

URBAN GARDENING

WITH RISING FOOD COSTS AND CONCERNS OVER FOOD SECURITY, NOW IS A GREAT TIME TO DEVELOP YOUR GREEN THUMB RIGHT IN YOUR BACKYARD

BY
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City Beet Farm co-owner Duncan Chambers with Aylah and Haley, preparing a strawberry patch near Main and 47th in Vancouver.

NEARLY EVERYONE HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY SOME SORT OF FOOD INSECURITY.

Whether it is being shocked by rising grocery costs, wondering why some veggies aren't on store shelves or making tough decisions on what goes into the cart. According to Canada's Food Price Report 2022, the cost of vegetables will outpace other food categories and is expected to see an eight percent hike this year. Yikes!

I've always grown vegetables. I went through the 'back-to-the-land' phase years ago, but I always thought it was cool to be self-sustaining. Now it's almost essential. And what could be more rewarding than to serve veggies still warm from the sun to friends and family, that you started from seed? Remember the 100-mile diet that advised us to buy local, organic and seasonal whenever possible? Looking at my front garden and irritated by my lawn's demands, I realized that a 100-yard diet was within my reach.

GET OFF THE GRASS

Lawns. What are they good for? Absolutely nothing, unless you play golf. Cultivating my lawn was a waste of time, space and money. It required endless hours of maintenance and gave me nothing in return. Heck, I didn't even have garden gnomes or lawn chairs on my grass; the only time I inhabited my turf was to weed-whack or mow.

We know that lawns negatively impact the environment. Mowers and trimmers contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, and many of us "protect" the grass from invading plants with pesticides that can wind up in our water supply. Research also shows that 29 of the

30 most used lawn pesticides are toxic to birds, fish, amphibians and bees. The sprinklers and hoses we use to keep our property green use a precious resource.

Deciding enough was enough, last spring I replaced my front lawn with an edible landscape. By summer I was reaping the rewards of my potager (a fancy word for vegetable patch) and it's also aesthetically pleasing—my neighbours aren't in the least offended. On the contrary, their reactions suggest there may be cabbages sprouting in more than one front yard on my street this year.

SEED SECURITY

Food security is defined as the availability of staple crops throughout the year. Seed security is defined by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization as when farmers "have sufficient access to available good quality seed and planting materials of preferred crop varieties at all times in both good and bad cropping seasons."

Whenever possible, buy locally bred seeds as they are more able to withstand the province's varied growing conditions. Plants grown from different seed varieties often adapt to local conditions, from mass floods to high temperatures to soil salinity. There are several seed producers across BC, so if you're looking for a specific seed variety adapted to your area, check out ecological seed finder through Seed of Diversity. For instance, search results for *Best of All* tomato in my area brings up Metchosin Farm.

"There is no food security without seed security," says Fiona Hamersley

Chambers, an ethnobotanist and owner of Metchosin Farm where more than 260 seed crops, mostly heirloom varieties, are grown. And she is creating new varieties, such as strawberry cherry tomato and Metchosin apple. "We don't have as much choice as people did 100 years ago and most seed packages the home gardener purchases are hybrids," she says.



A Kitsilano worm workshop organised by City Farmer.

Hamersley Chambers explains that open-pollinated seeds are more diverse than hybrid varieties because the pollination process is left to nature. This may lead to an increase in survival rate and can be advantageous in the event of a newly emerged plant epidemic or other extreme stressors that hybrids are not bred to withstand—

like the recent heat dome.

"Ninety-seven percent of veg seed grown in Canada is imported; we have small farms coast to coast but there is no food security," she says. "Our grocery store shelves are full but we have

a false sense of abundance—when the borders closed, we panicked. Waiting to learn how to grow a food garden is like waiting in the middle of a blizzard to change a flat tire." But it's not all doom and gloom. "Gardening has so many benefits, like enjoyment. I'm hopeful that people won't start gardening out of fear," she adds.

COMMUNITY SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE

If you don't have the time or energy to rip up your lawn or plant a backyard veggie plot, consider buying from a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. You'll help fund small, local farms that will provide you with fresh produce and a bonus: having a box of ingredients come to you before looking at a recipe teaches you to cook whatever is in season.

If you live in Vancouver, City Beet Farm can turn your lawn into an urban farm. Owners Liana Glass and Duncan Chambers currently grow food and flowers on 12 front and back yards around Vancouver—about half an acre of land to supply 87 CSA members with 20 weeks of produce. “This year we have more demand than supply. During the first year of the pandemic people became interested in local food and every year more people are on a CSA waitlist,” says Glass. At the same time, people are offering their yards to City Beet Farm but some are too far away, too shady (property, not people) or too small to be operative. “This year we are hoping to add a few more centrally located yards. If someone calls us in February, we still have time,” adds Glass. “First, we kill the grass by covering it with a big tarp for a few weeks. Then we turn over the sod so the grass decomposes; plan where to grow which vegetables; put in irrigation; add a layer of compost and prepare beds for planting.”

Glass says that most CSA members are working professionals and young families who don't want to mow the lawn or pay landscapers. And most homeowners keep a small portion of their backyard to do their own gardening. One lady has a greenhouse and she gives her front yard to us,” says Glass. “Like other homeowners, she wants someone else to use her space and in return she gets both an esthetic component (beautiful crops are also a conversation piece and provide interesting landscaping) and either a 50 percent discount on a full CSA season or a share of whatever produce City Beet Farm has that week,

not necessarily from her property.” The homeowner is only on the hook for the water bill. And there is the community spirit, where like minds support home-grown, local food.

