

Planting the seeds

The role of teachers
and the union in
food security
in BC



BC Teachers' Federation
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Introduction

Among the inequities that have been exposed and amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, access to affordable and healthy food is increasingly a crisis for many students and their families. In Canada, a survey conducted in May 2020 found that almost one in seven (14.6%) Canadians were living in a household with food insecurity, an increase from 10.5% in 2018, and with higher rates for households with children than those without (Statistics Canada, 2020). This has contributed to increased attention to the impact of COVID-19 and food security on children's well-being (Children First, 2020; Dove, Wong, Gutafson, & Cornell, 2020; UNICEF Canada, 2020), as well as renewed calls for a national food program (Food Secure Canada, 2020; The Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2020).

The responses to food insecurity over the course of the pandemic have been necessary emergency measures. For instance, as schools shut down in Spring 2020, countries around the world put in place emergency programs to continue providing food to students (Breakfast Club of Canada, 2020; World Food Programme, 2020). Likewise, food banks across Canada have seen a spike in demand.¹ At the same time, the pandemic has served to magnify an issue that many teachers have seen and addressed daily in their classrooms. A 2015 study by the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) found that there was a "considerable gap between the needs of hungry children attending public schools and the food programs available to meet their needs" (BCTF Research, 2015, p. 7). In many cases, it is teachers who step in to fill these gaps. For instance, teachers reported spending on average \$29/month to meet the needs of hungry students, a figure that resonates with research from the US. However, there is a gap in the food security literature in relation to the role of teachers, and teacher unions, in this important issue.

To explore food security from the perspective of teachers, the BCTF held a virtual Think Tank in Fall 2020. As a social justice union, the BCTF has prioritized healthy food for all students as a key equity issue that necessitates concrete action to benefit all students and families. The impetus for the Think Tank came from a BCTF Executive Committee motion that recommended "investigating holding a Summit on Healthy Food for All Students or other teacher research process that investigates issues and solutions related to food insecurity, access to healthy food for students, and culturally relevant and place-based food."² The virtual Think Tank was made up of three activities: (i) a province-wide webinar in which the union president, Teri Mooring, discussed key issues with experts in food security research, teaching, and advocacy;³ (ii) a day-long workshop with teachers across the province engaging in food security work through teaching and advocacy; and (iii) a "town hall" format webinar to share stories and recommendations from the Think Tank. This report (1) foregrounds

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¹ See for example <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/most-challenging-difficult-year-canadian-food-banks-get-creative-to-meet-demand-amid-pandemic-1.5141549>

² Decision of the February 21-22, 2020 BCTF Executive Committee

³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whtud8lWFes&t=37s>

key themes from the Think Tank related to principles that can guide the union's action and advocacy on food security in BC and (2) proposes paths for the union to amplify, extend and advocate based on the rich diversity of work already occurring within the province.

“Transforming challenges into opportunities:” Principles for action

Three key themes emerged as teachers discussed their experiences with, and perspectives on, food security in BC public schools. Broadly, these can be described as rights-based, universal, and place-based and culturally relevant.

“Public support and investment in the well-being of all children, not just charity”

A rights-based approach is about addressing the structural issues that drive food insecurity. For example, while food banks may meet an immediate need during the COVID-19 crisis, they have been found to be an ineffective “solution” to food insecurity (PROOF, n.d.). Food banks are also critiqued for their reliance on a charity model and for masking the need for deeper structural change such as a basic income approach to poverty reduction (Riches, 2020). In the context of school communities, one of the key challenges discussed at the Think Tank was that school food programs often rely on a charity model (such as partnerships with external community providers or grants). Not only is this at odds with a rights-based approach, it also undermines the long-term sustainability of these programs.

