

## Getting back to rural roots

Forsythe farm  
offers city families  
taste of country life



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in Markham

On Monday Beth Asbell packed up her three children — Yaacov YOSHUA, 9, Shalom MOSHE, 7, and Rivka, 2 — and took them out to the farm.

This is not as easy as it used to be. Once surrounded by farms, Toronto is now ringed by sprawl, which grows every day as local leaders approve plans to build on some of Canada's richest soil.

Markham was a farming community until quite recently. In the past 10 years 100,000 people have moved here. The land where Jim Forsythe grew tomatoes in the 1980s, at 14th Avenue and McCowan Road, is now a high school.

Mr. Forsythe moved north, to Kennedy Road just north of Major MacKenzie Drive, and he adapted. These days, Forsythe Family Farms offers what Leslie Forsythe, Mr. Forsythe's wife, calls "entertainment farming."

For a fee of a few dollars (prices vary by season) the farm invites kids to pet the animals, ride on big-wheel tricycles, and even go out to the fields and pick fruit and vegetables. On weekends, they ride hay wagons.

Colourful paintings by local artist Gillian Iles, of kids frolicking in corn, and of farm animals and giant pumpkins, brighten up the barnyard.

Bees here pollinate the vegetable flowers and then make honey, which is for sale in the shop.

The Forsythes, who live and love farming, worry that urban folk are cut off from knowing where their food comes from. They aim to teach people about farm production.

"It's been a way of preserving the farm, allowing people to stay in touch with farming," says Mrs. Forsythe, sitting in the cool former stable, now a thriving market stuffed with the bounty of the

Ontario countryside. "It's not an amusement park. It's an opportunity for people to experience the farm and enjoy it, because they're not doing the work."

As many as 25,000 school children visit here every year.

The Asbell family, who live in the Bathurst Street-Lawrence Avenue area, are real troupers. They carry a little spray bottle to "schpritz" each other with water, to stay cool in the intense afternoon sun. They set out, wearing their pink arm bracelets.

"We wanted to have a nice fresh outdoor experience," says Mrs. Asbell. "It's less expensive and it's real. It's not mechanical. This is really the way life used to be."

A shriek interrupts her. "Mommy, look, he's eating it!" Shalom has got a goat interested in a scrap of cabbage leaf outside his pen. "Mommy, look!"

We stop by the cows. A cow, perhaps overcome by the heat, lows, long and plaintive.

"Oh my goodness!" says Mrs. Asbell. "That never happens." We gape at the creature; for a Torontonian, a cow these days is as exotic as an elephant.

Then we head out into the sultry fields. Under the shade of a big tree by the vegetable patch, the family says a little blessing before sharing a picnic of Niagara peaches they bought at the Forsythe store.

From here is a pastoral view of rolling hills: to the north is a huge expanse of corn; to the south are fields with trees at their borders, barns and, far to the south, a row of brand-new houses. We set to pick some beans.

"You guys, all the long ones are here because no one wants to go in the weeds," Mrs. Asbell says.

### 'IT'S BEEN A WAY OF PRESERVING THE FARM'

Prolific rain this year has the countryside bursting with life.

"I knew this would be good for the kids," says Mrs. Asbell. "I knew they'd be happy, and they are happy."

The Forsythes, meanwhile, have purchased another farm north of Uxbridge where they can afford land. There, they are raising beef cattle that don't eat growth hormones on pasture and whose meat they sell at the store.

Corn here is fresh, though the Forsythes have stopped growing it. "Too much labour and too much waste," says Mr. Forsythe. "I can buy it cheaper than I can grow it."

As we leave, Mrs. Forsythe is gabbing with the customers who stop for pies, syrup, tomatoes, beans, fruit, jellies and corn. They tell her jokes, they talk about the weather.

"We try to give it that personal touch," she says.

"It's something they don't get when they go into a big store. People like coming to a spot where they know they are recognized."

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