

small enough to make a change  
big enough to make a difference



# ISLAND GREEN

A Language Arts Educator's Guide to  
"Feed the Soil" and *Island Green*



## INTRODUCTION

### Tanya Davis, a Canadian poet to discover

Powerful words and images can touch and transform audiences. Tanya Davis, the author and voice behind the poem "Feed the Soil," featured in the NFB film *Island Green*, is a young Canadian artist whose talent is truly inspiring. Her words are wise, heartfelt, beautiful and, in a way, haunting. They remind us of our responsibilities as stewards of the Earth and all the forms of life on it.

This Language Arts Educator's Guide offers discussion questions designed to assist teachers leading students in a critical analysis of *Island Green* and, in particular, of Davis's poem. It is also an invitation to savour the words of Tanya Davis as she speaks for the Earth—to hear her message, to feel, and to respond with one's own personal message in the form of a poem. The guide is intended for students in Grades 7 to 12.

## ABOUT ISLAND GREEN

Prince Edward Island has long been famous for its spuds and red mud. But in the last 50 years since industrialized farming took root, this small, agricultural island has been building a new reputation—for having the highest cancer and respiratory illness rates in Canada. Is there a link?

Every year, countless tourists are greeted by PEI's warm sandy beaches, quaint seaside villages and, of course, field after field of the island's signature potato crops. Rather than dwelling on PEI's worrisome monocropping practices, *Island Green* dares to ask: What if PEI went entirely organic?

Using beautiful imagery and poignant stories from the island's small but growing community of organic farmers, PEI filmmaker Millefiore Clarkes, whose work includes *December in Toronto* and *Stalking Love*, explores a healthier future for Canada's smallest province. In addition to the farmers' stories, she shares the stirring words of PEI-born poet Tanya Davis, which remind us that we can rob the land only so much before it robs us of the nourishment we need for life.

As *Island Green* shows organic farmers working the fields, eating their bountiful harvests together with friends and family, and discussing the success of their farms, its story is ultimately one of hope and healthy promise.

## ACTIVITY

### Brief outline and purpose

Students engage in a critical viewing of *Island Green* with the goal of understanding the film and identifying the various techniques used by the filmmaker to deliver her message. Students also reflect on their reading of the poem "Feed the Soil," seeking to better grasp its contribution to the film's themes and message. They then write and share their own poems.

### Part 1: Understanding the film and interpreting the poem

- Watch the film *Island Green* with your class, asking students to pay particular attention to the narration of "Feed the Soil" by Tanya Davis.
- Invite your students to take note of powerful or meaningful excerpts as they listen to the poem for the first time.
- Ask students to discuss their reactions to the film by answering the following questions:
  - What is the main issue presented in the film?
  - How is this issue connected to you?
  - What was the intent of the filmmaker in creating this documentary?
  - What techniques, strategies or effects did the filmmaker use to convey her message?
  - How does the poem by Tanya Davis contribute to the film's themes and subject?
  - What images and words from this film will stay with you? Why?
- View the film for a second time with your class. This time, give students the words to "Feed the Soil" (see page 4) as well as the discussion questions designed to help them interpret the poem (see worksheet on page 3). Ask your students to jot down ideas in response to these questions as they watch the film. They can complete their answers after this viewing.
- Once students have had a chance to answer the questions about the poem, facilitate a class discussion in which students share different interpretations of the poem and its meaning.



## "FEED THE SOIL" DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Watch the film, listen to the poem, read the poem, re-read the poem. You may even read the poem out loud!

Pay attention to its rhythm and think about its possible meanings. Then, once you have played with the poem enough to have a firm grasp of it, answer the following questions.

QUESTIONS	NOTES
What is the subject of the poem?	
What are some possible interpretations of the poem?	
Which key phrase(s) or verse(s) is/are central to its meaning?	
What is the poet's opinion about protecting the soil?	
How do the sound of the poetry and its rhythm contribute to its meaning?	
What world view or ideology does the poem espouse or reflect?	
How does this poem make you feel?	



