

River Ridge Farm: A Conservation Partnership and a Green Dream Come True

Written by Nadine Abrams, Toronto and Region Conservation



Newly installed fencing protecting the riparian area along the Humber River.

Photo credit: Nadine Abrams

When Norman and Brenda Varrall purchased their Caledon farm in 2010, their vision to provide their community with fresh, home grown produce began.

“Norman and I both grew up on a farm so when the opportunity came to purchase my father’s farm, we couldn’t pass it up,” says Brenda. “We’ve always loved the Caledon area so we were happy to plant our roots here”.

The Varrall’s River Ridge Farm, which sits on 20 rolling hectares of Oak Ridges Moraine, was once home to approximately 60 head of cattle. Today, a handful of cows and horses remain however, the farm’s main focus has shifted to providing customers with fresh produce which is sold at the farm gate.

In addition to the natural beauty of the area, the Varralls enjoy a serene vista over the Humber River and one of its many small headwater tributaries, both of which run through the property. Naturalists at heart, they wanted to enhance the natural areas on the farm.

“As avid bird watchers, we wanted to provide plenty of habitat for our feathery friends”, Brenda said.

The Varralls learned about Toronto and Region Conservation’s (TRCA) Private Tree Planting Program from a family friend. Working with program staff, the couple developed a planting plan and in the spring of 2013, over 10,000 reforestation seedlings such as maple, oak and larch were planted. In 2014, they once again partnered with TRCA and planted an additional 6,500 seedlings on retired pasture lands that were too steep to farm. The planting efforts resulted in more than five hectares of reforestation, further expanding the existing nine hectares of mature forest.

Brenda later stumbled on an article in the local paper on the Peel Rural Water Quality Program (PRWQP). The program is jointly administered by TRCA and Credit Valley Conservation (CVC) and is funded by the Region of Peel. Brenda was pleased to find out that there was assistance available for a fencing project they had in mind.

“We were happy to learn that the Conservation Authority provided assistance for livestock fencing”, said Brenda. “Now that we had planted all these trees, we wanted to protect them”.

In the past, cattle had access to the river and tributary for drinking and would cross these areas to reach additional pasture. As a result, the banks and surrounding vegetation were heavily damaged. With support from the PRWQP, the Varralls decided to erect approximately 70 metres of page wire fencing along the edge of the pasture abutting the Humber River. An additional 560 metres of fencing was

erected along either side the tributary to replace a temporary two-strand electric fence. The fencing created a 30 metre buffer along the river and a 10 metre buffer along the tributary.

The newly created buffer areas provide many benefits on and off the farm. Buffers help protect the stream from manure runoff which in turn improves aquatic habitat. They provide a haven for wildlife which increases biodiversity, provide air purification services and natural filtration through their roots and help protect and preserve water quality. As for the Varralls, they have enjoyed watching the regeneration occurring on their farm and have even noticed an increase in the number of wildlife sightings.

“We used to see one or two deer every once in a while, now deer are a regular sight on the far hills” Brenda said.

“We have even noticed an increase in the number of bird species, birds that weren’t here five years ago are now a regular sight”, added Norman.

Cost share funding for the reforestation planting project was provided by TRCA’s Private Tree Planting Program and Trees Ontario through their 50 Million Tree Program. Cost-share funding for the fencing project was provided by the PRWQP. If you reside within Peel Region and are interested in undertaking environmental improvements such as these on your farm property, technical assistance and financial incentive is available to eligible farm land owners. To learn more, contact Toronto and Region Conservation at 416-661-6600, ext. 5349 or visit www.trca.on.ca/rcwp.

Many Conservation Authorities across Ontario offer similar programs to that of the Peel Rural Water Quality Program. Not sure which of the 36 Conservation Authorities you should contact? Check out the provincial map and contact listing on Conservation Ontario’s website at: www.conservation-ontario.on.ca.

About TRCA: With 60 years of experience, Toronto and Region Conservation helps people understand, enjoy and look after the natural environment. TRCA’s vision is for the Living City; a cleaner, greener and healthier place to live, for you today and for your children tomorrow. For more information, visit us at www.trca.on.ca

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