

Dig This!

Winter 2023



warm wishes from DIG to all!

Winter solstice

On Wednesday, December 21, 2022 at 4:47 p.m., winter officially began in the Northern hemisphere. For many ancient cultures, this was an important day that held the promise of longer, warmer times to come. These people thought that the sun was a god, with the onset of winter every year because the sun became sick. They celebrated the solstice for it meant that the sun god was beginning to get better.

Many plants played a pivotal role in the celebration of the longest night and the shortest day of the year. The Druids, a learned class of people living amongst the Celts, dwelling in the British Isles and France, believed the holly plant was sacred due to the fact that it was green and beautiful throughout the somber and dark times. Holly, being ubiquitous in nature, was a way for the poor to decorate their homes, which people believed would bring protection and good luck in the new year.



Saturnalia, or the Feast of Saturn, in honour of the Roman god of agriculture, was held during the solstice as a way to celebrate the renewal of life. Evergreen boughs were cut, and used to decorate temples and homes. This is why some people still follow the old traditions, and “deck the halls with boughs of holly” to this day.

The plant we often think of first at this time of year, is of course the Christmas Tree. But where did the idea to decorate a tree come from? Known as the Yule Tree, the modern

custom of decorating a fresh cut evergreen began in Germany way back in the 1500s. It is said that Martin Luther was walking home one winter evening, and was awestruck by the stars twinkling amidst the spruce and pine trees. He decided to share this miracle with others, and so put up a tree, lit with candles. Soon, people began decorating trees with objects that represented the spirits of those recently passed, along with religious symbols, and edible treats.

Another plant we associate with the Winter Solstice is the mistletoe. Curiously, this plant has a parasitic relationship with certain trees and shrubs, and smothers their growth, yet is a vital food source for birds. According to traditions of the past, consuming the plant was linked to improved fertility, which might explain our modern interpretation of kissing under the mistletoe!

Most of our modern Christmas rituals have a link to the past, and we should stop every once in a while to think about how deeply rooted plants are in our lives (pun intended).

Agri-Hero

Forget-me-not Alpacas



Just in time for Christmas ... The perfectly soft, sustainable, and local gift for that special someone is available from this season's Agri-Hero. I am talking about alpaca mittens! Nothing takes the chill out of the air like alpaca wool, which according to the company's website is “as fine as cashmere, soft, silky and much warmer and stronger than sheep's wool”. Plus, alpaca wool is easy to launder (unlike sheep's wool).

Their online store is easy to use, and shows a variety of gorgeous alpaca products, including

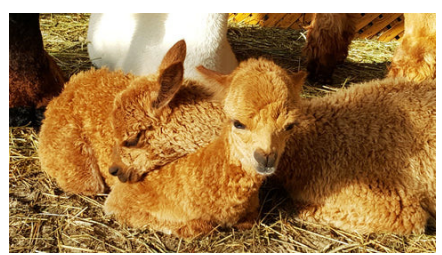
dryer balls, cat toys, calendars, greeting cards, scarves, toques and headbands, yarn to do-it-yourself, and even comfy cozy alpaca socks to keep your toes toasty warm.

In the warmer months, you can even purchase a 10 pound bag of manure, to work into your garden plot. According to O2compost.com, the nitrogen and potassium content of alpaca dung is high, yet lower in organic matter content than the manure from most other barnyard livestock (cows, horses, goats and sheep), allowing it to be spread directly onto plants without burning them, all the while improving soil texture and water-holding capacity.

Located at 1595 Concession 3, Beaverton, ON L0K1A0, this charming business is open by

appointment only. According to their Facebook page, they are offering tours of the farm this holiday season for \$12/person, with kids under 3 years of age free. You can book tours on their website or by calling or emailing:

<https://forgetmenotalpacas.ca/>
289 221-6102
sam@forgetmenotalpacas.ca



Letter of concern from a local farmer

**Attention Honourable Lisa Thompson
Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural
Affairs**

minister.omafr@ontario.ca

www.omafr.gov.on.ca/english/about/about.html

I would like to voice my concern over what I have seen in Bill 23 (More Homes Built Faster Act).

As a farmer, I have watched as prime rural land has been paved over steadily within the past few decades. I believe our provincial government should put a bit more stock in having locally grown food. There seems to be surface-level (non-concrete) mention of farmland protection in Bill 23, but as far as I can see, the proposed bill will only accelerate farmland purchasing by speculators and

developers, it will re-zone thousands of acres of prime farmland to allow for development, it will increase land prices—something that new farmers cannot afford, and increase the cost of producing food locally.