As for food security, one day Glass was working in someone's yard when “a guy walking by said that ‘Everyone will need to turn all garden space into production when the war comes.’ But with last year's floods and borders closed, we need to have food nearby and accessible now.” For \$600, City Beet Farm members receive seven to 10 items per week (such as leafy greens and root vegetables, a pint of cherry tomatoes) for 20 weeks.

COMMUNITY GARDENS

“Since we started City Farmer Society back in 1978, there has been a big interest—for different reasons,” says founder Michael Levenston. There was the ‘fear of pesticides’ movement and Covid triggered a rise in the ‘home grown’ movement. The past year has seen a huge increase in gardening and raising chickens as the cost of vegetables and eggs skyrocket.”

Along with teaching urban dwellers

More than 1,000 pounds of potatoes were harvested from this Vancouver front yard.



how to grow food in the city, Levenston also runs the Vancouver Compost Demonstration Garden and answers the compost hotline. “People want to know where to buy and how to compost—it's the bedrock of growing food,” explains Levenston. “We have visitors to our demonstration garden in Kitsilano year-round, including kids who get excited about worm composting. Early spring, you can see beans and bok choy ready to pick from cold

frames and raised beds.”

Unfortunately, not everyone can reap what they sow. Not everyone has a vegetable patch and community gardens worldwide have waiting lists. “Pressure has to be on government to have more garden space. You cannot cram people into cities without amenities, and community gardens are amenities,” says Levenston.

When asked if more community gardens are in the works and if there is a

long waiting list, a City of Vancouver spokesperson said in an email, “As gardens are managed by individual societies, the City does not track membership or waitlists. However, we are aware that many or most gardens across the city do have waitlists for a plot. Some gardens are managed in a more collaborative approach which enables individuals to get involved with communal plots or programming rather than waiting for access to an individual plot.” ▶

In other words, the city isn't cultivating any more community gardens.

There's no waiting list in the Slokan Valley. Cory Strom is garden manager at the Food Bank Garden, which supports the Slokan Valley Cupboard, and the garden has expanded to include community garden space.

"We have 10 vegetable beds used by only a few people, including a senior couple who don't have a yard of their own," says Strom, "but this year with food costs more people will be using the food bank, and at the same time, there's growing interest in having your own garden."

Strom contributes to the community garden by sharing a truck of manure and his knowledge. "Students employed by the Youth Centre last year were pumped: I showed them how to plant onions, prune raspberries and pinch tomato suckers. Some 16-year-olds have never gardened but they all want to return. They come back with an appreciation for food and all the work that's involved. If only they would like weeding," says Strom, laughing.

And it takes a community. "Clayton volunteers 16 hours a week in the Food Bank Garden and I reach out to anyone with horses and cows within a 10-kilometre radius and I pick up truckloads of manure in my truck—everyone is happy to help," says Strom.

A few words of warning: Growing vegetables can be a full-time job, beginning in February and ending in November. For some gardening fanatics like me, you have to shell out more than a few bucks, not only for a shovel and trowel. I get excited walking into Lee Valley and I brake for most garden centres. There are infinite ways to waste money—my shelves are crammed with several books on propagation and germination alone.

I always germinate too many seedlings, so those that aren't transplanted in May are moved out to the sidewalk, like they're waiting for the bus.

The author's (once) front lawn in Victoria. It now has tomatoes, peppers, beans and peas, which are shown opposite with a few months until harvest.



It's amazing how far people drive to get free tomato and pepper plants. If I happen to be puttering around the front yard, strangers ask me when and where to plant them and it feels good to share advice and encourage potential gardeners.

I'm always asking for advice. "The Italians are now planting radicchio and endive and the Asians are planting anything 'choy'—crunchy vegetables for stir-fry," said the garden expert at Buck-

erfields last summer. Depending upon where you live, you can also plant cold weather crops—all those veggies your mum couldn't get you to eat—later in the year. For instance, arugula, kohlrabi, Brussels sprouts and a few cabbages will grow into December. While mainstream varieties are bred for durability, long shelf life or appearance, most heirloom varieties are bred to turn your garden beds and meals into delicious riots of colour.



I DO GET to relax in early spring when seed catalogues arrive, my best bath-time companion. Who can't resist "four seasons marvel" lettuce, mizuna and mibuna, anything French-sounding, Russian kale, tigerella, sungold and green zebra tomatoes, the latter a chartreuse tone with lime and orange stripes. And the regal dragon carrot, with a purplish exterior and orange insides, and so much more.

Back in my garden, my second fa-

vourite activity is swearing. Swearing at the plump sparrows waddling about my raised beds, having just been stripped of delicate seedlings. And the slugs lurking about the cabbage patch, the squirrels hoarding nuts. Speaking of hoarding—and I'm not the only one—my order from Metchosin Farm came early and I now have hundreds of seeds germinating, including several organic, open-pollinated tomato varieties that will again make my neigh-

bours happy. Once the shoots emerge (what could be more exciting?) I have to keep up the momentum—they need pricking out and potting then hardening off—shlepping inside and outside until they can handle the great outdoors fulltime.

Taking into consideration the cost of labour, I figure one gardener's delight or tiger tom tomato is worth \$50. But I'm looking forward to my harvest, and can't wait to do it all again next year. 🍷