Across the conversations in the Think Tank, teachers spoke clearly about the need for a rights-based approach to food security in BC. A rights-based approach is responsive to the multi-faceted impacts that food insecurity has on children, as documented in the research literature (e.g. Deeds, 2020; Faught, Williams, Willows, Asbridge, & Veugelers, 2017; Food Research & Action Center, 2017; Johnson & Markowitz, 2018). For example, school food programs meet the nutritional needs of students, but teachers also noted how they can be a “vibrant learning space,” and “a central part of creating school community.” One teacher described how each class in a school prepared a dish for a shared Thanksgiving meal, and how this was a powerful moment of connection grounded within the school community. Another teacher recognized how “stable healthy food access” is critical to “mental health for all of our learners.” School food programs also too often rely on the passion of a single teacher, or the support of one administrator. Teachers at the Think Tank spoke to the importance of reframing food security as a central part of the mandate of public education, ensuring “access to healthy food for ALL students and supporting food literacy learning for ALL students.”

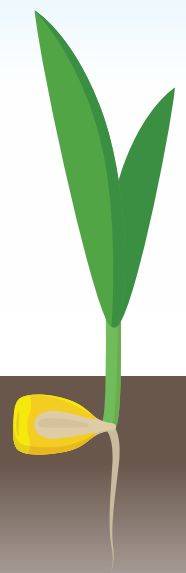


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“Universal, not targeted”

Building on a rights-based approach, the second theme articulated by teachers to guide action is universality. As with the previous statement related to accessing healthy food for all students, this is also about “universal access to food (breakfast and lunch) as a community everyday.” Many school food programs are targeted programs, meaning they are intended for families that struggle to provide their children a lunch from home. Students who then access a lunch provided by the school are considered ‘in need’ and this can create stigma. In contrast, universal school lunch programs provide lunch to all students, regardless of financial need. Teachers recognized shifting from targeted to universal school food programs for all as key to addressing the potential stigma that children and their families who access school meal programs may face (see also BCTF Research, 2015; Black & Elliott, 2020).

Universality also speaks to how learning about food could be a key part of teaching and learning in BC. As one teacher shared, all students have “food stories,” and an inclusive approach to food security is based in “ensuring everyone’s food stories are being told.” Throughout the Think Tank, teachers described ways in which food security extends beyond the provision of school meals and can become a key part of the curriculum. This includes the “preparation and sharing of school meals,” “food literacy learning for all students,” and connections to outdoor education.

Working towards a universal approach may also require re-thinking the spaces of public education. This could be “a garden in every school” or “working farming programs in all schools,” and including “partnership with farmers” in the local community. These spaces are a potential part of recognizing that “deep system change is needed to build resilience and equity into the future” (Food Secure Canada, 2020, p. 10). As one teacher explained, addressing the global climate crisis “starts in the school system” with “educated and informed youth.”

“Place-based and culturally relevant”

The third theme drawn from teachers’ perspectives on food security in BC is the importance of place-based, culturally relevant approaches. As teachers discussed school food programs, the conversation repeatedly returned to community, emphasizing partnerships and the importance of community engagement. Furthermore, teachers explained how place-based learning about food can support the BC curriculum’s “experiential approach to learning,” and support teachers to “develop the practice of teaching outside, on the land, independent of the ‘school building.’”



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Teachers shared how this lens is a critical opportunity to disrupt Western knowledge systems and engage with Aboriginal ways of knowing and being, as part of truth and reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b). In residential schools, food was a colonial tool used to dominate, humiliate and control indigenous children (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a). The lack of culturally relevant food continues to act as a barrier to participation in school food programs (BCTF Research, 2015), and “dependency-based food structures” are an ongoing colonial legacy (Food Secure Canada, 2020). Recognizing that “Indigenous food systems are deeply connected to Indigenous economies, cultures, health, and wellbeing,” (Food Secure Canada, 2017) teachers have the opportunity to engage food sovereignty as part of the work of reconciliation. Here, food sovereignty is understood as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Food Secure Canada, 2020, p. 10).

Teachers spoke about building a relationship with plants and seeds and how taking students onto the land can make space for truth and reconciliation. One teacher spoke about supporting their students to write stories from seed to squash, connecting them to teachings about the environment and food sources. Learning about food is also an opportunity for “intergenerational relationships with elders” and “reconciliation through partnerships and sharing opportunities with First Nations.”