## Part 2: Writing a response to Tanya Davis's "Feed the Soil"

- Invite students to discover Tanya Davis's body of work. They can visit her website [tanyadavis.ca](http://tanyadavis.ca), which presents her bio, poetry, music, videos, etc., and her Facebook page [facebook.com/pages/Tanya-Davis/8063194647](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Tanya-Davis/8063194647).
- Ask students to write their own poem, inspired by Tanya Davis's work, about an issue or idea relating to the Earth, the environment, or the community. If they wish, students can share their own poems with Tanya Davis via her Facebook page. She has expressed that, although she cannot possibly respond to all postings, she loves reading the work of other writers!



## FEED THE SOIL

Poem for *Island Green*  
by Tanya Davis

### ACT ONE

Thing about morning is  
There's not so many people up  
There's lots of space in it  
and the way the light comes pouring in  
through barn doors  
is like god calling  
'you awake yet?'  
or, if you don't believe in that kinda thing  
you could say  
it's a relay race  
and the moon gave the sun the baton again

In the morning dirt smells best  
here, smell this  
it's a merge of life and death and mystery  
it's the bones of old mixed in, we will become carbon again, certainly

Oh, but we don't talk about this, actually  
it's too close to home  
funny what kind of information people skip over  
like, how we have this here island  
with such beautiful soil  
and the irony is  
even though there's so much iron in it  
it seems to not be enough  
so people sticking it with too much  
it's rough  
what we're doing  
the earth, up to a certain point, will be forgiving  
but she's not gonna feed us if we keep stripping her  
we forget we're the fetus  
and she is the nurturer  
she doesn't need us as much as we'll be needing her  
when the fields are ravaged and the nutrients we once scavenged  
are limited and scattered

we forget that good food, healthy planet is what we're after  
and there's lots of ways to get that

### ACT TWO

Look what we got –  
country roads that shine in the eyes of tourists  
meals we make to pass around tables  
that not only feed but nourish  
our ground that could flourish in all seasons  
whether resting or yielding  
flowers from seed giving pollen to bees  
that would be grateful to keep toxins from their honey  
and children could go running  
with clean air in their lungs  
less dusting to settle on all of our lawns  
and the mood on the farm  
could be communal and calm  
competent women and men keeping on

be it in the woods, by the highway  
your next-door neighbour, in the city  
where plants are still food  
and animal husbandry  
means caretaking, means kindness, means some kind of loving  
because what we take inside us  
should not get there poisoned and struggling

### ACT THREE

Behind the scenes all picturesque  
are the country's highest rates of cancer and respiratory illness  
pesticides flow from the fields to kill off the fishes  
and the nitrates in the groundwater are higher than we should live with  
and expiry dates on potatoes don't cost as much as the debts  
farmers are building  
as they're aging  
without plans to pass the land to future generations  
farms forced to expand  
grow over their neighbours  
and community ties are compromised  
and our stewardship is waning

### ACT FOUR

Though the harvest is death giving us life  
sun sets for moon rise and long nights  
it is splendid communion and the sacrifice comes from all sides  
the farmers toil, the seeds grow food when we feed the soil  
let us stay as true as nature is wise  
on this planet and for its people let us plant something beautiful  
and reap something equally kind



## FINAL POEM

Hands dance  
Hands plant and seeds grab what they can  
seeking a place to crouch then kneel then stand  
there are a thousand ways to bend and kiss the land

And we need these plants  
they hold nutrients like hope  
like smoke  
let it rise then let it go  
they are alchemists to chlorophyll  
turning it to gold

Earth knows how to breathe  
how to keep itself clean  
nature nurtures its babies  
its elderly, its matrons  
and it doesn't need saving  
as much as we think  
we are the impatient ones  
expecting quick, enormous, and cheap

but there will be reason to grieve  
for one and all  
if we can't slow the system's changes  
our planet's subtle sadness  
let us take, for goodness' sake,  
a moment's pause