The bill will eliminate agricultural systems mapping and impact assessments, and likely will increase fragmentation of rural and agricultural areas. This fragmentation of land will inevitably lead to a reduction in biodiversity as well.

Housing should be built within existing urban areas, where infrastructure is already in place. Housing developments should not be sprawling, and tailored for the automobile.

Developing on wetlands, forests, woodlots, hedgerows, and farmland will lead to increased flooding after significant rainfall. We need



these areas to filter pollutants, and to act as a sponge. During times of drought (which we saw this past summer) these natural areas slowly release moisture back into the environment.

I would appreciate a response. Please know that farmers are not okay with this bill.

Thank you

(Specific information sourced from Sustain Ontario, <https://sustainontario.com/>)

The wonderful elderberry

Growing along hedgerows, in parks, pathways, and forgotten places, the elder, *Sambucus* sp. is among our most antiviral fruits here in Canada. An aggressively spreading bush, the elder, or legion as it used to also be called, can be found all over the world. The species most often found nearby is *Sambucus canadensis* and *Sambucus nigra*. Commercially, many growers sell the Adams variety (indeterminate).

There is nothing quite like the elder. Once you stumble upon a patch, you will know it based on the following clues. First, the leaves are pinnate (for every leaf on one side of the stem, there is another opposite). Second clue: by mid-July, the prolific white flowers emerge

in a large umbel inflorescence (umbrella-like cluster). By August, the flowers have given way to small green berries, ripening to blue/purple in colour. The berries linger until the blue jays, robins, starlings or humans descend and devour the entire crop. If in doubt, consult a field guide such as “A Peterson Field Guide To Edible Wild Plants: Eastern and central North America” by Roger Tory Peterson.

Buying elderberries is prohibitively expensive, as the harvesting is time-consuming. (I know from experience!) Therefore, it is best to obtain your own stock. In the spring, many growers sell cuttings or the new shoots that emerge from the base of the plant, in gallon pots.

Because the elder is so aggressive, it will have no problem in the garden, as long as it has access to some sunlight, and its roots are unhindered. During the first year of growth, it is important to pick the flowers, which you can consume raw, or prepare as a hot infusion (1 ounce of fresh or dried flowers in a quart of hot water, covered - drink once cooled).



When you are able to harvest the berries the following year, heat in a pot of water to a boil, then simmer covered for about 30 minutes. Next, put a metal strainer over a bowl, pour elderberries (along with any liquid), and use a potato masher to push through as much liquid as you can. Sweeten the liquid “syrup” to taste, pour into glass jars, and put in the fridge or freezer.

At the first inkling that you may be sick, drink a cup of your elderberry syrup. Dosage (from “Herbal Antivirals” by Buhner): 2-4 tsp every 2-4 hours during the early stages of cold/flu infection. The scientific studies on the effectiveness of elderberries against specific viruses is extensive, and can be found in the above mentioned book on pages 232-233 and pages 240-242.

Disclaimer: This article does not provide medical advice. The article’s contents, including but not limited to, text, graphics, images and other material contained are for informational purposes only. No material is intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified healthcare provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition or treatment and before undertaking a new health care regimen, and never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read online.

FoodTip

Eat fresh greens all winter long!

Sprouts, which are newly germinated seedlings, are easy to grow at-home, available year-round, and extremely nutritious. You can savour the fresh, tasty vegetables every day of the year by following a few simple steps, with minimal equipment.

While sprouts can be grown in fancy store-bought containers, the cheapest do it yourself (DIY) option is a glass jar and lid. Drill or poke holes in the lid, 3 to 5 mm in width, to allow the sprouting water to drain. Next, fill the jar about 1 to 2 cm with your sprouting seeds, add enough water to cover, and place somewhere out of direct sunlight, soaking for 12 hours. Twice a day, empty the water (keep the lid



on!) and refill. Rinsing often keeps everything mould-free.

Within a few days, your sprouts will be ready, but leave them for a few more days, until first

leaves develop and you have yourself some microgreens! Try sprouting organic peas, chickpea, sunflower, adzuki, radishes, broccoli, kale, red cabbage, fenugreek, lentil, alfalfa, along with traditional mung beans. Add the finished product to salads, wraps, and even oatmeal!