Paths for action: Amplify, Extend, Advocate

While the rich conversations from the Think Tank, and indeed the diversity of teacher experiences and perspectives from around the province, cannot be reduced to a singular vision, one teacher provided a summary of many of the points discussed when they described their vision: “all children in BC have access to healthy, sufficient, place and culturally based foods in a universal program delivered in cooperation with BC food growers, providers and caretakers. Food is the connecting place for community, economic and social health.” The Think Tank offered three paths for working towards this vision: amplify, extend and advocate.

Amplify

Across the province, BC teachers are using their professional judgement to engage in food security issues in innovative ways. Teachers participating in the Think Tank shared how the day-long workshop was itself a unique space to learn about the diversity of approaches and programs across the province.



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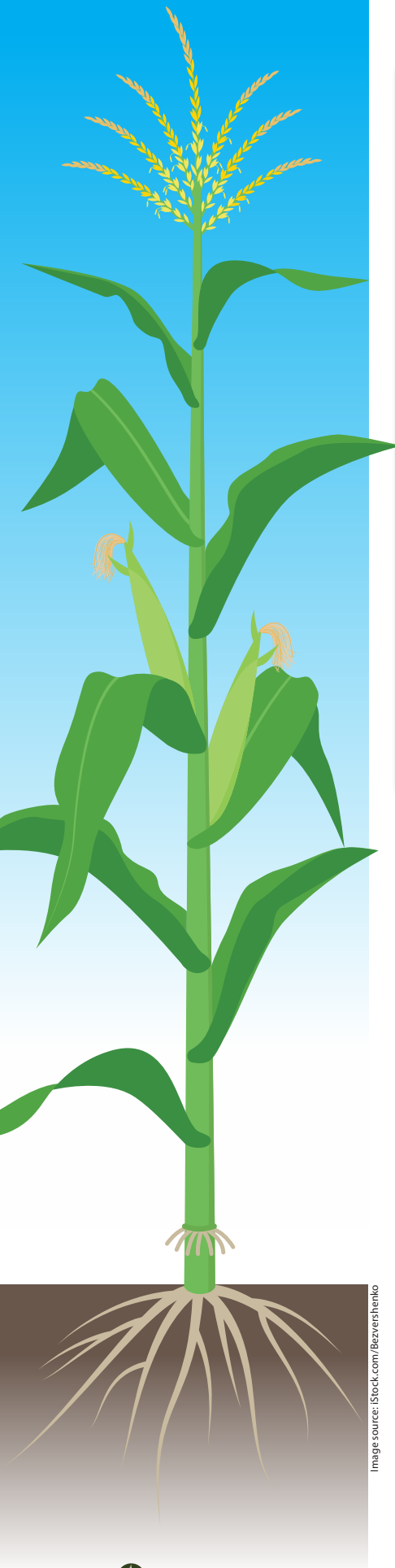


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Examples of teacher-led work and resources shared during the Food Security and COVID-19 in BC Think Tank

- **The classroom gardener** – <https://theclassroomgardener.com/>
- **Food resources** – <https://maps.youngagrarians.org/>
- **Foods Work** – <http://www.farmtocafeteriacanada.ca/2014/04/foods-work-doing-what-comes-naturally-on-haida-gwii/>
- **ToolKit for teachers of a variety of resources for teaching about local food systems** – <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EBd1Vrf9CdWGYCSGkcDcxhFno9IJ009eEa7zGRO5is8/edit>
- **Sharing and using food to build community connections** – <https://esquimalt.sd61.bc.ca/home/gingerbread-house-kits/>
- **“Gateway” gardening projects** – www.farmship.ca
- **Farm to School BC** – <https://farmtoschoolbc.ca/>
- **LunchLAB programs** – www.instagram.com/lunchlabroberts
- **Edible Education** – www.instagram.com/edibleeducationroberts

At the same time, teachers spoke to the need for an ongoing mechanism to share lessons learned and connect with one another. Possible paths are:

- Share food security issues and lessons learned from teachers’ perspectives (e.g. articles in Teacher Magazine or on social media).
- Support a community of practice related to food security (e.g. a provincial specialist association, ongoing opportunities to bring together teachers working in this area).
- Include food security issues in existing BCTF training events (e.g. Zones, Summer Conference).

