

Urban core is ripe for more edible gardens

BY TODD MAJOR, SPECIAL TO NORTH SHORE NEWS MARCH 27, 2013



Chives and swiss chard thrive in the Charros Community Garden at St. Georges and First Street in North Vancouver. North Shore Community Garden Society manages the site, which opened in November 2011, along with Queen Mary, Lillooet Park and soon-to-open City Hall community gardens.

Photograph by: NEWS photo, Mike Wakefield

NEW highrises seem to be popping up everywhere these days and many of those developments include public amenities but none of those new projects include community gardens as requirement of the development permit.

Why?

In a story by Brent Richter of the North Shore News on March 15, 2013, Richter wrote, "The City of North Vancouver council has given approval to Onni Group's request for a massive redevelopment of the Safeway site at Lonsdale Avenue and 13th Street." The Onni project will include 344 condos among other amenities, meaning that a minimum of 344 people (likely more) will have no place to garden or grow food other than on their unaccommodating balconies.

The nearby Queen Mary Community Garden is already full with a waiting list, so there's no help there to solve the problem. And growing veggies in poorly chosen roadside medians or public boulevards exposes people to toxic pollution residue from cars and trucks which permeate the soil in those areas.

In a recent talk on TED. com, Ron Finley gave an inspirational talk about his work planting gardens in the food desert of South Central Los Angeles.

Finley said, "To change the community, you have to change the composition of the soil. We (people) are the soil. Gardening is the most therapeutic and defiant act you can do. Especially in the inner city. Plus you get strawberries.

If kids grow kale, kids eat kale. If they grow tomatoes, they eat tomatoes. But when none of this is presented to them, if they're not shown how food affects the mind and the body, they blindly eat whatever you put in front of them. Growing your own food is like printing your own money." Finley's

comments resonate with people because he speaks at a level that touches and inspires people to understand the issues and take action.

Ongoing residential developments in the City of North Vancouver and District of North Vancouver are increasing urban density and increasing the "food deserts" in both cities. Admittedly the space for community gardens is limited on most new high-density residential developments, but there are always rooftops, the option of using less concrete for public spaces and reducing or exchanging the mandatory "landscaping" areas to create places for people to grow ornamental or food plants.

I am no politician and it's highly likely that my simple community gardening idea cannot be accommodated for reasons that I am not aware of. Many cities around the world have begun developing food security policies and it has always seemed a little ironic to me that a mountainous region like the North Shore has invested much time, money and policy development into food security when there is so little arable or available land to grow food.

It is true there are several community gardens across the shore, including Loutet Farm and the backyard food programs started by the Edible Garden Project that have raised food growing awareness and provided a measure of fresh veggies for local organizations. And I have continually said in this column that we should tear up useless lawns and grow veggies. But it is still not enough.

If growing food is like printing money as Finley said, then shouldn't we be trying to give residents the tools to print their own money, or rather their own food? And if as Finley says, "kids will eat whatever is put in front of them," shouldn't we try to put healthy food choices in front of them? And I mean right in front of them where they live, in the form of mandated community gardens in all new developments, instead of zoning another fast food restaurant.

Generally speaking, I support redevelopment in urban areas and increasing density because the alternative is to kill forests, block up the foreshore or pave over valuable farmland. So we must build up to the sky to increase density to protect what little greenspace is left. I believe that all three North Shore municipalities should put their authority where their food security mouths are and require all new large-scale residential developments build community gardens as part of the development permit application. Community gardens cost the same as or less than the cost of the typical useless lawn areas, boring landscapes or large areas of hard surfacing which always accompany such development projects.

We can expect over the next 20 years that residential and commercial redevelopment across the North Shore will continue and the region will become increasingly denser as cities build out their official community plans. If we do not plan now to incorporate food security in the form of community gardens into the largest source of available land - redevelopment land, then we will surely be building a food desert for our children.

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