

Why Agriculture?¹

“Our youth, who we sometimes fear, have sweat as they dug gardens, gotten dirty as they planted seeds, have dreamed with us about our future. And now we feel hope.”

- *Toronto Community Food Animators*

Executive Summary

Agriculture was one of the early skills our forebears developed as soon as they learned to settle down from their peripatetic wanderings as hunter-gatherers. Agriculture brought them into intimate awareness of and relationship with their ecological environments. That awareness shaped their cultures as it informed their values and understanding. They were immersed in their activities in the field and felt part of the ecological environment. Yet, the environment was not just a bank for their material survival; it also gave them their sense of spirituality and provided the matrix in which they socialize—celebrating together the seasons, festivals, and family life.

However, the evolutionary process of society has caught up with us their offspring. The material achievements of modern life have taken us away from intimate connection with the land. In the last three centuries we have carried on with a self-conscious defiance as people high and above our ecological environments. The natural environment and its bounties have become to us mere commodities. Our urban environments show the results of our defiance in the hardnosed economy that run there and leave many on the margins, barely subsisting. Being disconnected from the land is hurting us and other living creatures around us.

The good news is that the community gardening movements in cities are now assisting, through agricultural and social activities, those who have suffered from this estrangement. They are finding healing and new hopes for their journeys through life. This is no mere fad. It is real! Medical institutions like our Alberta Health Services and social housing societies in Europe, North America, and Australia are incorporating community gardens into their programs for the cultural, emotional, mental and social health of the people for whom they provide services.

Agriculture, whether as planting and reaping products of the field or as domestication of animals for food, is one of our earliest occupations as *homo sapiens*. It was one of the engagements that gave birth to human settlements as we evolved from roving hunter gatherers to become peoples domiciled in specific places. Those years of our roving ancestors, however long or short, were actively spent in full emersion in the world of nature. They had no option.

Times and seasons informed their peripatetic wanderings. Barefooted, they felt the earth under the soles of their feet. Their tastes evolved according to the bounties of the vegetations that greeted their palates. Of course, those diverse vegetations and the edibles they offered sprang up

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in consistence with the various climatic and ecological conditions that governed the various parts of the planet they trod. With centuries and millennia of trial and error, their eating habits and food culture synchronized with their environments, and the physiological functioning of their bodies harmonized with the immediate world around them. They were in nature and nature was in them.

More than the physical immersion in the world around them, our forebears perceived and felt the transcendent dimension of their world. The unfailing dynamics of their ecological environment in the cycles of the seasons, the flashes of insights that came with their bent postures towards the earth in agricultural production, the surreal feel of their fingers deepened in the soil, and the pollen-laden air they inhaled, all strengthened their bodily immunity and awakened their intuition of the value of the material world for their metaphysical wellbeing. It is no surprise that the earliest literature that emerged from their primal philosophies, their oral and written sacred texts, often began with descriptions of our origins as located in an idyllic garden long lost.

As in every evolutionary process, the old must yield to the new; but the outcome of encountering the new will depend on who we are today. We cannot unlive the past with total detachment from its contributions to our genetic and cultural evolution. The emergence of settled communities has impacted culture and necessitated governance. And although our modern society is far from our primal beginnings, both in value and texture, we still live in tension with those beginnings. For we remain the people we have been from our origins, and home does not stop beckoning at us, especially when our great but synthetic achievements fail us. Many are making the return home today in urban community gardening, healing themselves from the stress of our fragile lifestyles.

Yes! Modernity and its technological achievements have taken many of us away from working on the land. We live in the industrialized north where we engage in services and production processes that are remotely connected with the land. With the increasing sophistication of technology, we are not only moving away from appreciating the value of *terra firma* for our total wellness, we are also reducing it to a mere commodity for making quick money by disposing it wholesale or utilizing it in parts for mining, quarrying, and housing. The secularization that increasingly drives this use is most evident in the cities, and it is daily leaving many behind. Modern society's hardnosed philosophy of take-it-or-leave-it has orphaned

disadvantaged people and groups, structurally consigning them to the margins of society where their vulnerabilities have exposed them to the vagaries of street life and their consequences.

However, there are movements in the world today that are recognizing the disconnect among us humans in consequence of our disconnect from the land. To overcome this challenge and its attending consequences, new housing movements are rooting for integrated housing schemes where residents, across their various ethnicities and statuses as privileged and underserved citizens, can interact and share their common humanity. City-located community gardens (CG) are part of this trend. These are “open spaces managed and operated by members of the community in which food or flowers are cultivated.... CGs are often seen as a positive solution to address social, health and environmental challenges” (Dyg, Christensen, and Peterson 2019).