Extend

While some teachers are already engaged in food security issues, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how food security impacts everyone in our school communities. Potential paths to extend the work that is already occurring are:

- Create a “making the case” toolkit for teachers to advocate for rights-based, universal, place-based, and culturally relevant school food programs in their communities.
- Develop a “food justice lens” to guide teaching and learning.
- Develop professional development workshops and other union-created resources on food security issues.
- Include food security in existing structures within school districts (e.g. a helping teacher on food security, link food security to mentorship, connect with community experts to bring food literacy into classrooms).

Advocate

There is also the need for broader system-level changes and supports. Potential paths are:

- Integrate a food literacy program into BC’s curriculum.
- Engage with other education stakeholders (e.g. CUPE, Principals and Vice Principals).
- Advocate for free universal school lunch programs.
- Endorse the Coalition for Healthy School Food.
- Include a food security lens in new building construction (i.e. designated school garden spaces, less ‘structured’ play spaces and more open spaces for children and teachers to explore nature, ensuring every school has a kitchen).

Taken together, paths to amplify, extend and advocate are about building collective action over the issue of food security in BC public schools and ensuring that all students and their families have access to healthy, culturally relevant food.



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Graphic recording of the Think Tank, by Drawing Change

COVID-19 FOOD SECURITY in BC

INEQUITY & INTERSECTIONS What is being amplified?

- Food insecurity at highest levels in Canada before COVID
- 1/8 households food insecure
- Households with children are harder hit

- DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS ...
- BIPOC
- Women
- Low income
- Disabled

CELEBRATE SEASONALITY

FOOD CALENDAR
for the land you are on connects weather, language...

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY!
harvesting traditional foods to nurture families. Struggling through covid

VALUE KNOWLEDGE HOLDERS OF LOCAL FOOD...

When we know our local abundance, we are not poor.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY PRO-DAYS

- Skinning deer?
- Farming?

WHOLE WELLNESS

The importance of outdoor play!

CONNECTING CHILDREN TO LAND

SUSTAINABLE?

VALUE CARE GIVERS & ESSENTIAL WORKERS
• parents, teachers
DEDICATED STAFF POSITIONS

VALUE INVISIBLE LABOUR...

Biggest barriers to home gardens? Know-how!

Get kids outside finding meaning & they don't want to come back inside...

COLONIZATION impacts on Indigenous food > RE-LEARNING

in residential schools food was used as a weapon...

- STRESS + HUNGER
- DEPRESSION
- SUICIDALITY

Reducing food quality Sacrificing quality

Worried about food

Reducing food

from price meal grants

DREAM BIG

MANDATE: WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR???

UNIVERSAL

infrastructures of

CARE & CONNECTION

LIVABLE BASIC INCOME & Social safety net!

OVERCOME SCARCITY & STIGMA!

SUPPORT for STUDENTS

Who are out HARVESTING ALL DAY & get marked 'away'...

FOOD: THE GREAT CONNECTOR...

for

• Community
• economic
• social
• Health & wellbeing

THE LAND IS THE CLASSROOM!

- Leave behind reliance on classrooms ...
- Localize learning spaces
- Resources for teachers on how to support students in land-based learning

students get credit for photo-documenting land-based learning...

(a boy documented all the Salmon Species in Haida.)



children & youth lead their LEARNING

- We listen & facilitate
- Compost content Pedagogy & nurture PROCESS

Support young people to imagine new OPTIONS...
NEW CAREER PATHS!

Reconnect to food life cycles, Seasonality & locality → RESILIENCE

for future pandemics

- Grow food
- Feed schools
- Sell to community

Hydroponics
When soil not an option?

