

FIREWEED FOOD CO-OP

LATERAL NETWORKS - REBUILDING THE FOOD SYSTEM



Who is Fireweed Food Co-op?

An Interview with Asha Nelson

The Manitoba Cooperative Association had the pleasure of interviewing Asha Nelson, the Project Coordinator for Fireweed Food Co-op (originally known as Farm Fresh Food Hub), to let us in on some of the exciting work going on within their cooperative. Some people have wondered why the co-op name has changed. Asha Nelson described the purpose behind it: "Our name was originally Farm Fresh Food Hub. During a brainstorming session, we decided on Fireweed because it has a lot of meaning and purpose. Fireweed tends to emerge in places that have been destroyed by forestfire or clearcut and it helps to rebuild a thriving plant community. It does it through lateral root networks. **This was very symbolic for this food co-op in Manitoba. To create lateral root networks with members, stakeholders, and together rebuild the food system.**"

Fireweed Food Co-op is a community service multi-stakeholder co-op made up of consumer and producer members. They formed in 2016, consisting of 60 plus members - situated in Winnipeg, MB.

Why We Exist

Fireweed Food Co-op

Fireweed Food Co-op is a multi-stakeholder cooperative consisting of producers and consumers. What is unique about Fireweed is that they bring two different classes together, both the producer and consumer. This is not all that common. Having both at the same table is a great opportunity to sit down together, creatively problem solve and better understand one another's needs to build a more resilient and inclusive food system.

The reason people came together and initiated the food co-op in the first place was that there was a need in the Manitoba food system to fill in a gap in the supply chain. Currently, local small-scale farmers cannot easily access more stable market opportunities such as restaurants and wholesale customers. Fireweed started the South Osborne Farmer's market as a way to build relationships and better understand the food system, before launching their ambitious Food Hub project. This initiative had yet to exist in Manitoba, at least in a cooperative fashion with a focus on small, local regenerative farms.

In addition, Fireweed's market is more than just a place of commerce, but an important meeting space for the community. They offer entertainment, beer gardens, kids activities and community programming in addition to shopping.



Fireweed Food Co-op was able to launch its Food Hub in the summer of 2020. As expressed, they are glad they took the time to investigate and build relationships with the members of the community who the co-op serves. Beginning the Food Hub initiative in the summer of the pandemic was not an easy time for the co-op. The primary focus during the pandemic has been getting the Food Hub initiative running.

The long-term primary goal of the Food Hub initiative is to collectivize the power of small farms and to make sure the co-op can help them develop a more stable wholesale market for local food. In return, this allows for local food to not only get into the hands of the wealthy, but inner city schools and institutions. Changing the mindset overtime surrounding the idea of food access, is what they aim to do.

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The Food Hub and WASTE-NOT

The Food Hub

It is important to understand that Fireweed Co-op is the main umbrella with the Farmer's Market and Food Hub existing within it. The South Osborne Farmer's Market and the Food Hub. Currently, the Food Hub is structured to only sell to grocery stores and restaurants etc. Individual consumers cannot purchase from the Food Hub, but rather they can purchase from the Farmer's Market. For them, it's more important to get the food into places where it doesn't currently exist. Their vision is to provide for restaurants, businesses, schools and more long-term goals, for example, a university campus. That sort of business secures a lot of income for their farmers and is a financial guarantee.

The Food Hub services provided are marketing, building customer relationships, aggregation, storage for some, and delivery. Small farmers who are not able to access large markets require marketing and business guidance. The work that is simply outside of farming is what they are trying to do to optimize the local farmers' business opportunities. This allows farmers to work on their land while the co-op can offer services on the business side of the spectrum. For example, providing online software system, distribution and delivery to customers. Their producer-members expressed the need for this, and Fireweed saw it as essential to listen to their needs and implement it in within the co-op. By creating and expanding the market for local food, they hope to see more people enter small-scale ecological farming to try and change the profile of who is out there on the land, although this could take years to do so. There are a lot of people who want to enter the small-scale farming market, and they are trying to build a movement and sustainable food system for people to do so.



South Osborne Famer's Market

Waste Not: A Community Food Box Program

Fireweed Food Co-op is undertaking a new collaboration with the Mutual Aid Society Winnipeg, a grassroots, community-led initiative founded in response to COVID-19. One of the projects that has arisen from their work is the MASYWG Meal Program "Serve the People", which has provided by estimate nearly 6,000 meals to folks in need in Winnipeg since March.

Fireweed is also working with Serve the People to provide a channel for food donations through their Food Hub warehouse and at the South Osborne Farmers Market, and with help assembling boxes of healthy, local food that can go to families in need, and help prevent the waste of high quality, high nutrition, locally grown food.

The Importance of our Local Resilient Food System

Pandemic Lessons

"Trying to get on our feet and launch initiatives in a pandemic has not been easy - most businesses have struggled a lot." As explained by Asha: "On a positive note, during this time, I feel as if a general awareness of how unstable and broken our global industrial food system is has been brought to light. The pandemic has disrupted global supply chains causing serious food shortages, increased food prices, and increased food insecurity. This highlights the need for a more localized, ecologically resilient and just food system where the needs of the land, producers, and eaters are put ahead of profit." It's a no brainer! Therefore, greater investment in our local food system is needed to be able to effectively respond to crises, such as the pandemic.

In terms of engagement for their projects, they've set up a stakeholder advisory committee for both initiatives. Co-op members who are involved in the Farmer's Market have an opportunity express their voice and feedback in two meetings per year. They take their feedback and incorporate it into the co-ops own work and planning. Concerning the Food Hub, Fireweed meets with their producers twice a year (there is an open-door policy) and this has been very helpful to hear their voices and let them know about the proposed changes in the co-op and whether that would work or not. The Food Hub has a lateral root network. They have a community advisory committee consisting of producers, restaurants/retailers, and food security organizations. In addition, they come together to talk about the Food Hub to make it more relevant and impactful. They also engage their members through the use of surveys. This year they introduced member-only events. This is a way to gather, build relationships and connect outside of their identities.

"If you can build in that engagement and sense of belonging, people feel invested in projects. Inevitably for the farmers, although we have an awesome idea for our vision and ideals, we take things day by day. It is so important to build trust with your members because it builds a sense of patience, support, and transparency. We are a business based on values."

