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Put on pot of soup, help fight food crisis

By: Laura Rance

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Growing up on the farm, hardly a day passed when there wasn't a soup pot simmering on the kitchen stove.

It's a simple image, but one that captures much of what life was about in those days.

Soup was an inexpensive way to nourish a growing family and it could easily be stretched with a little bit more of this or that, depending on the head count. That bubbling pot was also an efficient place to throw leftovers before they turned mouldy in the fridge.

"Waste not, want not," was a familiar mantra for my parents, who spent their early years living through the Great Depression. Because the entire family had a role in producing the food on the table, either through weeding or feeding, throwing even some of it out seemed like a colossal waste of our collective time and energy.

The energy police might take issue with the amount of power consumed by the extended cooking time, which blended flavours and ensured it was free of harmful organisms. But as most of that food came from either the garden or barnyard, it's a safe bet this kind of eating left a smaller environmental footprint and dramatically reduced waste.

Back then, a roast was big enough to feed the family Sunday after-church dinner, provide luncheon meat for a few days, produce a casserole -- and the inevitable soup.

This little dose of nostalgia came to mind this week while sifting through the material that enters the inbox leading up to today's celebration of World Food Day.

This year's theme, "United Against Hunger," calls upon the global community to take the necessary action to ease the problem of hunger and ensure the world's future demand for food will be met.

It seems everyone, including the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, is placing the tremendous onus on the world's farmers and their productivity to meet that challenge.

"World food production will need to increase by 70 per cent to feed a population of over nine billion people in 2050. With limited land, farmers will have to get greater yields out of the land already under cultivation," says the FAO's director general, Jacques Diouf, in his annual message.

And, with a billion hungry people on the planet today, the world is already falling behind.

It's important to remember, though, that today's hunger is not the result of inadequate supply. It is one of distribution. The world's farmers are producing more than enough to provide a nutritional diet to every person on the planet.

In fact, researchers estimate up to half of what is produced today gets tossed out because it spoils. In our part of the world, it spoils in our fridges, gets left on our plates or is disposed of by the food service industry at the end of the day. Estimates vary, but households typically waste between 15 and 27 per cent of their food purchases.

One researcher concluded this food is costing us in three ways -- we're spending hard-earned money

growing, processing, packaging, transporting and refrigerating food that ultimately produces methane gas as it rots in landfills.

In other parts of the world, food wastes because farmers lack the harvest capacity, storage and transportation infrastructure to get it to markets. Mould and bugs get to it first.

In addition to the food that goes to waste, there is the food that goes to waist -- the extra calories that contribute to the obesity epidemic in select parts of the world.

Edible waste is an important, but routinely overlooked consideration in the highly polarized debate over how to feed the world.

Increasing production to meeting the world's growing food needs is the most commonly cited reason behind the push to further industrialize agriculture, a process that historically has led to fewer farmers and more corporate control over the food system. This approach also places more pressure on the world's dwindling fertilizer and fuel resources.

Increasing calls for a return to more "natural-systems" approaches, which rely on farmers' knowledge of crop rotation and nutrient-building cover crops to reduce their reliance on purchased inputs, are countered by the argument that yields in these systems have tended to be lower. That would require the conversion of more forests and wildlands into agriculture.

However, recent research suggests properly managed organic rotations can achieve similar yields as conventional.

Improving agriculture's productivity one way or another is undoubtedly part of the solution. But so is