Food that absorbs carbon & nourishes bodies



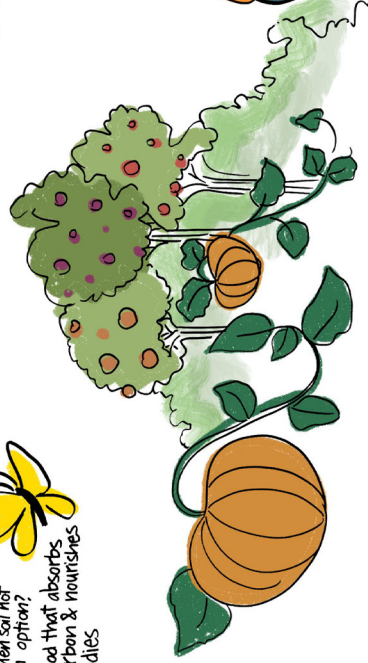
embedded across the culture...
Not just I class, I season, I teacher...



Community of Practice demonstrate what is POSSIBLE!

- Coalitions
- Learning exchange
- Success stories
- Toolkits: making the case

PAID POSITION & TIME!



FOOD JUSTICE LENS:

- New buildings policy & school act

Universal food program

- cooperation between BC-food growers, province, caretakers
- ALL children in BC have access to:

- healthy & sufficient
- Place & culturally based foods



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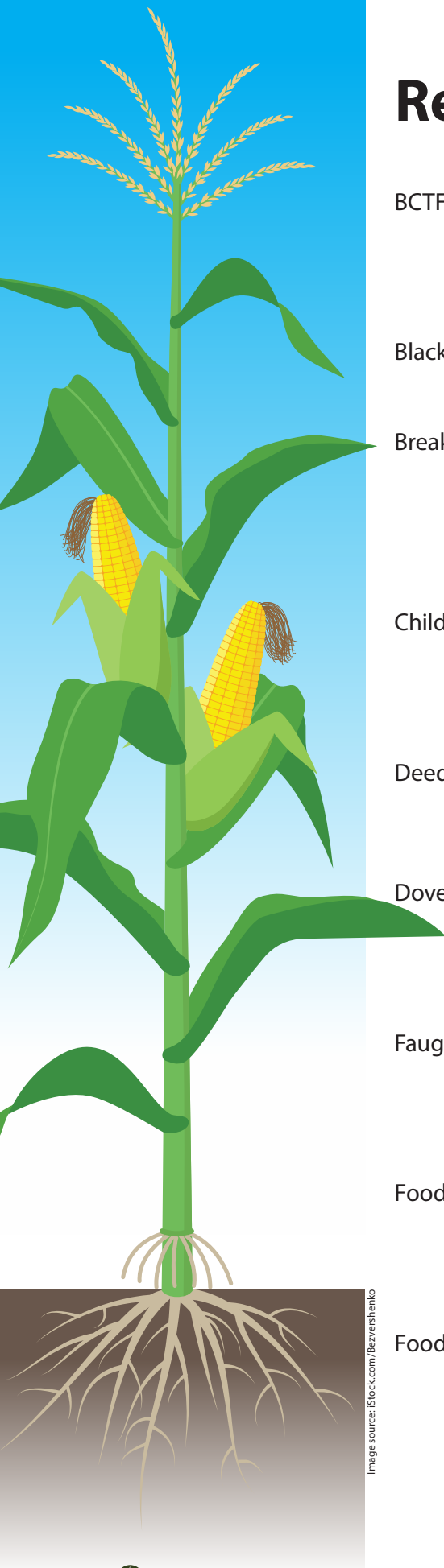


