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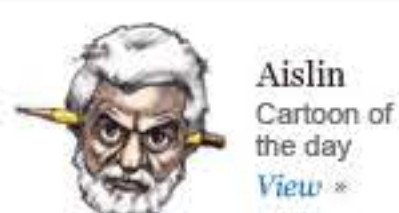
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Green Life Column: The magic of rooftop gardens

September 8, 2009, 2:07 am • Section: Green Life

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A cheap, low-maintenance planter can help get Montrealers to grow their own produce

By Michelle Lalonde, The Gazette

It's just about harvest time for us urban gardeners. Like many Montreal residents, I have very little green space on my property, so a huge backyard vegetable garden is out of the question. But the other day I did harvest a perfect red tomato from the magic planter I keep on the roof.

That sweet, delicious tomato – and there are more ripening now – was a little miracle to me, considering I've only watered that planter three or four times since early July. Yes, we had a lot of rain this summer. But still, I've tried rooftop gardening in other containers with little success. The roof gets so much sun that if I didn't get up there almost every day, everything would shrivel and die.

But I'd heard about these "self-watering," "semi-hydroponic" rooftop gardening kits developed by Montreal's own award-winning Rooftop Garden Project, and decided to give one a try. I'm sold, and it's not only about my excellent tomato.

The Rooftop Garden Project, along with the Minimum Cost Housing Group at McGill University, are working miracles to bring urban gardening to thousands of Montrealers. In a city where, according to Montreal's public health department, 40 per cent of the population does not have access to fresh fruits and vegetables within a half-kilometre walk from home, this movement is crucial to our health and our environment.

Growing your own food is a fabulous way to reduce waste from packaging and cut air pollution from transportation, not to mention the health and quality of life benefits of gardening and eating fresh produce. Planting greenery in the city also reduces the "urban heat island" effect, whereby cities tend to be several degrees hotter than nearby rural areas.

And with its flat roofs, ubiquitous balconies and outdoor stairways, Montreal's cityscape offers a wealth of untapped potential for container gardening.

The Rooftop Garden Project is a partnership between Santropol Roulant, a meals-on-wheels operation, and Alternatives, an international network that promotes urban agriculture in Montreal and around the world.

The two groups began experimenting with different container designs a few years ago, when Santropol Roulant was looking for cost-effective ways to include more locally grown, organic fruits and vegetables in its meals. They wanted to design a planter that was relatively lightweight, portable, and made of easily attainable, salvaged or recycled materials. They wanted the kit to be easy to use for volunteers in community garden projects, but also affordable, so they could sell them at a small profit to the general public to raise funds and spread the joys of urban gardening.

The planter uses a standard plastic recycling bin, a plastic sheet and a 30 cm length of rigid plastic piping. The plastic sheet forms a false bottom about two-thirds of the way into the bin, under which is a 14-litre water reservoir and over which is a soil mixture. The pipe is inserted vertically and used for watering.

The system is "semi-hydroponic," which means it uses less soil than traditional container gardening and relies on the natural tendencies of plant roots to seek out water and of soil particles to attract moisture. The system tends to require less water and maintenance than traditional container gardening, and plants grow faster, thrive more, and produce more fruit.

In 2007, the Rooftop Garden Project struck a partnership with the Minimum Cost Housing Group, a research unit of the McGill University School of Architecture, to build a garden on McGill's main campus. Headed by professor Vikram Bhatt, the MCHG has been doing active research in urban gardening in Montreal and around the world since the 1970s.

The project's directors chose an unlikely site for a garden; a concrete-covered plaza around a 13-storey pavilion called Burnside Hall, near the main campus entrance on Sherbrooke St.

That first summer, the Edible Campus project consisted of 123 containers (most of them identical to my own magic planter) and the garden produced 177 kilograms of produce. This summer, there are over 225 containers in the garden, and a nearby ornamental rock bed has been converted into a 100 square-metre series of raised beds.

The garden is wide open to the public at all times, yet has no problems with vandalism or pilfering. Cherry tomatoes and bean plants climb the walls of Burnside Hall. Up the giant steps just north of that building, you'll find dozens of containers teaming with ground cherries, tomatoes, peppers of all colours, cucumbers, beans, swiss chard, lettuce, various herbs, zucchini etc.

Not only is the Edible Campus project now providing virtually all the fresh produce Santropol Roulant can use this growing season, the Roulant is selling off the excess in baskets or giving it to needy families.

Alternatives and the MCHG are partnering with various community development groups to set up several new garden projects in the Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve borough. The Rooftop Garden Project has created several community gardens on its own, including a large rooftop garden at the Université du Québec à Montréal's design building on Sanguinet St., another at a seniors' residence in Montreal North and another at a community centre in Villemarie.

In 2008, the Edible Campus Project won a National Urban Design Award from the Royal Architecture Institute of Canada. The project also won a Phénix de l'environnement prize in 2008, one of Quebec's highest environmental distinction awards.

This Thursday, Santropol Roulant will throw its annual Harvest Party at the Edible Campus Garden from 5 to 10 p.m.. There will be live music and volunteers will be serving up vegetable stew and locally grown, organic corn on the cob. I'll be toasting this great Montreal initiative by drinking a toast on my roof and eating a fresh, homegrown tomato.

Ready-to-Grow kits can be purchased for \$40 at Alternatives, 3720 Park Ave. For more information, go to www.rooftopgardens.ca

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elizabeth 4:31 PM on September 10, 2009
I have an ongoing problem with squirrels on my backyard patio. I am afraid to grow things in containers because I know the squirrels will eat anything I plant. Does anybody have constructive, uncomplicated, and inexpensive ideas (besides poison) for discouraging squirrels from eating produce from container planters?

moniqueb 5:01 PM on September 10, 2009
Hi Elizabeth, My neighbour swears by chicken manure, but she said you have to make sure it is a kind that is safe for vegetables. She puts it around the plants and says it keeps the squirrels away.



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