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Daniel Bouchard of Santropol Roulant and Rachael Graber, U2 Arts (Geography), serve up some corn during the recent Edible Campus harvest. / Photo: Owen Egan

By Neale McDevitt

Prior to this year, my previous experiences with gardening have always bordered on the torturous. Childhood memories of dad marching me and my two siblings out to the family tomato patch for some forced labour of the weeding variety are always rekindled whenever I watch the chain gang scenes in *Cool Hand Luke*. Without the good-natured prison hijinx, of course.

The situation was only compounded by the fact that my buddies and I used my parents' large backyard as our private sports complex and the tomato patch stood as the sideline in football games. Urban planners take note: tomatoes, football and irate fathers do not mix well. Another thing to keep in mind. No matter how much Scotch tape is used in resuscitation efforts, a squashed tomato plant will still wither and die. Guaranteed.

But a funny thing happened on my way to living my entire adult life garden-free – McGill's Edible Campus project.

In the spring of 2007, large containers filled with earth began appearing outside Burnside Hall where I work. From my first-floor window I watched people sink plants and seeds into the pots of earth and begin the regular cycle of watering and weeding. At first I thought it was McGill's attempt at sprucing up the barren concrete plaza that surrounds Burnside with potted flowers – albeit an economical beautification project seeing as how the pots were obviously recycled plastic drums just cut in half.

While some flowers did sprout and bloom, it was soon clear – even to my untrained eye – that this garden was designed to be eaten. Over the ensuing days, weeks and months I had a front-row seat at the quiet miracle of nature that has been playing out since the dawn of time. A little dirt, a handful of seeds, a bit of water and – voila – food for all. Broccoli, cantaloupes, leeks, mint, ground cherries, bok choy – a veritable cornucopia of fresh produce shot up where not even grass had sprouted in decades. These people had done the impossible. They had made Burnside bloom.

These people" are actually volunteers from McGill School of Architecture's Minimum Cost Housing Group (MCHG), and from Alternatives and Santropol Roulant, a pair of Montreal-based NGOs. Just completing its second season, Edible Campus has expanded to include more than 160 containers growing over 25 varieties of fruit, vegetables and herbs, and numerous edible flowers.

Tracing project's roots

The Edible Campus garden has roots going back to 2004, when the MCHG began its Edible Landscape project looking to promote the growing of food on rooftops in urban centres in poor countries such as Sri Lanka, Uganda and Argentina. "But we wanted to push the envelope," says Vikram Bhatt, Director of the MCHG. "So we decided to bring the gardens down from the rooftops and into full view of everyone."

The MCHG decided to create a living lab on campus to see how successfully they could grow produce on an extremely limited budget in order to simulate conditions faced by poor urban dwellers around the world.

They also chose to create that lab on one of McGill's most public spaces – Burnside Hall – because, according to Bhatt, "It was under-used and just another heat island that led people from here to there. But we soon found out that a garden embellishes the landscape and attracts people." And Bhatt is right. Every day, passersby stop to admire the garden or pop a cherry tomato into their mouth with a furtive smile. Aside from fast-walking students late for class, human traffic slows noticeably along the garden's fringe. People stop to enjoy a momentary respite from their bustling day.

And the garden inspires. Because it was happening five feet in front of me, I saw beautiful crops grow with remarkably little voodoo or incantations on the part of the volunteers. A little water, a little pruning. It seemed almost too simple.

Fears of failure allayed, I planted a garden in my own backyard this spring, enlisting the help of my five-year-old daughter Charlotte. Miraculously, she didn't cringe, but jumped at the prospect of digging holes in the ground and getting covered in dirt.

Charlotte loved turning the soil and shaking out the clods of grass and weeds. She happily separated the "good guys" – big, fat earthworms – from their villainous cousin the cut worm. And, more than anything else, she loved to plant, thrilled at the prospect that her garden would soon bear fruit...and vegetables.

Harvesting the fruits of our labour

The harvest season has come to the Edible Campus. Every day, I watch volunteers pluck sun-burnished cherry tomatoes from the vines that frame my window. Elsewhere in the garden, purple eggplants grow fat and green beans hang heavy from vine-covered archways. The bulk of the fresh produce grown here (which topped almost 180 kg last year) will go toward Santropol Roulant's meals-on-wheels project that supplies nutritious meals to elderly Montrealers and people with limited mobility.

The project has garnered lots of attention off campus, too. In the face of the global food crisis, the BBC News posted an article on their website this summer looking at the Edible Campus as a possible solution to food shortages. Earlier this year, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, the Canadian Institute of Planners, and the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects selected the Edible Campus as the winner of the 2008 National Urban Design Award in the Urban Fragments category. They praised the project for its ability to "employ underused corners and spaces within the public realm to grow produce linked to a food collection and meal delivery system."

Back home, we're enjoying the fruits of our labour as well. Last night we ate stuffed bell peppers handpicked by Charlotte. Breakfast cereals and waffles are topped with fresh raspberries and strawberries. Salads and fish are garnished with homegrown chives and parsley.

But the most important sustenance my humble little garden has provided has been to feed my soul. More than anything, I love being out there with Charlotte. We pick, we prune and, yes, we weed, but mostly we talk. We trade jokes and take turns telling silly stories or talk about the friends she's making in her new school.

I'm amazed how Charlotte can work in the garden for an hour straight when her attention span is usually taxed at 15 minutes. The little girl who still struggles with the concept of weeks and months is eagerly planning ahead for next spring's garden – which, she asserts, will have to be bigger because she wants to grow broccoli. Suddenly she's patient and careful and nurturing. Like the Edible Campus, my little girl is blossoming before my very eyes.

Now, if I could only get her to stop playing soccer near the tomatoes.