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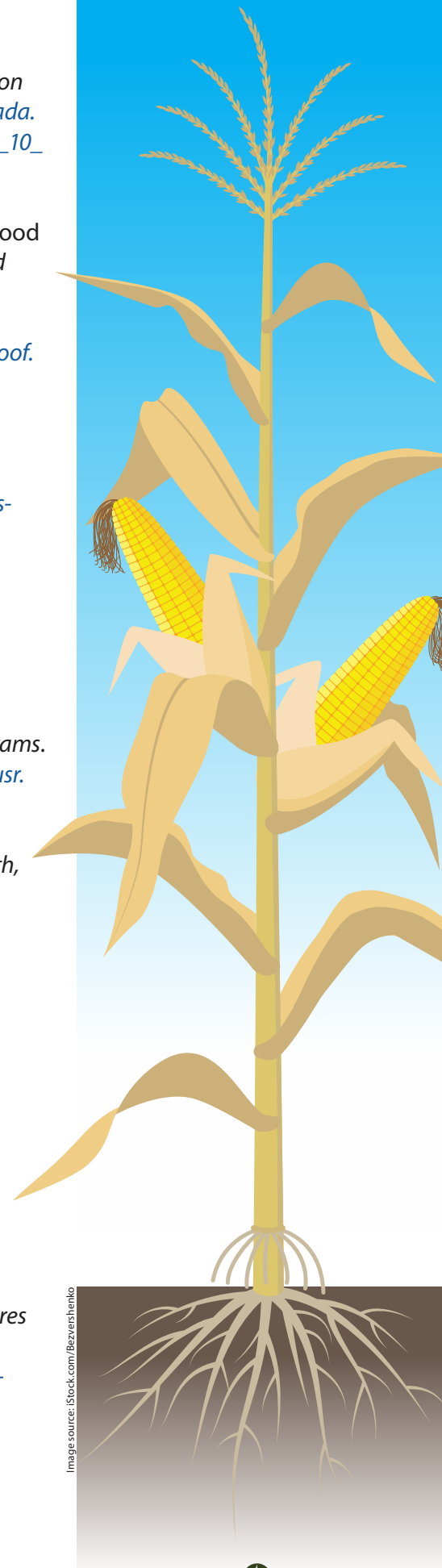


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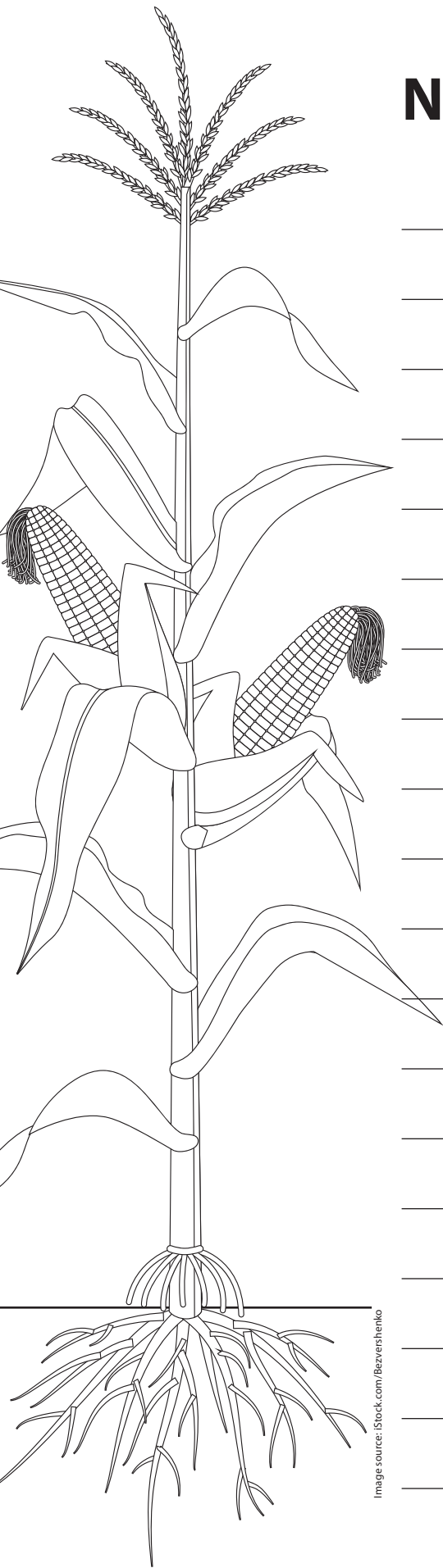


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