

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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The Wonders of Locally Grown

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From a very early age, Allison Shannon knew that her livelihood would involve growing. Although her original vision didn't include horticulture, it's a path that has seamlessly brought together her love of plants and her desire to provide a space where she could share her knowledge and passion with her local community.

Allison began her growing journey at the University of Guelph in Ontario, where she studied agronomy and crop science. It was here that she met her husband Greg, who was a soil science major. The two shared a dream of making agriculture a full-time vocation, wanting a business that could sustain their passion for growing and their livelihood. However, they didn't anticipate the path that they would choose would be in horticulture.

"We looked at several different farming ventures—from dairy farming to a grain elevator. However, nothing was really coming together," said Allison. "So we took a leap of faith, sold our property with the small farm on it and bought our current property with the intent of building a greenhouse."

The Shannon family had two young boys at the time, ages 1 and 3, and Allison was looking forward to having a home-based business. Although the steep learning curve involved with horticulture was intimidating, Allison was eager to explore this new sector.

"We broke ground in May 2002, beginning with 13,500 sq. ft. and a vision to grow a better-tasting tomato using hydroponics," she explained.

Pictured: Allison Shannon, owner of Sun Harvest Greenhouses in Kingston, Ontario, with her husband and business partner Greg.

Based out of Kingston, Ontario, Sun Harvest Greenhouses began as a hydroponic operation that produced

tomatoes and cucumbers for the local community. At the time, hydroponic tomatoes had a reputation of tasting like cardboard and the benefit of growing locally was still largely under the radar. Sun Harvest Greenhouses wanted to change that concept of food by showing both their local customers and grocery stores the benefit of locally grown food.

“We marketed that our process allowed the tomatoes to fully ripen on the vine, and so consumers could enjoy produce that was picked, shipped and packed that same day,” said Allison.

Kingston is currently a community in tune with the locally grown movement, but when Sun Harvest opened its doors, it was a step ahead of this movement.

“When we started, we went everywhere to try and sell our fresh tomatoes,” said Allison. “But it wasn’t normal for a farmer to approach a chef with their produce; it simply wasn’t a part of the culture at the time.”



Thankfully, the couple had already developed a relationship with their local grocers with their field-grown garlic, making this market the natural first step for their business. Delivering to the local grocers allowed for large volume drops of product. However, the couple also wanted to connect directly with their local customer, so they placed a sales table inside the greenhouse.

To diversify their product offerings, the company allocated a row to grow cucumbers and added a nutrient film table (NFT) to grow lettuce. However, Allison learned pretty quickly that to get more customers into their space, she needed to provide additional reasons to stop by and visit.

In 2004, the company decided to launch into bedding plants, including growing their own annuals, vegetables and herbs, and allocating space for a retail garden center. It was a drastic, but essential, move, providing consumers with additional motivation to enter the space and purchase

locally grown products.

Pictured: Allison and Greg's sons Brodie (left) and Kieran (right) holding hanging baskets.

The greenhouse continued its slow and steady growth, and quickly established itself as the go-to location for bedding plants, hanging baskets and containers. By 2012, 10 years after opening its doors, Sun Harvest Greenhouses had expanded to the point where Greg could join the operation on a full-time basis.

“As a grower, I’ve learned that you can’t take anything for granted,” said Allison. “Everything is about the details in this business, and if you pay attention to those details, you will be successful.”

She describes her journey in horticulture as a combination of learning from the school of hard knocks and recognizing when you need to reach out for assistance.

“When you’re in business, you can’t live long enough to learn from all of your mistakes, so don’t be afraid to reach out to people that are there to help and answer your questions,” she said.

Sun Harvest Greenhouses is open to the public from early spring until just before Christmas, where they provide seasonal plants and produce, most locally grown, to their community. The original 13,500-sq. ft. footprint is still allocated to produce, where Sun Harvest grows five different tomatoes and two varieties of cucumbers, all of which are sold exclusively in the market garden store. The company has also added aquaponic lettuce, the only year-round crop, to their offerings. The perennials and flowering shrubs are sourced from growers in the Niagara region.

It's a space that evolves with both the seasons and the needs of their customers. In the spring, the community is drawn to the space for both the delicious produce and custom hanging baskets. All of the baskets are created from annuals that Sun Harvest has thoroughly researched and trialed, providing customers with a beautiful mix of products. They've also allocated a dedicated growing space for custom container growing for residential and business clients, including offering a seasonal potted insert program—the Sun Harvest Urn Club membership.

In the summer, the business extends to the outdoor spaces, including using the outdoor fields to grow additional produce, like corn, potatoes and beans, and an extensive cut flower garden.

"Flower fields at Sun Harvest is a 1-acre cut flower garden where we invite customers to come and cut their own bouquet," said Allison.



Upon arrival, customers are provided with a bucket and clippers, and are invited to wander down the field walkways to create their favorite bouquet. The fall program includes mums, a porch package and pumpkins, providing customers with the products they're seeking to transition into the next season.

Pictured: Kieran Shannon holding Sun Harvest's #loveyourlettuce branded product.

One of the most significant changes that Allison has identified over the past 20 years is with the consumer base. When the company opened, the primary customers were retirees or individuals who had the time to make an extra stop to buy a great-tasting tomato. Today, the customer base is individuals who want to fill their lives with green things.

"They are well informed, intelligent and appreciate having a space to go to," said Allison. "I feel like we are experiencing a very exciting renaissance of the horticultural industry."

As Sun Harvest Greenhouses celebrates its 20th year of business, they're eager to welcome their youngest son, Kieran, into the fold and share the love of horticulture with another generation.

"We see so much opportunity for an industry that is so fundamentally important," said Allison. "There are so many exciting things happening in this industry—new technology, a drive to find sustainable options and a growing community of consumers who are embracing gardening." **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.