

# CONCRETE GARDEN

SUSTAINABLE // URBAN // AGRICULTURE

SPRING/SUMMER • 2017

## THROWING SHADE

FOOD AND HOUSING GO HEAD TO HEAD  
AS VICTORIA GROWS



WHERE THE WILD FOODS ARE

SCALING UP  
SUSTAINABLE FISHING

CONTAINER **FARM** FEVER

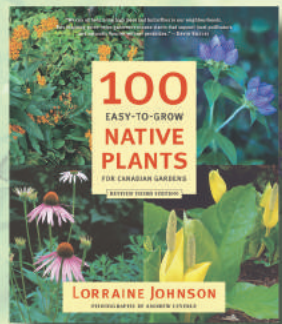
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GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT

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# CONCRETE GARDEN

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ACKNOWLEDGE THIS MAGAZINE IS PRODUCED ON  
THE UNCEDED TERRITORIES OF THE COAST  
SALISH – THE LEKWUNGEN AND WSÁNEĆ PEOPLES.

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What goes around comes around!

**10 ACRES BISTRO / KITCHEN  
COMMONS / FARM**

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I'VE LIVED IN VICTORIA FOR SEVEN YEARS NOW, nearly four of those downtown. I've watched the city grow and change around me, with my corner on upper Fort Street becoming an increasingly busy hub. Solange constantly croons in my ears—there are cranes in the sky everywhere I look.

Development and “progress” often feel inevitable. Momentum sucks you in and sedates you. But we should know after this last year that nothing is a given. We can imagine different futures for ourselves and our cities. In the cover story, Trina McDonald asks why it feels like Victoria needs to choose between housing and urban farming, and hears from those who are proving that we don't. Meanwhile, Sarah Hughes charts a more sustainable future for our oceans with Community Supported Fisheries and I tour a futuristic two-acre farm inside a repurposed shipping container.

As we think ahead, it's important to remember that this place also holds many histories and ongoing narratives. We've added a few new sections this issue, but I'm most excited to introduce “Land Writes,” which highlights Indigenous food issues from an Indigenous perspective. Christine George of T'Sou-ke First Nation leads us off with a wonderful summary of their Ladybug Garden and Greenhouse program.

At *Concrete Garden*, we believe everyone deserves access to housing and healthy food. When the local food movement includes voices from all of the groups in our communities, we can imagine food systems that are both sustainable and just.

— QUINN MACDONALD



PHOTO: APRIL GARRISON

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Find more from *Concrete Garden* on our website! Learn about our team and stay up to date on the local food movement. Read about innovative projects and people in the weekly “Spotlight on Sustainability.” Check out our back issues and web-only features.



Feast of Fields

WHEN: AUGUST 27, 2017  
WHERE: RAVENHILL HERB FARM  
TICKETS: FEASTOFFIELDS.COM

ON SUNDAY AUG. 27, FARMFOLK CITYFOLK WILL HOST ITS 20TH ANNUAL Vancouver Island Feast of Fields: a four-hour fundraiser and celebration of local food, spirits, and agriculture. Area chefs and suppliers will come together to present the best of what they have, hosted this year at Ravenhill Herb Farm in Saanichton. Attendees can wander around the farm while sampling the offerings in scrumptious bite-sized morsels.

“It's an event with a mission,” says FarmFolk CityFolk executive director Nicholas Scapillati. “It's very British Columbia to support social activism and give back to our community while supporting our farmers.”

Since 1993, FarmFolk CityFolk has worked to grow sustainable food systems throughout B.C. The registered non-profit offers interest-free micro-loans to local food producers, promotes organic seed security programs, and helps maintain and encourage alternative forms of agricultural land ownership. Any money spent at the feast helps FarmFolk CityFolk invest in the local food community. Other Feasts of Fields are held annually at rotating farms in the Okanagan Valley and Metro Vancouver.

“I think a big part of the feast is the fact that everyone who comes is truly local or doing things sustainably,” says Scapillati. “You can't just come here while buying all your produce off a Sysco truck.”

This year's event at Ravenhill also marks a return to the location of the first Vancouver Island Feast of Fields. Speaking to the event's longevity, Scapillati says that it looked very different two decades ago, when less than 100 people were involved, including the suppliers. The organization has held over 50 feasts since then, and grown to be one of Canada's oldest and largest food celebrations.

“Twenty years ago, the local food movement was pretty much non-existent,” he says. “[The festival] is something that British Columbians have really embraced. It ties the spirit of what's happening in with local food, and it's connected to a non-profit so everything that the chefs, producers, and beverage makers are donating—along with all the guests and volunteers—all the money is put back into the food system.”

