

Green in the City: The Benefits of Urban Agriculture

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It was 2003 when Jason O'Brien got sick of watching binners and crows rip through the large blue garbage container in the vacant lot outside his kitchen window — the vacant lot underneath the SkyTrain on Commercial Drive. It couldn't be used for either residential or commercial space, but O'Brien had bigger outcomes in mind for the aesthetically displeasing piece of land anyways.

Imagine if he could turn his backyard mess into a rehabilitation centre, a mechanism to reduce crime, promote community, give recreational space, and produce food?

It may sound like a lofty goal, but anyone familiar with community gardens will mention the above benefits. Hence MOBY was born. MOBY, an acronym for "My Own Back Yard," is one of the newest community gardens in Vancouver.

Community gardens like MOBY are primarily hobbies here in Vancouver, but internationally they are known for their ability to feed entire cities. This inner city food production is known as urban agriculture, a widely discussed topic at the recently held 2006 World Urban Forum in Vancouver.

The term urban agriculture is relatively new, as is the acceptance of urban agriculture as a viable form of sustainable food practices in the city. As few as 20 years ago, putting the words urban and agriculture together would have been unheard of. In the past, urban agriculture has been viewed by governments as a form of squatting — in which people used land that they had "no right" to be on in order to obtain some form of food security.

But food shortage crises and rising concerns about declining oil supplies have begun to give urban agriculture some legitimacy in the eyes of municipalities all over the globe. The David Suzuki Foundation estimates that much of our food travels over 2,400 kilometres just to get to our dinner table. What's even more astounding is that the production of the food needed to feed a family of four, including packaging and distribution, releases up to eight tons of carbon dioxide annually.

Add to that the current migration of the world's population to cities — with nearly 50 per cent of people in the world living in urban environments — and urban food security becomes a huge issue.

The city — our beautiful construct of industry, services, and the arts — must be reconceptualised. Where it was previously a place where citizens could live entire lives without realising that food comes from somewhere other than a grocery store, it

must become a place where we integrate agricultural knowledge and urban life.

Urban agriculture encompasses production, processing, and marketing, not only of vegetables, but of eggs, meat, flowers, and dairy products as well. It was estimated by the United Nations Development Agency in 1996 that 15 to 20 per cent of the food produced in the world is produced by some 800 million urban and peri-urban farmers and gardeners.

Many cities in the world have already taken the plunge into accepting and promoting urban agriculture. Cities like Havana, Cuba; Kampala, Uganda; and Rosario, Argentina have done so in response to desperate food shortages which forced them into accepting innovative ways of managing food needs.

Due to such a food crisis following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Havana, Cuba, has become a fully self-sustaining city.

Before 1991 Cuba had been importing as much as 50 per cent of its food from Eastern Europe under special trade agreements. The documentary *Seeds in the City: The Greening of Havana* explains that Havana also had a gasoline shortage which kept trucks from importing food from rural Cuba into the cities. This combination of events left Cuba with a dire food shortage.

In response to the food shortage, Cubans began to grow their own food within cities, despite strict laws against urban agriculture in places like Havana. Spaces such as rooftops, balconies, and vacant lots were used for food production. The government soon warmed up to the idea, and grants of land were made to any person who promised to grow food on it. Markets were opened and urban food production not only helped to feed citizens, it eventually became profitable for urban farmers.

Havana has set an example for the success of other cities wishing to adopt formalised versions of urban agriculture. John Ssebaana Kizito, former mayor of the city of Kampala in Uganda, boasted of urban agriculture's success in his city at the World Urban Forum.

Kampala farmers do not only provide fruits and vegetables, they also supply 70 per cent of the poultry products consumed in the city. In addition to food security, agriculture in the city of Kampala has opened up new job opportunities for people migrating into the urban setting.

Back in Vancouver, a wealthy global city in the first world, we are also recognising the benefits of urban agriculture. The city of Vancouver has recently set a goal to increase the number of community gardens in the city from 900 to 3000 by the year 2010. Or, as they say, increase the gardens to 2010 by 2010.

It's clear, however, that Vancouver is not in a state of food crisis. In fact, with the

Agricultural Land Reserve so close to and even covering some of Vancouver's urban centre, practices such as urban agriculture can seem almost redundant. So why are we taking steps towards increasing the amount of urban agriculture in our city?

"We currently have a sufficient amount of food," explained Herb Barbolet, food consultant for the local organisation Farm Folk / City Folk. Despite this, we have reason to increase urban agriculture now. "Obviously, with population pressures . . . is going to get more and more problematic," said Barbolet, "with globalisation of the food system [the capacity to obtain food] it's only going to get worse."

While we may not be out to produce enough food to take up a substantial portion of our Vancouverite diet, urban agriculture and community gardening have a number of other benefits. Despite decades of neglected agriculture and materialism amongst urban dwellers, awareness about food security is raising rapidly in the city.

"A lot of young people are very smart with issues of food security," said Barbolet.

Strathcona Community Garden, located in Vancouver near Clark and Venables, began for reasons of food security "The people who did the backbreaking work to start [the Strathcona] garden were from the hotels in the lower eastside," said Muggs, an organiser of the Strathcona Community Garden, referring to the garden's inception in 1985. Since then, it has become a diverse and eclectic garden with 290 plots, 200 fruit trees, and beehives that produce up to 5,000 pounds of honey in a year.

Despite the initial intent of food production, the Strathcona Community Garden is now more concerned with fulfilling a desire to cultivate social and educational benefits, such as greening the city, health, exercise, recreation, increased community, and increased safety in neighbourhoods.

For people concerned with the high prices related to organic food, growing their own food is sometimes a viable option — that is, if they're prepared for the year-round TLC a garden needs. For those willing to take up a new hobby though, gardening may be just the ticket.

"We have people who don't even have a plot who come down to join the work party," explained Muggs, referencing Strathcona's monthly work parties in which 40 to 60 gardeners come together to help manage the gardens and orchards. The community aspect of the gardens is an appealing draw to all its members.

O'Brien has already noticed the social benefits of the newly formed MOBY. Although the garden members are primarily people whom he invited from his community, there are many people under 30, most of whom are socially and politically conscious. He dreams of the space being a place that is an aware, political, and sexy.

The benefits of community extend beyond just socialising with one another. Making

eye contact, chatting, and knowing your neighbours increases security and reduces crime in neighbourhoods because people begin to look out for one another and respect each other. The cleaning and greening of previously vacant space reduces crime because managed land is more respected — by people of all social classes — than desolate wasteland.

The garden project has become something that O'Brien has become deeply invested in. Members of MOBY are planning to compile a website with resources for starting gardens as well as to initiate a network of gardens across the city, allowing gardeners to share knowledge and experiences beyond their own plots of land.

An increase in urban agriculture in Vancouver is good if only for disaster mitigation. While even 3000 community gardens is a far cry from cities like Berlin, Germany — which has around 80,000 gardens — the head start Vancouverites are getting on potential food shortages is important.

Urban agriculture in the developed world serves a different purpose than that of developing countries. Rather than needing it for food production, we desire it for community development and disaster mitigation. Nevertheless, the importance of understanding how food is cultivated and linking urban lifestyles with agricultural knowledge will lead to increasingly sustainable cities. Ideally, the understanding of gardening on a basic level will help us to determine more efficient ways to use the land, our waste, and our resources in the future.