

# An Interview with Shane Eby



Shane Eby is a Greenbelt farmer who has taken the concept of “local” beyond food. Under Ground organics, the farm in Milgrove where Eby is works, produces vegetables, herbs, and flowers, which you can find at Farmers’ Markets in Toronto, and in stores in Hamilton. Erin Charter spoke with Shane about starting a new farm, permaculture and the challenges of being a small farmer in Canada. *(Photos courtesy of Seth Goering)*

**EC:** Tell me about your farm.

**SE:** Under Ground organics is a farm in Hamilton and I operate the farm with two business partners. It's a fair sized market garden. This year, we're growing 25 vegetables, 25 herbs, and 125 cut flowers. We've been operating for four years. We're certified organic. We do a bunch of business in Hamilton, but a lot of our business is in Toronto.

**EC:** And you sell mostly at farmers' markets?

**SE:** Yeah, we sell to a few farmers' markets in Toronto: Trinity Bellwoods and Dufferin Grove. We sell to restaurants, to small independent groceries and health food stores, a few florists, and we do a weekly Community Supported Agriculture flower share in Hamilton. So, we bring a weekly flower share into the city. It's at a few depots, and we also do a bit of home delivery in Hamilton. Hamilton's our home, so we just do it there and the rest of the stuff, we take to market and the other outlets. We're pretty small scale. We're trying to grow slowly. The idea has always been to grow a little bit each year and we're trying to stay with that.

**EC:** So, what did the farm look like when you started?

**SE:** It was a conventional cash crop farm. There was a house and a barn and a 40-acre field. So, when we got there, it was a big, open canvass. We had to figure out how we were going to start working with it. Our guiding principles have been permaculture and long-term planning. Instead of having just large, annual production fields, we wanted to have more of a forest garden. We had a lot of perennial crops that we were maintaining and keeping healthy throughout the year but just harvesting when things were fruiting. But we also like growing a lot of different things. So, we wanted to mix that perennial agriculture with annual cropping. When we took it over, it had been worked on by someone who had rented the farms for years and he had rotated different field crops. That was a challenge, to figure out how do we put in tractor paths? Where do we put the greenhouse? Where do we put the asparagus? What's going to happen in five years? Is this the right place to put that? So, we tried to start small.

**EC:** How did you learn to do all this?

**SE:** It just took time. We all have different experiences, the three business partners, but none of us grew up farming. Two of us came to farming after university. Each of us worked on a few different farms and through personal interest we learned about different aspects of agriculture. Our other business partner was a landscaper, so he knows a lot about plants. He's really helped us with sourcing out a lot of material and actually starting a lot of our plant material, but he's been learning about agriculture through us. So, all three of us have really come with our own personal interests and our own agendas for agriculture and have just taken our own time to implement what we've learned and what we wanted to learn. Because we've all worked for other people, but hadn't really had a chance to actually shape a farm for ourselves. So, starting a farm business was really amazing. Suddenly we had that chance to do all the things we wanted to do but were never able to.

**EC:** What made you want to become a farmer?

**SE:** There was something in me that never allowed myself to follow my own personal interests or desires. Something in me was nagging because there was something that always said "that's going to cause more harm than good. It's not going to help anyone. It's just going to be a part of consuming and depleting resources," so, somehow there's some environmental ethic in me. That could be a result of my father's side being Mennonite. We didn't grow up in the Mennonite world, but I certainly had a reference for it. So, somehow there was just something that wouldn't let me do something that wasn't environmentally sound and I sort of used agriculture as a bit of a base because of my family's history. After university, I wanted to help and I wanted to offer something to the community that would help more than just me. So, instead of pursuing my own personal agenda, I tried to find something that would help and I found community gardens. And then a few people I met through community gardens purchased a farm. So that gave me the chance to start getting dirty and learn a little bit about developing a farm.

For the most part, why I got involved in farming was to help be part of the change that I thought our communities needed.

**EC:** Do you think there's a trend of young people going back to the farm and taking up that lifestyle again?

**SE:** I would say yes. It's not exactly an educated trend, I think it's an idealistic trend and the reality of actually farming is very different from the ideal. I love that people want to get involved, but I think the challenges of being involved are going to come up very quickly for the people who want to get involved. It's so difficult, so challenging. This is not to say that it can't be done, or shouldn't be done. Some people just follow their own interests and passion and try to make it work. And, like any small business in any industry, if you have the determination, you're going to look in the face of failure and keep at it. I think a lot of the people who are interested in farming will keep trying even though it's so difficult.