To really be self-sustaining, next year devote a few rows in your garden space to grow these plants, and collect their seeds for your winter sprouting purposes.

For more information, why not check out our YouTube channel, Durham Digs, where we have a short tutorial on how to sprout: <https://youtu.be/f1YxjkCN3Zg>

GardenTip

Ever wondered why your hedge died back after winter? *Blame salt!*



Most trees, shrubs, and perennials have a hard time growing in salty conditions, with the notable exception of those that occur naturally along the seashore, and thus have evolved to be tolerant.

If your evergreens turn brown during wintertime, and few green needles form the following year in spring, then salt might be the culprit. New branch formation might be delayed, or altogether absent.

You might think that only road or pathside plants are affected, but airborne salt can be kicked up and carried far from the highways and roadways (up to almost a kilometer away!).

So what can be done? The easy answer is to cover susceptible plants with burlap. Of course, this solution is not possible for tall trees, but shrubs and saplings can be covered. The other

solution is to be proactive, and to plant species that can take salt.

Perennial

- Sedum
- Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
- Blanket Flower (*Gaillardia*)
- Russian sage (*Perovskia atriplicifolia*)
- Columbine (*Aquilegia*)
- Silver mound Artemisia (*Artemisia schmidtiana*)
- Pearly Everlasting (*Anaphalis margaritacea*)

Shrub

- Winterberry holly
- Viburnum
- Forsythia
- Staghorn sumac
- Common lilac
- Butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*)
- Five-Leaf Aralia (*Acanthopanax sieboldianus*)

Tree

- Horse chestnut
- Choke cherry
- Mountain ash

- White and red oak
- Yellow birch
- White spruce
- Balsam poplar

For more information visit www.wellington.ca/en/resident-services/resources/PDS_GRCA_-_Salt_Resistance_of_Trees.pdf



Recipe

Christmas Coffee Cake



Ingredients

- a tube pan for baking
- 1 c sour cream
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1/2 c butter
- 1 c sugar
- 2 eggs
- 2 c bread flour (all-purpose flour will also work)
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 c golden raisins (or red and green glazed cherries)

Topping

- 1/4 c sugar
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 c chopped nuts
- 1/2 c red and green glazed cherries

Instructions

- Mix soda in the sour cream and set aside for a few minutes.
- Cream butter, sugar and eggs together.
- Add sour cream mixture.
- Mix the baking powder and flour; or sift together. Gradually add this to the wet mixture.
- Pour half the batter into a tube pan.
- Sprinkle with raisins, or cherries, and half the topping mixture.
- Pour in the remaining batter.
- Sprinkle on the remaining topping.
- Bake at 325° for one hour.

GardenArt ~ Reminder

Brandon from DIG made a step-by-step tutorial on how to put together your own festive wreath using locally sourced materials. Check out the video here:
<https://youtu.be/s6tmL9xBhCQ>



'Garden' things to do during winter

Attend a Seed Swap

Swaps are a fabulous way to give away seeds you don't need and take others home that you'll actually use. That way seeds don't get wasted and you save money. Check community garden websites for these events.

Make newspaper plant pots for starting seeds

The paper and ink are safe for growing seeds, and the pots last just long enough before they begin breaking down. It works out well because, by that time, you can plant, newspaper pot and all.

Garden planning

Plan your garden: what you'd like to grow; where to put it considering companion planting and crop rotation; and when you need to sow seeds. Browse seed catalogs for ideas. Use a garden journal or online planner if you'd like, but organizing now will keep you on track in the spring.

Clean your pots and tools

It's not dirt that you should be worried about, but bacteria, viruses, fungi, and pests. Give pots a good scrub and rinse in a very mild bleach solution. Wipe tools with alcohol, buff any rust off, and oil them with good vegetable or olive oil.

Read gardening books

No matter how grand your gardening expertise, there's always something to learn. Besides new information, the illustrations are colourful and fun to look at.

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A quarterly publication of Durham Integrated Growers

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YOUTUBE www.youtube.com/user/DurhamDigs

DigThis supplement

In light of recent provincial political developments, DIG would like to share some interesting points of view. First from former Regional Councillor and current activist, Bonnie Littley: her presentation to the Standing Committee about Bill 39 which would repeal the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act. Second from Peggy Brekveld, President of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture; her presentation to the same committee.