— ADRIAN PARADIS



PHOTO: COURTESY OF FEAST OF FIELDS

TO BUY TICKETS AND FIND MORE INFORMATION ON PAST CHEFS AND SUPPLIERS, VISIT FEASTOFFIELDS.COM

TO FIND MORE INFORMATION ON FARMFOLK CITYFOLK, INCLUDING A FULL LIST OF THEIR PROJECTS, VISIT FARMFOLKCITYFOLK.CA

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CHEF GREG WARD BRASSERIE L'ÉCOLE, 1715 GOVERNMENT ST, VICTORIA



IT IS NOT UNCOMMON FOR Victorians to watch a new restaurant wither and die before it really gets a chance. Some spots, however, quietly become iconic staples. Brasserie L'École is one of those institutions. Any avid diner looking for steak-frites and classic French fare has almost certainly been through this cozy restaurant on the edge of Chinatown.

Greg Ward has been with the Brasserie since 2006, but only took over as chef in the summer of 2016. Ward was previously the sous to co-owner and chef Sean Brennan, who has moved on to other projects. Ward took his

place in the kitchen while sommelier and maître d' Marc Morrison, who has been with the Brasserie since the beginning, took full ownership.

Ward may be no stranger to the kitchen, but cooking wasn't always his dream growing up. "I was too busy with sports," he says about high school in Nova Scotia. "Skiing took up most of the winter months."

After graduating, he attended a job fair where he learned about

The Culinary Institute of Canada in Charlottetown, P.E.I., and decided to apply. Ward finished culinary school in 1998 and moved to Banff—where he could continue to ski daily—to work in Cilantro at the Buffalo Mountain Lodge. He was only responsible for two or three people, but he got his first taste of being a chef.

Ward moved to the Island in 2002 and worked at Pescatores (now the Kitchen part of 10 Acres) for five years before landing at the Brasserie.

Today, Ward is excited about the developments at Brasserie. Their menu changes often, depending on the season, but "there are standards on the menu that will never change," he says. "That's part of what Brasserie is. People come for the steaks and the salad." However, Ward says he's enjoying taking liberties in his new position. "Everything in between we can play with. People seem to be liking it."

Working with such a seasonal focus can also have its restrictions. There is less experimentation in the winter months when fewer products are available. "It's a lot of waiting and waiting for garlic to be ready, or your first tomato of the year, or chanterelles," he says.

Ward is in frequent contact with suppliers like Madrona Farm and Saanich Organics, and he's excited to see what comes with the longer days. "Every week we will add something new to the mix. That's what spring and summer are all about."

— ADRIAN PARADIS

**HODGE PODGE RECIPE** SERVES 2-3 FOR LUNCH OR A SIDE DISH

**INGREDIENTS**

- |                                     |                         |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 lb. small new potatoes (20 to 25) | 4 cups whole milk       |
| 1 lb. baby carrots                  | 1/4 cup unsalted butter |
| 1/4 lb. English peas                | Salt and pepper         |
| 1/4 lb. sugar snap peas             |                         |

**PREPARATION**

- In a small pot, cover potatoes with water and add 1 tbsp. salt. Bring to a slow simmer
- Cook until almost tender, five to 10 minutes depending on the size, variety, and freshness of the potatoes, newer ones won't take long
- In another pot bring milk and butter to a slow simmer. Season with salt and pepper
- When the potatoes are ready to transfer to the other pot, add all of the remaining ingredients and cook slowly until carrots are to your liking. Be sure not to boil milk as it may try to curdle on you
- Adjust seasoning and ladle into bowls



PHOTOS: APRIL GARRISON

**WHO:** DAVE FRIEND, AKA MR. ORGANIC  
**WHAT:** GROWING YOUNG FARMERS SOCIETY

DAVE FRIEND HAS BEEN TALKING ABOUT FOOD SECURITY FOR A long time. On a 2011 plane ride home from Dubai, where he was commissioned to give talks on the subject, he had an epiphany. He realized he needed to put the ideas he'd been preaching about into practice, and the Growing Young Farmers Society was born.

"I started with one school, one class, and a bed full of weeds and dying flowers," he says. "Every class in that school in Sidney is now in the program."

Covering pre- to high school, Growing Young Farmers (GYFS) educates, encourages, and empowers students to grow their own food. For one hour a week, a "growing educator" meets with a class to help them grow produce, usually on school property, and teach them about sustainable practices. There are currently 11 schools in Victoria, Sidney, and Duncan in the program, with more on a waiting list.

One of Friend's key motivations is the haunting and oft-cited statistic that without the supply coming from the mainland, the Island's grocery stores will run out of fresh food in three days.

"When I found out we only have three days of food supply on the Island, I thought, 'kids could grow food,'" Friend says. "It's not going to solve that problem, but if they know about that from a certain age, they can be taught how to grow food, and then eat that food and take ownership of that food."

Friend was born in a tiny farming village in Yorkshire, England, where his father was a farm labourer. "We had no money," he says, "but we had food growing all around the house. I didn't realize the importance of that as a little kid." Seeing the struggles his father went through, Friend swore—ironically—then that he would never work on a farm.