**EC:** With the average age of farmers rising and the need for new farmers, it's an encouraging sign to see young people taking up farming.

**SE:** I don't think it's enough that there are young people that want to try because they don't have the resources to enable them to make it happen. They don't have the land, they don't have the capital and, in many regards, they don't have credit to make that happen. A lot of people who seem to be interested in agriculture aren't coming through traditional farm families and that was a way a lot of farms used to be extended, through lineage. It's a little bit different where people are just trying to make it happen from scratch. The land and the capital are so difficult to access. Farming is a very industrial activity, even on a small scale. There's a lot of equipment to buy, and a lot of costs, and labour is very expensive. Unless you're on a massive scale and you use imported labour, it can be really challenging to make a small operation work. That desire to make it happen is still different from the reality. The challenges are immense. So, even though there are people who want to try, I think there needs to be some way to enable people who want to try through shared resources or land, or connecting with community.

**EC:** Do you think the local food movement will start to shift this landscape?

**SE:** There are still only 4% of Canadian farms actually growing fresh produce and fruit. It's coming from everywhere else on the planet, all those other tropical and warm climates. They can import food and drop it on our doorstep at a cost that's so minimal than anything I can produce, if I try to value it at its true cost, I need to ask for a price that's above the price of the import cost. That's one of the biggest challenges for people buying local food is that when they compare something that I'm offering with what they can find in the grocery store, they can just buy it cheaper. They also know that they can go to a grocery store somewhere nearby any day of the week and get almost anything they want. I can't offer all those options. The price point is a challenge, and the availability is a challenge.

Buying land for farming is also difficult because the price that can be had for that land for development makes farming very impractical. You can't get the same kind of return from farming that you can from land speculation. So, that pressure from land values just makes farming really inaccessible. And then costs of capital, and equipment, and labour. It pushes on you on a really large scale that I don't think a lot of farmers really want to take on. So, any farmer that gets involved has to be very creative, and find a very direct, local market. A lot of the

small-scale farmers in Canada, if they're really good at it, can earn about \$20-30,000 a year. That's poverty. That doesn't give you real support for your family or for your future. I can work my 100 hours a week, but in the end, I'm just scratching poverty. It doesn't make sense that something so fundamental as food production should be so undervalued.

Two researchers with the National Farmers' Union just put out a brief, which they presented to a parliamentary committee on agriculture in Ottawa. They totalled up all the gross receipts from Canadian farms from 1984 to 2006 and added it up to \$802 billion. Then they looked at the total percentage that actually stayed with Canadian farms after expenses and costs. Guess what it was.

**EC:** 40%?

**SE:** Only 0.4% actually stayed with Canadian farms. \$3 billion out of the \$802 billion was kept by Canadian farmers. The rest went to the multinational middle folk. And it's shocking. That 0.4 percentage works out to \$1.45 per acre for Canadian farmers. And, somehow I don't think that's going to really cut it. For the last 25 or 30 years, the federal government in Canada has pushed global exports and all supports went to policy and to legislation that supports large, international agriculture, and the support for local, small-scale family farms in this country has absolutely disappeared. If you have 0.4% staying with Canadian farmers, [that support is] nonexistent. And if we give away all of our ability to support ourselves, we're just setting ourselves up for disaster. Right now, Canadian agriculture is an absolute disaster, except for if you're a large transnational and then you're probably really happy.

**EC:** What do you think is special about farming in this region?

**SE:** In our area, the Hamilton region, we're really far south, we're on a plane with southern Oregon. We have a pretty good climate that enables us to grow quite a bit. We have a limited growing season, but it's pretty long by Canadian standards. We do have a pretty good ability to grow a diverse range of crops. We can extend our season a little bit on the front end, and on the back end. There are so many things we could try to grow, we're not limited like some other parts of the country. We get enough heat and we usually get enough rain. Usually there's enough snow in the winter to get a good blanket to insulate things. All in all, as far as Canada goes, we have some of the most favourable physical characteristics. And then we have a huge consumer base all around us. The Greenbelt area is amazing in that there are great physical characteristics and there's a great population to try to draw from.

