

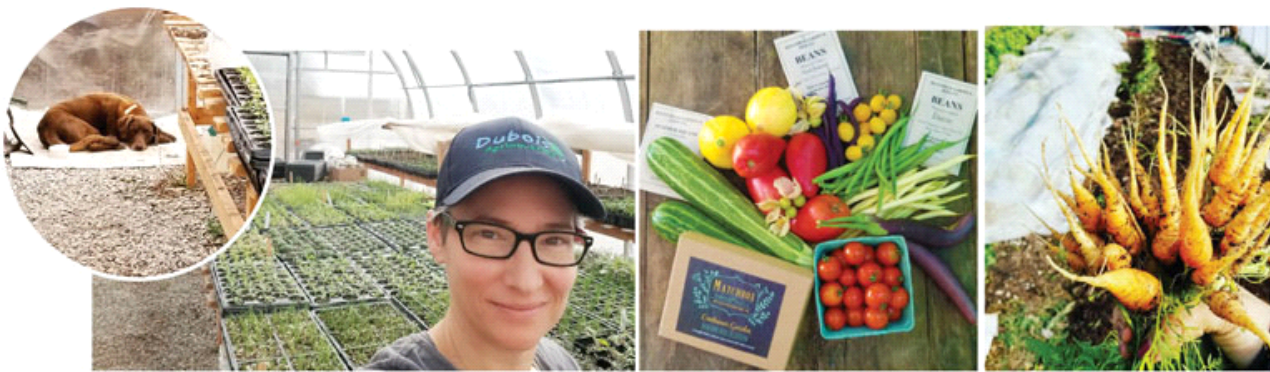
GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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How One Grower Achieved Her Dream

Anne-Marie Hardie



Pictured left to right: Another day in the greenhouse with Tikka, Hanna's Labmaraner and her everywhere companion for the past 10 years. • Hanna Jacobs, owner of Matchbox Garden & Seed Co. in Haldimand County, Ontario, Canada. • Matchbox's on-site hoophouse is used to harden off the seedlings and to grow food year-round. • Late summer's harvest from Matchbox's gardens, along with a sampling of one of their seed collections and a variety of seed packs, all produced at the farm.

In a small hamlet along the Grand River in Haldimand County, Ontario, resides the innovative operation of Matchbox Garden & Seed Co. This seed and small farm operation beautifully showcases owner Hanna Jacobs' passion for growing and seed harvesting.

Hanna began her horticulture journey in the restaurant and hospitality industry, working in kitchens and traveling.

"I fell in love with food and feeding people, and this passion eventually evolved into growing," said Hanna. However, it was an experience in Eugene, Oregon, that genuinely sparked her desire to pursue farming.

"I was working at a restaurant whose food was 100% organic and 95% local, and I was offered an opportunity to volunteer at the farm of one of their suppliers," she said.

This was Hanna's first farming experience, but immediately, she realized that it was something that she was meant to do.

"It felt good doing physical labor and being in this beautiful field with the purpose of harvesting food for others," she said.

Seven years later, after Hanna had returned to Toronto, Canada, she ventured into her first horticulture project. This

project involved converting an abandoned parking lot into an oasis. She transformed the 1,000-sq. ft. space into raised bed gardens where she grew seedlings, harvested seeds and grew produce for her local farmers market.

This marked the beginning of their horticulture adventure and provided Hanna with the space to learn about growing. However, it didn't take long until she wanted to move out of the city and further advance the knowledge in farming. She applied to the Farm Startup Incubator Program, where she received 3 acres outside of the city (in Brampton, Ontario) to farm.

Hanna's farm was incredibly successful, eventually expanding to a 90-member CSA, while also selling produce at multiple farmers markets and wholesale accounts. Her success led to being approached by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, who offered a 10-acre farm and orchard for growing. She committed to this project for one year, but began to realize that it was time to launch her own farm.

"I was commuting from downtown Toronto to the farms, Brampton and Vaughan, and not for a desk job," said Hanna. "It just didn't make sense." So Hanna took a year off from farming to consider her next step.

She decided to remain in farming, but this time to find a space she could call her own. After some searching, Hanna found a space in Caledonia in 2013, where she could both work and live.

"I liked the topography of the land," said Hanna. "It was at the base of the Grand River, offering protection, and the land was virtually untouched, providing the perfect template for an organic farm."

Eager to get started, she had all of the gardens prepped by the end of September, less than 60 days after their closing date.

Her goal for the new operation was to slowly shift her focus from farmers markets to wholesale and online clientele. However, this journey didn't happen overnight.

"Since it was our first property purchase, I tended to do things in baby steps," said Hanna. Matchbox Garden began small with an 8 ft. by 16 ft. greenhouse, which housed between 10,000 to 20,000 herb, flower and vegetable seedlings. These seedlings were sold to both wholesalers and farmers markets.

"Everything has been incremental," said Hanna. "I want to make sure it works well before progressing to the next thing."

Six years later, the company has developed a strong customer base of wholesale customers, which has, in turn, allowed it to move out of the farmers market sector. It's also helped foster Hanna's passion for seed production, providing her both with the space and time to explore this avenue of horticulture.

"I believe in food security and seeds are one of the basic building blocks for food security and biodiversity," she said.

Seed savings is far from a simple process—it involves lots of trial and error, and connecting with others to learn the specific rules for each species of seed. On a positive note, once she's established a successful process, it's easy to use the knowledge to learn about a new species.

Currently, Matchbox Garden is working with four other farms across the province for a seed grow-out. Although she prides herself on having a fairly extensive seed catalog, working with other farms allows Hanna to increase both her selection and quantity of specific varieties.

"I can't do certain things that require huge isolation—for example, beets require a huge length for their isolation distance," said Hanna. "Right now, I'm growing-out Touchstone Gold, so I might have another farm grow out Detroit Dark Red for me."

Moving away from the city has allowed Hanna to keep her footprint small while still allowing her to grow the business. This includes shifting from the small greenhouse to a custom-built one that's 30 ft. by 20 ft., allowing Hanna to do a lot of seedling production. The space is converted in the fall for a quick dry area for seed crops and a place for winter workshops, while the on-site hoop house is used to harden off the seedlings and year-round growth of food. In addition to selling products and seedlings, Matchbox Garden & Seed Co. conducts monthly workshops, where Hanna shares her knowledge to those customers who want to learn more about seed harvesting and growing organic food.

For growers who are considering entering into the industry, Hanna advised the importance of pacing yourself and not rushing into decisions.

"This is literally back-breaking work—be smart about it," said Hanna. "Not very many of us get rich from farming; instead, we do it because we love it."

When asked about the plans for the future, Hanna hopes to further refine the production of the produce, seedlings and seed-harvesting process.

"I'm not a believer that bigger is better," said Hanna. "I like the size and the amount of production that we have right now and am just excited about fine-tuning it a bit more." **GT**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.