



URBAN FARMING



Growing Towards Change with Urban Agriculture & Community Building

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The UN (2018) notes that “Today, 55% of the world’s population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 68% by 2050.” As people continue to be displaced from rural areas with increasing wildfires, rising tides, and other destabilizing climate events, we will likely see numbers rise even higher. With this in mind, we must have a systemic approach to how we will feed ourselves over the next 100 years and more with these figures and demographic migration trends in mind.

A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF LAND AND GROWING IN CANADIAN CITIES

Many of the areas with the best farmland in Canada were stolen from Indigenous Peoples with unfairly negotiated Treaties, by taking land through force, or via legalistic declarations and actions in The Indian Act of 1876, an oppressive and racist piece of legislation, still in existence today. It originated just nine years after the official foundation of what we now call Canada and what is traditionally known as Turtle Island (Joseph, 2018).

We can transform our urban landscapes and begin to relate to the land in ways that not only practice decolonization and reconciliation, but provide essential food and medicines inaccessible to far too many people today, especially with record high inflation.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

In the text that follows, we will dive into the potential for a new food future, going beyond every person's Right to Food as defined by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO) as "the right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, has physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement" (Food and Agriculture Association, 2008).

For many, the term "Food Security" is commonly associated with a just food system. The UN FAO definition above sounds good; however, it lacks depth and critical elements for equitable access to food. La Via Campesina is a collective of Indigenous, smallholder, peasant, and landless farmers and farmworkers that was formally constituted in April 1993 with 46 representations from organizations around the world (La Via Campesina, 2013). After just three years, the collective served up the concept of "Food Sovereignty" at the international table. Food Sovereignty was further developed in 2007 at the Nyéléni Conference in Mali and expressed in 7 pillars. Food Sovereignty's principles are:

1. Food for the People
2. Building Knowledge and Skills
3. Working With Nature
4. Valuing Food Providers
5. Localizing Food Systems
6. Putting Control Locally
7. Recognizing that Food is Sacred

Briefly, Food Sovereignty is defined as "the right of people to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (Food Secure Canada, 2022). As you may notice, this fundamentally changes the meaning of what it is to access safe, healthy, adequate, culturally appropriate food. If all your food is coming from Cargill, Bayer (Monsanto), Maple Leaf, and large grocery chains, this is not a food system that supports Food Sovereignty. As we have seen in the pandemic, there is a constant threat of sudden food and water shortages due to just-in-time logistics systems and intra-/international supply chains that prioritize profit over people.

Additionally, grocery stores offer what we call a limited choice framework – they decide what will be provided and you can only choose from what they provide. This can limit accessibility of culturally appropriate foods and it means that large corporations control your options for ingredients. Finally, if you are a farmer, you will have felt the pinch of powerful players in agribusiness trying to privatize seeds and maximize their profits by minimizing farm-gate prices (the price paid to farmers). If you are someone buying food, you may have noticed that prices just keep going up. This model of a food system that resembles a bowtie, employs a winner-take-all mentality where few companies are maximizing profits to themselves by minimizing benefits to the many.



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Urban farming is one of the ways that we begin to address some of the dimensions of Food Sovereignty. Our cities are great places to grow/raise nutrient dense foods – fruits, vegetables, and some poultry and meats. Our cities are not great places to grow/raise calorie dense foods – grains, legumes, beef, pork, and other foods that require large areas of land. The goal of urban food sovereignty is seeking to connect nutrient dense food growing with the conditions in urban centres.

The Urban Heat Island Effect is well-documented, and it occurs “when cities replace natural land cover with dense concentrations of pavement, buildings, and other surfaces that absorb and retain heat. This effect increases energy costs (e.g., for air conditioning), air pollution levels, and heat-related illness and mortality” (Environmental Protection Agency, 2022). As the name suggests, urban areas are warmer than their rural surroundings and, for a northern country like Canada, this can be of benefit. Canadian cities may be more productive for fruits and vegetables because they have a longer growing season than the surrounding rural countryside. Secondly, urban areas are built up with many towers and other heat-emitting buildings that could concentrate their heat into rooftop greenhouses rather than passively emitting this heat to the surrounding environment. Third, urban centres are concentrated areas of compostable matter, which can be turned into rich compost under the proper composting programs. Finally, because people are concentrated in urban centres, the environmental impact from shipping, transportation, and distribution can be minimized as LUFA Rooftop Farms in Montréal, Québec have shown.

