

Bringing green to the grey city

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The view east and south from the garden on Nanny Goat Hill is of high-rises. The view north is of a tidy row of compost bins. Some of the plots are profusions of onions or flowers or tomato plants. Some plots seem empty, but on closer inspection lines of tiny leaves can be seen poking out of the soil.

This unassuming patch of ground at the corner of Bronson and Laurier avenues has been a community garden for six years. It is one of at least 16 like it in the city: labours of love for apartment-dwellers, immigrants, school groups, retired people and environmentalists.

Urban Ottawa has never entirely lost its connection to the land. The proximity of the Greenbelt and the Experimental Farm have seen to that. There are vegetable gardens in backyards and herb boxes on balconies. And while the community garden movement struggles, it seems to be gaining strength.

Still, Ottawa has yet to embrace urban agriculture as a strategy for smart growth. We're behind much of the rest of the world in that regard.

This week, a global conference about cities is happening in Vancouver. Many delegates will be talking about how cities can feed themselves.

"It's the largest emphasis ever on urban agriculture at a World Urban Forum," said Luc Mougeot of the International Development Research Centre, before heading off to Vancouver. "In those countries where you have arid or semi-arid climates, the cities are developing a picture of the future. It's already happening there. We can learn from them how to do things when water becomes scarce as a result of global warming."

His colleague, Mark Redwood, told me about a partnership between the IDRC and McGill University called Making the Edible Landscape. It is helping people create urban farms and gardens in cities in the developing world: Kampala, Uganda; Colombo, Sri Lanka; and Rosario, Argentina.



CREDIT: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

Helen Doe works on her small plot of earth in the Nanny Goat Hill community garden at Laurier and Bronson avenues.

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"People who practise urban agriculture are often some of the most poor in a city," Mr. Redwood said. Small farms and community gardens can feed families and even provide them with incomes.

Growing food close to the people who eat it can be less resource-intensive than growing it in large, distant farms that require huge irrigation and transportation systems.

That's true for cities in the developed world, too. Why truck produce into Ottawa when we can grow it here? The main thing such a shift requires is creativity. Imagine how fantastic Ottawa would look from the air if its rooftops were covered in gardens.

There are many environmental reasons to make the city green rather than grey. And small gardens and farms usually contain a diversity of crops, which makes them resistant to pests.

Urban agriculture does come with its own challenges: unenlightened neighbours, for example.

In his lovely book *On Good Land: The Autobiography of an Urban Farm*, Michael Ableman writes: "When the cover crop gets to be about four feet high and taller, we can hear people as they walk by discussing how lazy we are for not controlling the weeds."

Mr. Ableman eventually helped create a non-profit corporation to protect Fairview Gardens in suburban California. Development pressure is one of the enemies of any urban farm or garden. The value of productive land is beyond measure: it feeds people, it creates a sense of community, and provides young people with a place to learn and develop a work ethic. But price and value are not the same. Most landowners will try to maximize profits.

In Ottawa, finding land seems to be the obstacle for would-be urban gardeners. Councillor Bob Monette is trying to help Orleans residents create a community garden, which would also contain a plot for the area food bank. He says there's a lot of interest -- but so far, no suitable location.

Like most good city planning, small urban agriculture is an old idea. In wartime, Canadians turned their yards into "victory gardens."

"The history of urban agriculture in the North is linked to crisis management," said Mr. Mougeot. Maybe it will take another crisis for Ottawa to tear down some of the walls between city and country.

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In a column on the national editorial page last week, I expressed surprise that only two of LibraryThing's approximately 44,000 users had the Jeffrey Sachs book *The End of Poverty*. In fact, 82 did, but they were under slightly different titles so they weren't all showing up in the website's "fun statistics." I now know I should have used a "combine works" feature to tell the catalogue they were the same work.

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