

Growing gardens blooming at NHCC



By KRISTENA SCHUTT-MOORE, Staff

At the beginning of summer the North Hastings Community Cupboard started two new projects with the help of the Community Food Centres Canada Grant. Now they are starting to see the fruits of their labour, and adding them to their programs. With help from the \$20,000 funding the NHCC was able to purchase seven garden towers and build several produce boxes. The goal of these boxes and towers is to bring fresh fruits and vegetables to their food baskets, the soup kitchen, and to develop more healthy eating programs. With the help of the towers in a greenhouse, NHCC volunteer Amanda Stone is hoping they can provide fresh food all year round to community members. With grow lights that attach to the towers, they will be able to grow plants even in the short, cold days of winter. The seven towers give the NHCC the ability to grow 196 plants. Currently, they are working on lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, beans and some herbs. "We tried to pick some simple things that people will actually use. There are a lot of options for what we can grow in a tower, but for now we are going to stick with the popular items for now." The volunteers working in the garden towers are going through a learning curve. Gardening in a tower indoors can be a bit different than working in a traditional garden bed. For example the towers do not use soil, can water themselves and they don't need to be weeded. But since the towers are in the green house, volunteers will have to pollinate plants themselves. The goal with these towers is for the NHCC to become more self-sustaining. Not only as a way to supply fresh produce for their shelves but as a way to raise funds for future programs. Stone is looking to the future when the garden towers may allow the NHCC to set up something similar to a farmer's market. This would enable the volunteers to raise funding for the Cupboard while providing fresh local food for area residents. Currently with COVID-19, there is more funding available for programs and organizations like the NHCC, but that is not always the case. At times it can be difficult for organizations to get the funding needed to run programs. "Knowing that we can do some social enterprise work with it [the tower garden] going forward is knowing we can keep our charity status going. Because there is obviously a need, but it does take money to run it," explains Stone. Stone hopes that once they are up and running well enough that the NHCC could also provide produce to local restaurants. The funds raised from those sales would help to directly sustain the work the NHCC does in the community. This project could take time to develop as the greenhouse, garden towners and garden beds will need to be expanded. There is another grant available through Canada Agriculture and the NHCC is currently looking into the possibilities of applying. "It would be so cool, I think, to be able to buy fresh grown local produce all year long. With all our little cafes and stuff, it would really help our local economy too, as opposed to having to order from out of town. It could be real sustainable." In the meantime, Stone and other volunteers are using the food baskets and fresh vegetables from the gardens to help others learn about healthy eating. This is done through the development of healthy recipes that are written out by the volunteers, and placed on cards that are included in the food baskets. These can be used by those who receive the baskets again and again, offering the opportunity to learn how to make nutritious meals for less. The NHCC is always looking for new ways to help the community, and with many people believing that COVID-19 will have an effect on food pricing and availability, the volunteers want to let people know that their services are available to everyone. "We are not just a food bank, we are much more than that," says

Stone.They are also looking for more help from area volunteers. Anyone interested in gardening, food, nutrition and more can find the volunteers working on the NHCC gardens every Monday.