

Fruits of the earth build communities

Star
20.9.03



Michele Landsberg

O Ceres, goddess of grain and of the autumn harvest, let me always live in a city where FoodShare exists!

Every time I begin to feel jaded with Toronto, someone from FoodShare (one of our most innovative non-profits, with its philosophy of wholesome food for all) calls to invite me to see some endearing new project.

Way down at the grassroots, far beneath the radar of most urban sophisticates, FoodShare quietly weaves people together into communities.

Their favourite medium: earth, with generous helpings of sun, rain and compost. Their prod-

uct: garden variety miracles.

Community gardens are just one of their undertakings. Bet you didn't know that a corner of rustic paradise now rustles and hums with vegetable life at the dour old place we used to call "999 Queen." Now, they call it the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health.

In one sunny corner of the sprawling grounds, 6,000 square feet are fenced off as the Sunshine Garden. Although sunflowers and orange cosmos sparkle their welcome along the fence, inside it's all serious stuff.

Stuff you can eat. Hyacinth beans are radiantly carmine as they catch the sun high on their vines. Eggplants of every kind — skinny and pale green, gleaming ivory or small, plump and purple — hang ripely beneath their leaves.

The tomatoes are a madness of abundance, from tiny yellow and red cherry to Striped German monsters, scarlet Black

Krims and sweet yellow Wonder Light. The stems of Rainbow chard glow ruby-red in the sunlight; tender little potatoes practically burst from the ground.

Could you guess that all this delectable produce was grown by psychiatric patients and inmates of the closed forensic units? Under the cheerful guidance of Helene May, a caseworker, and Karine Jaouich, a young FoodShare urban agriculturalist, the inmates chose the seeds, planted them and nurtured them to organic ripeness.

Along the way, they've gained a modest paycheque, some self-confidence, the ability to concentrate and learn, the habit of getting up for work, and the profound satisfaction of holding the fruits of their labours in their hands.

A community worker who dropped by while I was there told me that growing vegetables was the best therapy he'd seen for his clients.

The rules, however, are strict. Last summer, one forensic inmate was banished from the garden for some misdeed; later, he leaned remorsefully over the fence and begged, "Can someone water my corn for me?"

The vegetables are sold every Saturday morning at a lively market outside the Parkdale Library. And some will be on sale tomorrow afternoon, rain or shine from noon to 6, near the corner of Queen and Shaw, at the centre's public fun fair.

The day after I visited the Sunshine Garden, I went to the Urban Harvest Festival at Lawrence Heights Community Centre to discover a slice of Africa in the midst of a pitilessly bleak housing project. African drums thrummed from the outdoor stage and Somali children rushed about excitedly from the crafts table to the halal hot dog stand, distinguished from the Caribbean kids by the Somali girls' head cloths:

This harvest festival was another project with upbeat FoodShare participation. Tables were heaped with organic apples and tomatoes; passersby were encouraged to swap seeds and young mothers were shown how to make organic baby food. Hidden away behind the Lawrence Heights community centre was an African garden: a long swath of vegetables — calaloo, onions, tomatoes, beans — growing in a narrow strip of land.

"We're trying to encourage the kids to grow and enjoy their own cultural foods," explained Anan Xola Lololi. Reared in the suburbs, with fast food outlets at every corner, most of them are wary at first. "I asked them to name a vegetable and one little boy shouted out, "I know a vegetable! McDonalds!"

Lololi and his partner, Anyika Tafari, also co-founded the African Food Basket, distributed through FoodShare. Together,

they help supply the basket with African and Caribbean produce, from callaloo to yams, from their own astonishingly productive organic farm called Shamba behind their suburban bungalow.

While I hung around enjoying the friendly spirit of the Urban Harvest Festival, a community worker told me that immigration patterns could be seen vividly in the local elementary school.

"It's mostly Somali children up to Grade 4, and Caribbean from Grade 4 up," she said.

Give FoodShare and the city's community garden movement a few years, and they'll have those kids picking cukes and squash and giggling together.

It's solid and subtle community-building, from the ground up.

Michele Landsberg's column usually appears in The Star Saturday and Sunday. Her e-mail address is mlandsb@thestar.ca.