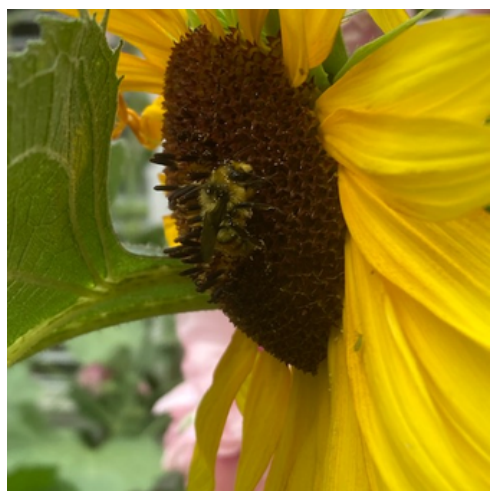




Another form of urban agriculture explores growing in marginal areas of the city where little commercial or urban activities are taking place. In Edmonton this includes the Northlands Urban Farm, while in Calgary this includes the Land of Dreams and Highfield Regenerative Farm. The Northlands Urban Farm (now called the Edmonton Urban Farm) was originally a 1-acre urban farm selling to local restaurants and markets. When the owners found land in the county, the farm transitioned into an educational hub where school-aged children came for experiential learning on regenerative urban agriculture. The Land of Dreams Project (LOD) is a unique undertaking, looking at food production on the Transportation Utility Corridor – the ring surrounding Alberta's major cities that is reserved for critical infrastructure projects. The LOD is unique as it partners with Calgary Catholic Immigration Services and works alongside new refugees and immigrants to offer a large garden plot going beyond the limitations of a 4-by-8-foot community garden. The purpose is to provide a place where people can practice traditional food and agricultural ways. Additionally, the project meaningfully engages and partners with local Indigenous Groups and is working towards providing space for Indigenous programming and initiatives. Finally, Highfield Regenerative Farms is located in an industrial area in Calgary (Highfield is near Ogden & Manchester which is the location of the former CPR maintenance yards). Highfield recently built a large greenhouse for extending their growing season, hosted an alternative music festival, and regularly welcomes volunteers to help out with the land and restore a former industrial wasteland into a beautiful farm full of life.



The benefits from urban agriculture are many. Some of these benefits include cleaner air, cleaner water, lower food miles, building the local economy, working towards food sovereignty, psychological benefits of being in touch with the land, and many more. One of the challenges with urban agriculture is how to build in equitable access and ensure that initiatives are not simply finding elite niches where they can sell a premium product. Many examples, primarily from Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities, of urban agriculture projects that are explicitly created to benefit all and seek food justice exist. The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative in Detroit, MI People's Food Co-Op in Portland, OR are two shining examples of communities overcoming systemic discrimination and oppressive racist and classist policies, rising above and finding a way to address food insecurity and build towards food sovereignty and alternative food futures. These initiatives are essentially local, grassroots, and require participants to get their hands dirty and become connected with the earth. To touch the ground and feel the incredible growing and healing power of the earth is essential to believing and building towards a better future.



BLOOMING BOULEVARDS & THE LITTLE SEED LIBRARIES

The final project that will be discussed in this report is one that is close to my heart and mind as it was created by my wife, Erika, and I. Blooming Boulevards & The Little Seed Libraries is a Calgary-based project that is building accessible, 4-foot high garden beds on boulevards (the area between the sidewalk and the street) in our community. The people (homes) that are hosting the garden beds must agree that (1) the gardens are explicitly for the public and community, and (2) it is the responsibility of the homeowner not only to be involved in building and upkeep, but to encourage any community member to contribute in any reasonable way they wish. Each bed has a theme such as a pizza bed (tomatoes, basil, parsley, oregano), pollinator bed, greens garden, and more. A laminated paper red light/green light system is used to indicate readiness for harvest. When the watering cans at the foot of the beds are full, it lets anyone know that they can feel free to water the beds. One of the most important considerations is that the entire community is responsible for planting, maintenance, harvest, and care. This element of community empowerment brings us to the second element: The Little Seed Libraries.

The Little Seed Libraries are similar to Little Free Libraries; however, they have seed packs that connect with their neighbouring garden bed, provide interesting sociocultural histories on the plants in the beds, give tips and tricks for growing and maintaining the specific plants successfully, and have recipes from community members for the plants in the bed.

The overall idea is that everyone has the right to the city, no matter if you have the privilege to be a homeowner, condo owner, apartment renter, or if you are living without a fixed address. It is by connecting with one another on a human level and growing something beautiful together that we will find the humanity to care for each other.

Urban agriculture has the potential to tell new stories, connect people across economic and social status, and build new relationships based on life-affirming principles. Building community by growing together, reconnecting with the earth that is the source of all life, and challenging the zero-sum politics of our food and social systems are essential to growing a better future. Hopefully you will feel inspired to become part of this change and plant the seeds for a new tomorrow.



Blooming Boulevards Perennial Pilot Project
Photo credit: Joshua Bateman

ABOUT JOSHUA BATEMAN



Joshua Bateman lives in Calgary in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta. This land falls within the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy, Tsuut'ina First Nation, and Stoney Nakoda, and Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3. Josh is passionate about social change through community empowerment, environmental justice, and economic systems that serve the people and planet.

Credentials

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