

## Markham oasis for newcomer

By L.H. Tiffany Hsieh  
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In the eyes of Beijing-native Shaojun Chu, Markham is a foreign country with few people on the street to look at or with whom to speak. But for the past three years since he's lived here, Mr. Chu has found a home-like place where he can grow Chinese vegetables and make friends between late-May and mid-October.

Located just two blocks east of Main Street Markham, the Markham Community Garden on Maple Street is a 1.5-acre piece of land with about 90 garden plots.

"I like to plant my vegetables here because there are no chemicals involved in the process," Mr. Chu said in Mandarin.

"Sometimes we bring the food home and eat them, sometimes we donate them, but I plant them because it's like watching a child grow and when the fall harvest comes, it's like going back to the old times."

The community garden, which recently held an open house, is the first project of its kind funded and co-ordinated by the York Region Food Network. It opened in 1993 to improve access to fresh and affordable food for people in the region.

It's different from the new Legacy organic garden on the Markham Green Golf Course and the volunteer-run "secret garden club" behind the Markham Museum, said Victoria McGrath, who heads the town's sustainability office.

Ms McGrath said they are co-op gardens in that members contribute labour and share their harvest collectively. The community garden, on the other hand, offers individual plots of land to local residents who want to plant and harvest their own fruits and vegetables.

Similar gardens have also been established in Newmarket and Aurora by YRFN.

In Markham, the land is made available free of charge by local Councillor John Webster's family. Mr. Webster said his late uncle, Carman Lewis, began an informal community garden on the land 20 to 30 years ago.

"It was a philosophy of helping people," Mr. Webster said. "Some people live in apartments, some have with mature trees in their backyards ... Markham is a melting pot and the garden has become a small Markham in a way. They all help each other out."

Mr. Webster pointed out the diversity of gardeners on the land and the wide range of produce.

"Things I don't even recognize. The garden is always full of people and what's fascinating is that a community of people can get together and talk to their neighbours," Mr. Webster said.

"An (Asian) person may be planting Chinese squash one year and next year they are planting western squash. We talk about urban farming, 100-mile diet and eat locally — it's all happening simultaneously."

As for Mr. Chu, "I don't speak much English, but I can make all kinds of friends here with my hands," he said. "Time flies when I'm there. I'm happy just looking at it."

There is no charge to participate in the community garden. Gardeners are asked to volunteer on at least one garden committee and to donate some produce to a local food bank, agency or family in need. Many also make



**How does your garden grow.** Shaojun Chu shows off his Chinese long beans in the Markham Community Garden on Maple Street yesterday. The garden, which recently held an open house, is the first project of its kind funded and co-ordinated by the York Region Food Network. It opened in 1993. *Staff Photo/Sjoerd Witteveen*

a donation to YRFN to assist with operating costs. For more information, visit [www.yrfn.ca](http://www.yrfn.ca)  
If you are interested in starting up a community garden, contact the town at 905-477-7000.

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