Your feedback is welcomed.

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My name is Bonnie Littley. I was one of the co-founders of the Rouge Duffins Greenspace Coalition and a former Regional Councillor with the City of Pickering.

We were extensively involved and worked hard for many years on preserving public lands in Pickering, Scarborough and Markham. Specifically, the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve (DRAP), Rouge Park lands, Seaton and Airport lands.

I could tell you that no Greenbelt lands are needed for housing – your own taskforce, municipalities and many NGO's have told you.

I could tell you that this will do nothing for the housing crisis – especially affordable housing when the costs of all your changes get passed down to the taxpayer – especially renters. You know that, others have told you. Growth will not pay for growth.

I could tell you about the dangerous game of cutting the Conservation authorities oversight – again others have told you.

I could tell you about the importance and value of prime agricultural land and ecological function – you've been given these facts.

I will focus my comments on the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve and the "real science" of how and why it was created.

Minister Clark stated on Tuesday in the house, I quote "The current mayor, Mayor Kevin Ashe, in Pickering has said it better than I could, Speaker. I'll quote him now. He said that land was put in (the Greenbelt) based on "political science," not "real science."

The Minister went on further to add "I'm with former Mayor Ryan. I'm with Mayor Ashe. I'm not going to deal with political science. We're going to deal with real science on this side of the House."

I'm glad the government is interested in the "real science" and not "political science" in regard to the Ag Preserve's establishment.

There are years of planning documents and Studies supporting protecting the lands as agricultural, all under three different provincial governments: NDP, Conservatives, then Liberal.

The Province released The North Pickering Project, 1975; The Seaton Planning and Design Exercise, 1994; The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Strategy, 1995; the then Town of Pickering's own 1997 Rural Study; all recommended to protect the DRAP. All informed by extensive study and science. And then The Central Pickering Development Plan 2006.

There's the real science – right there.

Isn't it curious, that the only study that recommended development in the preserve is the City of Pickering's Growth Management Study, Mayors Ashe and Ryan are referring to in 2003. The only study with developer influence and paid for by Silvio DeGasperis and other developer land owners? A study ignoring all the previous studies and science, without developer influence that informed making the lands an Ag Preserve in the first place?!

The public didn't buy it in 2005, and they still don't now. I can only assume the McGuinty Liberals didn't buy it either when they put the DRAP in the Greenbelt, placed a Minister's zoning on it and gave it its own legislation – The Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Act – effectively reinstating the easements that Pickering had no right to release.

In fact, it was the Conservative government in 1999 that put forward the legally binding agreements and Memorandum of Understanding between the Province, the Region of Durham and the City of Pickering to place agricultural easements on title of public lands being sold in the Ag Preserve – to be protected in perpetuity!

The City of Pickering, the Region of Durham and the Province of Ontario have a moral and

public duty to uphold their agreements for the public interest not private interests. They still do.

These lands were acquired by private land speculators when they knew there were easements legally protecting these properties as farmland in perpetuity.

The acquisition of legally protected farmland at discounted prices, followed by an aggressive lobbying campaign to have these protections removed, was purely an attempt to capture public wealth for a private benefit that was outrageous in 2005 and absolutely disgraceful today.

The Provincial Conservatives could have sold these public lands to development themselves in 1999 and profited for the public purse. Protecting these lands in agriculture represents a massive public investment in Ontario's natural and agricultural systems. Removal of these protections amounts to theft from the people of Ontario.

The second the easements are lifted, Mr. DeGasperis alone, profits 2/3rds of a billion dollars, without a single home being built, and the permanent loss of thousands of acres of prime farmland.

Mr. DeGasperis could walk away. Sell his lands to another developer with 2/3rds Billion dollars in his back pocket - aided by our own government.

There has been much investigation into the Conservative Party's monetary relationship with Mr. DeGasperis and his influence. The Council of the City of Pickering has a long history of campaign contributions from him as well.

Has our government lost its focus on who it's suppose to represent?

Surely, you can see this is so wrong.

So yes, Minister Clark and your side of the house, recognize the "real science" on this. Uphold your commitment please.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture represents over 38,000 farmers across the province. They, in turn, represent \$47 billion dollars in provincial annual GDP from field to fork, and over 200 different products. Which is one heck of a feast of flavours! Our vision is Farms and Food Forever.

