



"Growing food here is such a big part of our history and our foundation for the future. It's wonderful to be a part of it."

This description was inspired by the beautiful display of vegetables and fruits entered in the 2014 Milford Fair. Growing food makes you aware not only of soil and weather, but also

the community resources and relations you depend on, the advice, knowledge and on-the-ground help that can be the difference between failure and success. Fairs are about cultivating the resources and relations that sustain local agriculture, big and small.

For this edition of *Grow Your Own*, we consulted Phil Dodds' 1967 centennial publication, *Ontario Agricultural Fairs and Exhibitions, 1792-1967*. The Milford Fair is not included in this Ontario Association of Agricultural Societies publication, apparently because South Marysburgh never actually joined the Association. Dodds, an accomplished historian of Prince Edward County and long-time editor of *The Picton Gazette*, does however mention the Milford Fair, acknowledging its important and anomalous part in the history of County agriculture.

Early fairs were all about educating and encouraging farmers. Until the mid-1800s it typically took twenty years just to clear a 100-acre farm for cultivation and grazing. The first agricultural fair in Ontario was in 1765, and in PEC the first fair was held at Picton in 1836. Between 1830 and 1860 agricultural societies blossomed in Ontario, a sign of the province's social and agricultural development. An 1852 report by the Hastings County Agricultural Society noted that the society's early work was finally paying off: "The agricultural mind requires time to prepare it for knowledge, but the fruit is now every year improving in quality and abundance." Technology and trade were crucial in the development of agriculture, so in addition to awarding prizes for the best crops or stock specimens, early fairs gave prizes for improvements in methods of clearing land, for the biggest crop yields, the largest area under cultivation, the overall appearance and condition of farms, and the development of innovative agricultural implements. Agricultural societies instilled a spirit of friendly competition: "By the association of numbers together, they have been the means of creating a rivalry and competition and honourable emulation in the management of farms, far more than the mere desire of obtaining MONEY premiums." Today that spirit remains, as appreciation, enjoyment and honour - certainly not money - keeps farmers at work.

By mid-century the combination of education and improvement with favourable international trade agreements made farming in Ontario a more organized and export-focused practice. Yet agricultural industrialization proceeded unevenly across the province, and many farms in South Marysburgh continued on an older model of mixed farming. While South Marysburgh's ports had been a leg up when goods and crops were moved by water, the development of railways throughout Ontario thoroughly sidelined the once busy southern ports of PEC. The 1887 construction of a Crystal Palace drew more attention to the Picton Fair, now more accessible with increased automobile use, and spelled disaster for the Milford Fair. But the first era of the Milford Fair closed in 1894; the spirit remained until the Milford Fair was fully revived in 1946.

Always reflecting the changing face of agriculture in Ontario, the fair is now an important way of educating the broader Ontario population on agriculture as Canada's primary industry. In 1967 William Stewart, Ontario's Minister of Agriculture, said that agricultural fairs "have done more than any other agency to bring about a closer understanding between our rural and urban people." That this understanding has become closer and more important since 1967 is abundantly clear every year at the Milford Fair.

It takes hours and hours and hours of planning, preparation and legwork to put on the Milford Fair; volunteers get involved year after year because they know the fair is important to everyone, to friends and visitors, to all parts of the South Marysburgh community.

As you read this, plans are being refined for the Milford Fall Fair and volunteers are mustering to make it all happen. Thanks to our community our rural fair still thrives, a tradition that has faded elsewhere.

We growers are essential to that tradition. It's up to us to bring along the beautiful produce for others to enjoy. And be there to share in the pleasure of the day with our friends and neighbours. Take a walk around your garden with the Fair Booklet and you'll be surprised what you have to exhibit.

If you need any help, Nancy and I will be there to lend a hand at the Shed on Friday evening and Saturday morning. We're excited and really looking forward to seeing you and your goodies in the Shed.



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