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NEWS

Community Gardens revitalize urban landscape

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Although over 160 community gardens were closed in Montreal last spring due to soil



FOOD FROM COMMUNITY GARDENS SPRINGING UP ALL AROUND MONTREAL HELP FEED THOSE IN NEED.

contamination, the push to green a concrete city through gardening remains strong.

McGill University's Department of Architecture has been at the forefront of the movement to increase green space through the efforts of its Minimum Cost Housing Group (MCHG), which focuses attention on improving housing in poor nations. Part of this process involves creating urban spaces where food can be grown in portable containers.

According to Vikram Bhatt, director of the MCHG, the group's "Making the Edible Campus" project, which began last year, is part of an effort to look at issues such as producing food in urban areas from a different point of view.

"We are looking at... growing food on rooftops, looking at a city which has a lot of land wasted," Bhatt said.

He explained that the MCHG has focused on the concrete Burnside plaza near the northern "stairs to nowhere." Now, with the work of the MCHG and its volunteers – including McGill students and members of the Montreal community – the area has been filled with containers in which vegetables are grown, thus providing a green space for McGill students to enjoy. All the food that is produced in the garden is in turn donated to Santropol Roulant, a community organization run by young people who deliver meals to those who are elderly or lack autonomy.

Both Bhatt and Santropol Roulant's Green Project Coordinator, Tim Murphy, noted that the Edible Campus program was part of an effort to close the food loop.

"The garden [at McGill] is part of our work toward a complete food cycle," Murphy said. "We compost most of our kitchen waste, so we can grow vegetables, and the vegetables come back to the kitchen."

Part of Santropol's goal, he added, is to make its organization sustainable: trying to ensure that its food is grown locally, without pesticides, and with healthy varieties of seeds – all ideals the McGill project is able to achieve. As a measure of its success, Edible Campus was awarded a 2008 National Urban Design Award by the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada.

Edible Campus is not the only program of its kind, however. The Edible Campus project is only one of several "rooftop gardens" initiatives supported by Santropol Roulant and its partner, the international solidarity organization Alternatives, which works toward the development of sustainable societies. In August, students in the Environmental Science program at Université de Québec à Montréal (UQAM) created a new self-managed garden on the roof of UQAM's Design building, and produce grown there will go towards feeding those without any food or shelter.

Ismael Hautechoeur, the head of Alternatives's rooftop gardens project and a founder of the regroupement des jardins collectifs du Québec, stated that McGill's Edible Campus garden is the main demonstration site for introducing rooftop gardening techniques to the public, allowing volunteers from the city to maintain the garden regardless of whether they are students or not.

"The idea is that it's open and accessible to anybody who is interested in jumping into urban agriculture," Hautechoeur said. "Universities are the most accessible sites we could think of."

He added that other gardening projects have been created across Montreal, and have even been started internationally in Mexico, Cuba, and Senegal. Furthermore, the Université de Montréal (UdeM) has expressed interest in an urban agriculture project of its own. Ultimately, Hautechoeur explained, the goal is to promote the different models of urban gardening used in Montreal throughout the rest of Canada and its other universities.

The common vision of Santropol Roulant, Alternatives, and the MCHG is to take an environmental approach to their work of creating sustainable gardening in urban areas. They are intent on providing an educational experience to the volunteers participating in urban agricultural projects, said Hautechoeur.

"If generation after generation of students learn and enjoy discovering the garden, we will have done our job."

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