

# Kawartha farmers adapt to online sales in light of COVID-19 challenge

*Catherine Whitnall*

Farmers are accustomed to having to adapt and roll with whatever punches Mother Nature throws at them, and the current COVID-19 pandemic is no different.

Recently, a website in Peterborough and a Facebook group in the Kawartha Lakes were launched to help serve as a gateway to local food and farm-to-gate products.

Producers are also coming up with ways to keep doing business in a physical distancing, sterilizing, no-contact world.

In the Peterborough area, [www.localfoodptbo.ca](http://www.localfoodptbo.ca), and its accompanying social media platforms, includes a list of area farmers' markets and how to get updates on their status this season. Visitors also learn about what goes on at the farm and how that determines what local food is available at different times in the year, from fruit and vegetables to meats, dairy products, eggs, maple syrup and honey.

There are also videos on local farms, community garden information, emergency food sources and workshops on cooking and canning.

Kawartha Choice Farm Fresh ([www.kawarthachoice.com](http://www.kawarthachoice.com)), a site curated by Kawartha Lakes and Peterborough agriculture development departments, also has great ideas for those looking to support local producers.

Genevieve Kendell-Hayes is administrator of the [Farm Gate Fresh: Buy Local Kawartha Lakes](#) Facebook group which launched in January – but not because of the pandemic.

“I guess you could say we were a bit ahead of the curve,” said Kendell-Hayes, who raises poultry on her Haywood Farm near Reaboro.

“The idea was to provide a way for farmers in the area with a way to directly connect with customers outside of the regular selling and farmers' market season. I thought, we're all pretty busy in the spring, so why not start something up now (winter) so that we can get that customer base established in advance.”

Membership was growing slow but steady – and then came the pandemic.

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“We saw our numbers double in the first week when COVID-19 hit,” said Kendell-Hayes.

The group currently has 500 members.

“This has totally evolved to the point where it's not just farmers anymore. The thing

is, we have really good stuff here (in the Kawartha Lakes) if you know where to look,” she continued. “I really hope that the silver lining in all this (coronavirus) insanity is that more people reconnect with their local producers.”

Jessica Foote, owner of Lunar Rhythm Gardens near Janetville ([www.lunargardens.ca](http://www.lunargardens.ca)), has been doing a Community Shared Agriculture basket program for 11 years. The program sees members receive a weekly bounty of fresh, locally grown vegetables – meat and eggs are also available – during the growing season. She later began scheduling on-farm "mini-markets" during the off season, including during the pandemic.

People order in advance and then go to the farm the day of the market. Upcoming dates include April 18 and May 2 and 16. Customers call the farm when they arrive at the gate, then proceed to pick up their prepacked basket. Payments can be made by e-transfer, cash or cheque. Everything is sanitized between customers, including the money.

“I guess that’s the great thing about our money basically being plastic,” joked Foote. “It’s not perfect, but as long as you’re careful, and we’re being very careful because this isn’t just our business, it’s our home, you’ll be fine. At times like these, you have to get creative.”

Mary Kennedy agrees.

The Kennedy family has been farming in the Omemee area for generations and doing farm-gate sales – including their famous maple syrup – for much of that time. Recently they embarked on a new chapter of sales: their first online shop (<https://sites.google.com/view/kennedyfarms>).

“I think everyone is at the stage where they’re exploring different ways to stay connected to the community, to their customers and to each other,” said Kennedy. “They have a Facebook page but the website seemed like the logical next step.”

Having two tech-savvy boys at home was a bonus, as it also kept them busy during the extended March break.

“It seems to be working out pretty good,” said Kennedy, noting people simply order in advance and arrange for contactless pickup. Payment can be done either by exact cash or e-transfer.



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