Today I will comment on only a portion of Bill 39, Better Municipal Governance Act – the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve Repeal Act. And while I am here specifically for Ontario Federation of Agriculture, our affiliates the Durham Region Federation of Agriculture and the York Region Federation of Agriculture were also consulted for our submission. In short, OFA, DRFA, and YRFA are opposed to the repealing of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Protection Act (DRAPA) to “assist in removing barriers to building much-needed housing”. DRAPA should remain intact.

There is only one landscape. And everything has to fit. That includes the very cornerstones of life – food, water and shelter. When we consider the landscape, there are some pieces that are moveable, and some things that are not. Things that are not really moveable include: lakes, rivers and the Great Canadian Shield. It also includes farmland.

Less than 5% of the Ontario landscape is arable land. The best of it is often located next to cities. And we are just one of only seven regions globally that have the ability to export more food than we import. Ontario contains 52% of Canada’s prime agricultural land. In other words...

Farmland is precious. And it needs special consideration.

Statistically, “the Duffins” is 5200 acres of farmland, bordered on three sides by urban development (Toronto is just south; City of Markham is Northwest; City of Pickering/Ajax is northeastern/east). It may seem like a green island among the cityscape.

To the west though, is Rouge National Urban Park. This is significant. To the locals in Durham and York, “the Duffins” has been identified as an essential piece to help



build the continuity of the agricultural land base. It is also important to note that while it is surrounded by urban development, the agri-food sector in York and other GTA municipalities, the bakeries and food processors who use these products, is significant. Having the farms close to these assets is critical for economic success and the industry’s potential to grow.

At OFA, we often talk about the importance of agricultural systems. Places where the farming is a continuous landscape. Such places make it easier to farm. It means that farmers can plant and harvest crops with fewer challenges of things such as traffic. It means that supporting businesses such as grain elevators or feed companies, can be accessed with few barriers. It means that the combine can go from field to field with ease. It includes those end users that I talked about earlier.

The system can even create more ecological goods and services, such as wildlife habitat, since it is a larger area.

The Duffins and Rouge Park regions together make a viable agricultural system, almost completely made up of Class 1 land – the best for agriculture. The Duffins is part of a larger regional agricultural system creating a contiguously protected area. Farmers depend on the availability of land in proximity to their operations to be able to farm more efficiently, safely, and viably.

In just the York and Durham regions, there are over 1600 farmers that will be affected, directly or indirectly, by the repeal of the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Protections Act.

The Duffins is also a part of the Golden Horseshoe region. The Golden Horseshoe is home to nearly 5,000, or 10%, of Ontario’s farms that generate over \$2 billion in farm cash receipts annually. This area also has the most urban pressure for development. Although there are over 900,000 acres of farmland in the Golden Horseshoe, it has declined by over 4% in only the last 5 years. If we continue to lose 40,000 acres of farmland in the Golden Horseshoe each census, in 25 years, it will all be gone. That is likely inside of my lifetime, and likely most of yours.

Why does this matter to Ontario?

It is about food security. If you ate today, a farmer grew it. Ontario farmers are feeding Ontario, Canada and the world.

Saying that, OFA acknowledges that Ontario needs to build more houses, affordable houses in particular. We really do believe that we come with ideas and examples of how to address this and still protect farmland that will feed us.

It includes intensifying cities to build in and up, to renew and review. It is about building more housing around transit lines, and building the type of housing that we actually need – understanding what our population dynamics actually look like.

(Only last spring, the Housing Affordability Task Force stated that “a shortage of land isn’t the cause of the problem. Land is available, both inside the existing built-up areas and on undeveloped land outside greenbelts.” OFA, encourages the provincial government to listen to their experts and explore other avenues to address the housing crisis.)

More robust protection against development on agricultural land combined with fixed, permanent urban boundaries and pushing urban density and intensification requirements, will achieve community development and farmland protection objectives.

Farmland is a finite resource. But it is also perpetual. Meaning if we protect farmland, take care of it, we can grow food for generations. We can continue to feed Ontario, Canada and the world.

Just before publishing this newsletter, Bill 39 was passed removing the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve from Greenbelt. This puts at risk the ecosystems of the nearby National park and puts some of Ontario’s first settled farms out of business.

Rouge Duffins Greenspace Alliance intends to approach the Federal Government on having the Preserve added to the Rouge National Park, hopefully superseding Bill 39. It is asking you to contact your local MP to take much-needed action in this regard.