

Reclaiming the land

Community gardens are becoming a valuable source of food in the city

Lia Grainger, National Post Published: Saturday, May 08, 2010

When it comes to eating locally, it doesn't get much closer to home than your backyard. But what to do if you're one of the many Torontonians who doesn't have one?

Fortunately, urban gardening is gathering steam in Toronto, and the organizations that support community gardens are banding together so that more Torontonians than ever will have the chance to grow their own food this summer.

"We figure there are over 200 community gardens in Toronto," says Susan Berman, coordinator of the Perth Dupont Community Garden. "We've noticed an exponential growth in the number of people interested in the past year or two." She also volunteers with the Toronto Community Garden Network (TCGN), an organization that connects various community garden organizers so they can share resources, information and even seeds.

The reasons for becoming involved are many. As methods of mass food production are increasingly questioned, the demand for affordable organic produce grown in healthy soil has also increased, and for many, the best way to fill that demand is to grow the food themselves.

"The idea of cities providing for themselves is fascinating," says garden coordinator Emily Martyn. She works for Toronto Green Community, an organization that runs a garden near Yonge and Eglinton. She explains that while a community garden is often divided into separate plots allotted to individual members, at a communal garden everyone works the entire space together and then divides the crop at the end of season.

Though food production is a goal of Toronto Green Community, Martyn says the garden serves more as a teaching space where members can reconnect with the origins of their food.

"When people actually get out there and garden, they begin to understand what growing food means," she says. "They develop an awareness of natural processes, and right now people are very disconnected from that."

FoodShare is a Toronto non-profit that works to improve access to healthy affordable food. Their organizers concluded that rather than organizing the five to 10 gardens their staff could manage, they could better serve the community by using those staff to teach the public how to start and run gardens themselves.

"We discovered that we could make so much more happen throughout the city if we supported local community groups in bringing together their own food projects, and helping them to build the capacity to keep them running," says Ravenna Barker, one of the program's coordinators.

Those interested in starting a community garden can contact FoodShare and will be guided through the process of creating a functioning garden, from procuring land and resources, to organizing community meetings and planting the first crop.

"It's usually a one-year process to get it up and going, and after that the TCGN keeps people connected so that when struggles come up, they have support," Barker explains.

This mutual support among urban gardening initiatives is common, and indicative of the ethos that drives the movement. "You can't make a community garden by yourself," Barker says.

For many, the opportunity to socialize with diverse members of the community is a major draw.

"The connections that people are making are phenomenal," says Rhonda Teitel-Payne, an urban agriculture manager at The Stop Community Food Centre. The Stop runs a variety of food access programs, including multiple gardens and a 3,000-square-foot greenhouse at the Artscape Wychwood Barns.

Teitel-Payne is overseeing a new program that will see a series of demonstration gardens built by youth and seniors from various cultural groups in the neighbourhood.

"They may have an agricultural background themselves or just want to grow food that's familiar to them," she says. There will be gardens with plants and vegetables from China, Italy and the Caribbean, and [it] will serve to educate the rest of the community about these unfamiliar vegetables."

A common garden breaks down both cultural and socioeconomic barriers. "I think we've seen that even people who are quite marginalized and vulnerable and have some very difficult life situations are still very interested in learning about healthy food and growing food," Teitel-Payne says. "It's actually therapeutic for them, physically, socially and mentally.

For those who want to immerse themselves more fully in the urban agricultural experience, there are a number of full-scale urban farms, such as the one run by FoodCycles in Downsview Park near Keele and Sheppard.

"We have more than 300 volunteers that come here to experience what an actual farm is like, and it's accessible by the TTC," FoodCycles coordinator Sunny Lam says.

Across the city, community organizers are working to provide gardening space with the hope that one day the opportunity for all Torontonians to grow their own organic food will be viewed as a right and not a privilege.

"The idea that we can provide for ourselves is extremely important," Martyn says. "It helps people to understand that if they're not growing food for themselves, they should support and respect the people who do."

HOW TO REAP WHAT YOU SOW

National Post Join a community garden Nearly every neighbourhood in Toronto has at least one community garden. If you want your own plot, look for a community garden, and if you want to share the land and the food it produces, look for a communal garden. Tcgn.ca Start your own community garden

Feeling ambitious? FoodShare and other programs assist in procuring land, organizing and mobilizing the community and getting the first crop in the ground. Alternatively, gardeners can consult the TCGN's extensive manual on starting their own community garden. Foodshare.net, Tcgn.com Farm in the city For those who want to experience large-scale food production, there are a number of urban farms that invite the community to volunteer, often in exchange for some of the food produced. Foodcycles.org Swap backyards Have a big backyard but no time to garden? Eager to garden but unable to find land? There are a number of programs that pair gardeners with homeowners willing to share their space. Usually the crops are divided between the gardener and the homeowner at the end of the season. Sharingbackyards.wordpress.com Take a workshop For those interested in learning how to garden in private spaces such as balconies, rooftops and backyards, there are a number of organizations that offer workshops for free or at minimal cost. Gardenjane.com, Evergreen.ca, Foodshare.net, Foodcycles.org Lia Grainger,

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