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The Green Man

Gardening has skipped a generation: Young people get their hands dirty

By **RANDY SHORE** 15 APR 2011 COMMENTS(0) THE GREEN MAN

Filed under: gardening, urban agriculture

VANCOUVER - A new generation of vegetable gardeners is transforming the urban environment and the way we are thinking about food.

They are planting on boulevards, digging garden plots in city parks, tearing the sod out of their back yards and even their front yards and filling their balconies with pots full of herbs and greens. It's the young, the urban, the cool. And the rest of us, too.



"I've been serious about gardening for about three years," said Rebecca Cuttler, a more-or-less landless Strathcona resident. Cuttler, program manager of the Praxis Centre for Screenwriters at Simon Fraser University, lucked into a plot at the Cottonwood Community Garden near her home after joining a work party organized by the Cottonwood group last fall. She also has a garden at a home owned by her family in Kitsilano.

"We are going to get more ambitious with that [Kitsilano] space this year because it's an entire yard, so you can do a lot of stuff there," she said.

LINKS >

Green Man 365

- Green Man 365 - A year of eating locally
- VIDEO: What is Green Man 365?
- AUDIO: Green Man Randy Shore on AM1150

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- Simple Garden Pesto
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- Vancouver's backyard chicken revolution
- What is Green Man 365?

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Cuttler, 28, has spent countless winter hours sketching her garden space and planning crops by the square foot using the methods she gleaned studying permaculture design at Amherst College in Massachusetts. She has joined forces with a group of seven friends and neighbours to form a Transition Town, essentially a group of people who work together to maximize their productivity and reduce their carbon footprint, using the principles of permaculture to create a sustainable urban ecosystem.

Sophisticated gardeners such as Cuttler and her group are the urban agriculture vanguard, dragging the rest of us along in their jet stream. Evidence suggests there are a lot of willing passengers on the vegetable gardening bandwagon and you don't need a PhD to get aboard.

The number of households that report having a vegetable garden is now 53 per cent in the United States, according to the 2010 Summer Gardening Trends Research Report, issued regularly by the Garden Writers Association Foundation. That's up from 38 per cent in 2009 and Canadians appear to be in lockstep with their southern neighbours.

Sales of seeds, garden equipment and gardening books have doubled since 2008, according to Jeanette McCall, owner of B.C.-based West Coast Seeds.

"Three years ago, seed sales really took off and took everyone aback," she said. Many seed companies struggled to meet the sudden demand.

Until then, the seed business had been steady but not spectacular for several decades.

Waves of immigrants from Europe brought gardening knowledge and tradition with them to Canada in the years before and after the war, but the gardening bug skipped a generation as many children of the immigrant families rejected those "old world" ways.

"The children [of those immigrant gardeners] didn't garden, but now their grandchildren do," McCall said. "We've noticed a real trend in our retail store — our staff have even commented on it — where we have a younger group of customers who are very knowledgeable about organic gardening and it's [their parents who] are new to gardening."

"People want to grow organically or sustainably and this is all information they did not grow up with. There is a missed generation," she said. "It's fun to see young people in the store giving advice to older people about how to grow vegetables."

BC Greenhouse Builders marketing director Angela Drake said interest in using backyard greenhouses to grow edibles has exploded.

"Five years ago, maybe one inquiry in five would be about growing vegetables; now it is four out of five," Drake said. "Always our first question is, 'What do you want to grow?' and it's been a complete reversal."

Tropical flowers are out as greenhouse residents, replaced by bell peppers and heirloom tomatoes.

The City of Vancouver has keenly encouraged the home gardening movement, easing laws to allow people to raise laying hens in their backyards and facilitating the creation of more than 2,000 community garden plots in the months leading up to the 2010 Winter Olympic Games.

McCall says community gardens are the best place for beginners to learn about gardening; you don't even have to be a member.

"You can walk around and see what people are doing and how well their plants are growing

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and get an idea of how well different methods work very quickly," she said.

Locally based resources to help you get started or get better at gardening are proliferating online. Village Vancouver's Transition Town Initiative is a deep repository of both information and support for people growing in small spaces and urban environments. Find neighbourhood groups, FAQs and frequent gardening workshops to help get you started.

"People are going that greener route," said Geordie Flanagan, one of three 24-year-old entrepreneurs who have started a gardening resource website called www.MyGardenFootprint.com. "Everyone is realizing, 'Hey, I can grow things on my own.'"

Like Village Vancouver, MyGardenFootprint is an online community for people interested in local sustainable food and it is full of instructions and videos on planting, composting, harvesting and even cooking your produce. The heart of the site's business is a marketplace for local products and services — everything from local organic baby food to tractors.

"We think of it as a Facebook for food," said Flanagan.

Of course, you don't need a computer or a website to start gardening. A couple of pots of soil and a few dollars worth of seeds can get you started and, after that, there's a good chance you'll never stop.

I have pledged to eat something that I grew myself every day for a year. This is day 190. Read how I've been doing : Green Man 365 - A year of eating locally. Today I had lasagna made from freezer tomatoes. Follow The Green Man on Twitter [@theGreenManblog](https://twitter.com/theGreenManblog)

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