

Green life is stirring in city-wide community gardens

By Kyla Dixon-Muir

Food is growing in the city core: in small tracts in parks, on school property, city land, or private allowances. People grow vegetables, small fruits, herbs and flowers in plots sized anywhere from four x six feet to 10 x 15 feet or greater. Such plots are collectives of five, 15 or 50 members, with gardeners producing varieties tucked in unexpected nooks, that appear anything from abandoned to seductively lush.

"This year special efforts are being made to make these member-tended spaces vital and vibrant," says Rhonda Teitel-Payne, Urban Agriculture Coordinator for The Stop Community Food Centre, as Toronto prepares to host the American Community Gardening Association's 25th anniversary conference, October 1-3, for which she is also volunteer coordinator.

"Community gardens", adds Charles Levkoe, a Masters research student working with The Stop, "can be an important stepping stone for social inclusion, a model for democracy and a way of connecting

people to each other, to healthy foods and to the land." Locally, there are gardens at Riverdale Farm, Winchester and Jackman schools, Moss Park, Regent Park, St. Jamestown and where I'm a member, at Riverdale Meadow Community Garden (RMCG), Broadview and Danforth.

These community gardens differ significantly from the City of Toronto's allotment gardens, which grant tenancies from May to October for \$53.50. Examples of those heavily fenced spaces are in High Park and by Leslie Street Spit.

"The permit officer receives applications each February 1 only, and there is a waiting list, says Jasmine Uljarevic, program coordinator. Allotment gardeners often come from a distance and don't make the rules on how their gardens run. There is no participatory work, only one plot per person, and no involvement with the local neighborhood.

Community gardens on the other hand are collectives. They may operate year round, are generally more affordable and can provide spaces for the

members to share in developing flower beds or butterfly gardens, as well as renting members assigned plots in which to grow their own family's produce organically. As these gardens are scattered throughout the city, members are generally local folk, who come together with a neighborhood spirit to share ideas, frustrations, and support.

One of the biggest frustrations is a misunderstanding of the term community garden: it calls for a flexibly united effort by people who pay a yearly membership fee and receive opportunities to cooperate in developing the garden itself; community does not mean that what members carefully tend is up for grabs to any folks passing by.

Food bank donations encouraged

Beyond the personal gains of sun, fun, exercise, amity and healthy meals, members may participate in neighborhood altruism by donating extra produce to local food banks, emergency shelters, or com-



SPRINGING TO NEW LIFE: *The Song Cycle on Bikes, visited the Riverdale Meadow Community garden a few years ago, and as pictured above, enjoyed the spectacle of lush growth on a warm September evening. The RMCG, located behind the Adult Learning Centre at Broadview and Danforth has a new grant to help the community revive the vitality of the garden this spring. New members are welcome.*

Photo by Barbara Neyedly

munity kitchen meal programs, encouraged by a program called Plant A Row ~ Grow A Row, which was established by the Composting Council of Canada, the Garden Writers Association of America, and the Canadian Association of Food Banks.

"My plots produced about 95 pounds of food for Nellie's Hostel last year," offers George Moore, a member of RMCG.

"As much of a sense of community as the membership within the garden provides, we're looking to develop more understanding with the neighborhood as a whole. My wife has repeatedly seen dogs let off leash who barrel through the fence trampling plants and seedlings. This reduces both the food on our table and for those who are truly needy." The Toronto Community Garden Network is a project of FoodShare, with support from The United Way and The Ontario Trillium Foundation. RMCG, FoodShare's Laura Berman explains, "was started in 1994 because the garden at Ecology House, a demonstration house on Madison Avenue, which was on TTC property, had to go, and the plants needed a new home.

This garden was created with help from the Toronto Food Policy Council and from another organization that evolved into GreenSavers. A unique aspect of this garden is

that it is a non-school garden on TDSB property." Other gardens on school property, like the one Sunday Harrison runs at Winchester School are designed for children. "We're open to the community in the summer," says Harrison, "and run programs for neighborhood children and their families who may or may not attend the school; during the school year though, attendance at the school is a requirement."

As children's garden coordinator, Harrison also runs an after-school kids program at one of the community gardens at Riverdale Farm.

More to come

Zora Ignjatovic created another school garden at Jackman school, near Danforth and Chester and has designs on starting a community garden near Bridgepoint Health Centre at the south of Riverdale Park East.

Original tests of the soil at the garden determined that it is 'rural quality.'

"Eureka!" said Floyd Hutton, a new RMCG member. "I thought I found gold when I dug up the old stone terracing last fall. It's a delightful, huge challenge to take an overgrown mess and turn it into something dynamic, along the way discovering forgotten plants like foxgloves, asparagus and vinca."

Jennifer Volk, RMCG coordinator agrees. "It is fun: there's enjoyment of the outdoors, pride in what we grow, and camaraderie. There's challenging work to share, too, and while it's easy to attract new members in the spring, we need dedication all season long, and participation in some mandatory group activities, to produce the great results we're aiming for."

"We had a challenging water supply in recent years," she adds, "which has now been solved, thanks to MPP Marilyn Churley and Councillor Paula Fletcher."

"Community gardens are part of a vital network which enlivens Toronto neighborhoods," Fletcher agrees, "and water is an essential ingredient for gardens and community growth. As the former TDSB (Toronto school board) rep I was pleased to effect this resurgence."

Grace Kong, head caretaker at the City Adult Learning Centre concludes, "Due to city budgets the water mains are still far away from the garden under soil and structures, but are more reasonable now." This year, a grant from the Toronto Heart Health Partnership for RMCG will ensure that great plans get turned into action, reviving neglected plots and the hillside terracing while enhancing our composting practices.

Members of RMCG will be participating in the Rites of Spring event at Riverdale Farm on May 1, where there will be membership information and a seed exchange. Information on all the city's community gardens and the ACGA fall conference can be obtained through FoodShare's website at www.foodshare.net; and details about membership at RMCG are available via Jennifer at 466-1651 or email riverdalemeadow@sympatico.ca.

Mayor Miller's Community Clean-Up Day Saturday, April 24

It's time to get together with friends, co-workers and neighbours in your community.

Pick any public space such as a park or watercourse -- not private property -- and pick up the litter you find. It's that simple! To register your location, call 416-392-7899 so city staff can advise you where to put the litter you've picked up for collection.



Garbage bags, provided by GLAD and Pitch-In Canada Week, will be available for participants while supplies last.

And don't forget the 20-Minute Toronto Makeover is happening the day before, Friday April 23. At 2:00 p.m., we're asking everyone to come outside and spend 20 minutes cleaning up the area near their workplace or school. Check our web site below for details and phone to register.

Call before April 16 to register

www.toronto.ca/litter



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