

# Growing food fosters community

**Garden power:** Using public land for urban farms offers benefits far beyond the produce harvested

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN



I first discovered the link between city building and urban agriculture from a community police officer in Vancouver's Collingwood-Renfrew neighbourhood.

A horse-loving hobby farmer from Langley, she had set up a community garden near a SkyTrain station as a crime prevention tool. Her theory was that by engaging street people in a garden they would be doing something positive in their lives. When I asked her how it was working, she said it was working too well: People with not much else to do were over-watering the plants!

As a city councillor at the time, I quickly realized that a community garden is a simple, cheap piece of civic infrastructure that serves myriad purposes — with no downside. Community gardens really can reduce crime. At a social housing project in Manchester, two years after a large garden was built by people in the neighbourhood and young people got involved with it, calls to police declined by 50 per cent.

In any neighbourhood with many renters, newcomers from other countries, or the potential for seniors to feel isolated, a shared garden is a place where people can meet their neighbours around a simple project everyone can understand.

I've heard stories about elderly Chinese-speaking women out strolling who stop and watch hapless young hipsters trying to get a garden growing, then start gesticulating and demonstrating what they have to do.

Food gardens in public places are like that. Anyone who has



JASON PAYNE/PNG

The Woodland Community Garden, operating in East Vancouver since 2013, is one of dozens of community gardens that not only provide food, but improve neighbourhood safety and link generations and cultures.



planted their boulevard — like the Kerrisdale neighbours who built a garden between the sidewalk and the curb and organized a pumpkin-growing contest — knows you can't work in a boulevard garden without talking to people. Downtown Vancouver's Sole Food Street Farms, best known for its raised beds adjacent to BC Place Stadium, transforms vacant urban land into street farms that grow artisan quality fruits and vegetables. Now, with four urban farms under production, it offers people living on the margins of

society a kind of work that just isn't otherwise available within walking distance of the Downtown Eastside: relatively easy to learn, outdoors, physical, community-serving, utterly wholesome, with flexible hours.

At David Thompson Secondary School, Fresh Roots, a non-profit organization, staged what I consider the consummate food-growing coalition, more than living up to its mission to "create thriving neighbourhood gathering places for learning, sharing, and connecting." Co-ordinated by the ebullient Ilana Labow,

they turned part of the school-ground into a professionally-managed educational farm by engaging the students, teachers, grounds staff, parents and neighbours. The built the farm in four days with 360 community volunteers. The teachers build lessons around what's growing and use an outdoor classroom space when the weather is good. The kids learn to like kale and broccoli, and local seniors can sit at picnic tables in the garden and be part of it all. There's so much neighbourhood involvement that vandalism has never been an issue.

Curtis Stone, the former musician turned urban farming rock star in Kelowna, has developed a highly sophisticated strategy for making serious money off micro-farming: \$75,000 in revenue from 1/3 of an acre of small

urban plots. But even he, with fences around all his plots and a keen commercial eye, says his business can't avoid being a community project. He exchanges advice with nearby gardeners and uses retired senior volunteers to prune his tomato plants in the peak season. And his gardens beget more gardens: "In every place that I have had a farm plot over the years, I have seen at least 10 people in those areas start to garden passionately," he writes in his new book, *The Urban Farmer, Growing Food for Profit on Leased and Borrowed Land*.

Vancouver's first urban farmer, Ward Teulon, told me about one East Vancouver plot he tended — one of several backyards donated in exchange for produce and upkeep — where the owner lived alone and didn't talk to anyone else all week.

Increasingly, new housing developments are providing places where people can grow food together. District Main apartments at 28th and Main is one of many residential buildings with a rooftop garden where tenants can pick vegetables for their own dinner or dine at a communal table.

The simple act of food growing resonates in so many positive ways: improving neighbourhood safety, building links between generations and cultures, making people healthier and happier, relieving poverty, beautifying brownfield sites, educating kids about where their food comes from, improving diets and animating underused park lands and recycling organic waste.

A city that grows food together, grows together.

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