Early community gardens in North America started from New York city as a marginal movement that converted vacant urban lots into vegetable gardens in the face of urban blight that followed industrialization. Its evident success made it trendy as a movement being promoted by institutions that are committed to human wellness, including the World Health Organization. The movement has gained attention among health and social workers in Europe, North America, and Australia as an emerging corrective to the social, economic, and psychological effects of urban culture. Hou (2017), along with other researchers (Wakefield et al., 2007; Tharrey et al.; 2007; & Kingsley et al., 2019), observed that these gardens are gaining appreciation for their “multimodal” function as “convivial... cultural... inclusive... restorative... democratic... and... resilient” spaces, thereby contributing to the wellbeing of those involved and their communities. These results are not far to check.

Here in Alberta, our provincial health management body, Alberta Health Services (AHS), has been promoting and using CGs in assisting underserved and disadvantaged members of our communities through the services of recreational therapists. AHS is using community gardening, to support their participants in cultivating wholesome values and critical skills for independent and stable living. Through gardening, for example at Lady Flower Gardens, the participants learned social interaction skills, develop emotional wellbeing, and leisure awareness. Although they come to the gardens for various reasons of curiosity, socialization, mental and physical health improvement, sheer enjoyment, gardening, observance of nature, and change of environment, they often reported personal renewal at the end of each visit. In the AHS report of

the difficult pandemic year of 2020, the participants indicated a sense of fulfillment as they shovelled dirt, pulled out weeds, harvested vegetables for Edmonton Food Bank, walked in the forest and watched birds, often returning to their base with new sense of personal achievements (Amy Delday, 2020). What a significant experience for mental health! It is no wonder that CGs are also increasingly being incorporated into social housing programs through which broken and underserved people are regaining mastery over their lives.

Broadly speaking there are five significant ways the multidimensional value of CGs plays out. The first is that CGs in social housing generate social capital for members of the community. They provide the arena for interaction among residents, just as water holes and streams served communities in ancient times as places of social interaction. Whether they are run collectively or by allotted plots, gardening provides participating residents meaningful subject to deliberate upon, on which to exchange ideas, and forge sustained relationship. This experience breaks the cycle of social isolation that modern life imposes on all of us and steers the vulnerable elements away from slacking back into their defeating habits. In breaking social isolation, CGs in social housing thus provide the engaging environment for those intent on changing the scripts of their lives for the better.

Secondly, CG provides community members skills in food production. This is important for persons coming from houselessness and addiction, who might not have productive skills to support themselves and contribute meaningfully to society. Just as agriculture taught us to settle down and develop capacity as human communities, participating in CG can help those who have not been steady to develop that critical ability for focus, develop economic independence, and contribute to food security. Skills in food production is not only easy to grasp through cycles of repetition, but the tools also to start with are affordable and readily available to the learner-gardener unlike other skill-learning that require expensive tools.

There is a sense of achievement that comes with gardening, and this is the third way the multimodal nature of CG plays out. Persons coming from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have experienced personal achievements for which they can be proud of. Many reasons can be adduced for this. In the city environment, for example, some disadvantaged people may not be able to function with the rhythm of chronological time as required by employers. Since this ability is essential to stability in employment, they may not be able to keep their jobs. Gardening provides a relatively flexible vocation through which they can gradually synchronize their

lifestyles to begin to learn the disciplines of sowing their seeds, nurturing them, and watching them come to fruition. Two things are happening simultaneously here. The gardener is cultivating character for personal and communal usefulness by learning the lessons of patient waiting. Secondly, they are self-affirming their dignity as producers and not mere consumers.



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The fourth way CGs serve communities is that through the opportunities they offer disadvantaged people, they set them on the path of wholeness. This happens as they develop focus, gain skills, function in affirmative social relationships, experience achievements through gardening, and gain self-understanding as significant contributors to self and society. These

experiences improve their self-esteem, help them to gain confidence, and positively impact their mental health.

Finally, urban community gardens serve all of us irrespective of our advantages or disadvantages as urban dwellers. They filter the air we breathe to rid it of the toxins we pump from our automobiles. They soften the environment against the hard concrete floors and structures in our cities and the blinding glares from their curtain walls. We marvel at their apparent beauty as they tower above us, but we are not mindful of their destructive impacts on the lives of our winged neighbours, the birds, as they fly withing and across our cities. CGs mitigate the negative impacts of our structures, especially the reflected heat of the sun and glare, on our outdoor spaces. They provide tree branches and blooms as cafés and rendezvous for our winged friends – birds, bees, and butterflies – who contribute their nature-allotted service of pollinating our plants for necessary food yield. However we see them, CGs add value to the urban environment, provide us opportunity to mutually contribute to the quality of our lives. These and other individual and communal benefits have been documented in holistic approaches to human wellness in Europe, Australia and North America, examples of which are herein listed:

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Ecotipping point - Urban community gardening (New York City)

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Wakefield, Sarah, Fiona Yeudall, Carolin Taron, Jennifer Reynolds, and Ana Skinner. 2007. "Growing Urban Health: Community Gardening in South-East Toronto." *Health Promotion International* 22, no. 2 (June): 92-101. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/dam001>.

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