Before GYFS, Friend worked for a British promotional company where he managed social bingo clubs, bars, and ice arenas. Later, he started his own company providing consulting advice and managing services for similar businesses. After visiting organic farms throughout the U.K., Friend became interested in organic farming and started in the WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) program.

He volunteered on organic farms in the U.K. and Spain before WWOOFing brought him to Salt Spring Island in 1997. After that stint, he briefly returned to England before moving to Vancouver Island in 1998 on a work visa. He meant to stay for a

year, but says he found it hard to leave when he saw how the local food movement was ramping up.

Friend was instrumental in getting more organic, local food into Vancouver Island grocery stores, starting with his own certified organic gourmet salad mix. Based on the Saanich Peninsula, he began selling the mix to Thrifty Foods in 2002. The chain brought him on as

an organic consultant shortly afterwards. Under the alias of Mr. Organic, he traveled the Island doing demonstrations and samplings of certified organic B.C. apples.

Today, Friend is "retired." He's stepped back from Growing Young Farmers, leaving more to the current coordinator, Jenny Szulc. Friend now primarily promotes and networks for the society.

He's also arranging a new program for Queen Margaret's School in North Cowichan, where the older students will grow the produce to sell to the cafeteria. "I love what I'm doing," he says. "I'm very passionate about it and I believe strongly that kids should know how to grow food without chemicals and sprays and poisons."

If that weren't enough, he's also started coaching after-school soccer. Among his many other achievements, Friend was a semi-professional soccer player in South Africa for a few years. Seems like retirement won't slow Mr. Organic down too much.

— ADRIAN PARADIS



PHOTO: APRIL GARRISON



**FAVORITE TOOL :**

More than any other tool, GYFS uses kid's hand trowels in its gardens. Friend says the tool is perfect for those with smaller hands and teaches them how to garden effectively. However, this doesn't stop the kids from getting their hands dirty. "They are not touching chemicals or anything like that," says Friend. "They are touching natural soil. At the same time, they can touch worms, bugs, and slugs."



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# Comox Valley

## CUMBERLAND BREWING COMPANY (CUMBERLAND)

CUMBERLAND BREWING COMPANY OPENED ON DUNSMUIR Avenue, the main strip of the historic town, two years ago and has quickly grown. Owners Darren Adam and Caroline Tymchuk started Riders Pizza and the brewery in the same building, but the two businesses competed for a tight space so the pizza place moved next door. They've added a kitchen to the brewery, called the Cantina, which serves an eclectic world fusion menu. I like darker beers, so I can vouch for the Oatmeal Stout. But if you like it hoppy you will have to head to Cumberland and try one of the eight beers they have on tap because there are no plans for distribution. It's about "deepening the tapestry that is the destination of Cumberland," says Adam.

## SHELTER POINT DISTILLERY (OYSTER RIVER)

THE SHELTER POINT DISTILLERY MAKES FOR AN IMPRESSIVE sight. A large building lined with oak barrels looks out over grain fields that sprawl towards the sea. Inside is just as spectacular, with large wood beams milled on the farm, an antique farm truck, more barrels, and the polished stills, including huge copper ones shipped from Scotland. Patrick Evans helms the operation and his family has farmed in the Valley since the 1930s. He purchased the farm in 2006 and saw the potential for a value-added product in the Island's growing craft spirits industry. His whiskey—with grains grown, fermented, and distilled on site—is the crown jewel, but you have to get your timing right: it ages in barrels for a minimum of three years and the first batch, released last May, was sold out before Christmas.

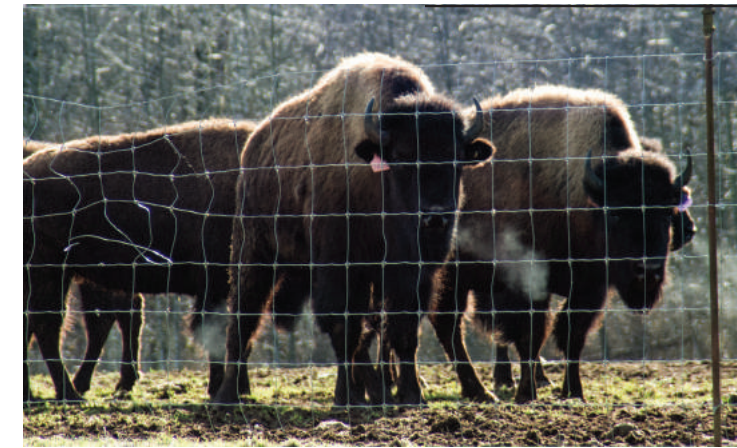
COMOX VALLEY  
PHOTO: RHETT BUCKLE



## ISLAND BISON (BLACK CREEK)

IT'S DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE BISON AND WATER BUFFALO roaming Vancouver Island, but amid the forest and fields of Island Bison's farm in Black Creek a number of these noble beasts thrive. Marc Vance says he didn't know how to start a tractor when he, his wife, her parents, and their four children moved to the farm six years ago. The learning curve was steep, but the advantage of being new to farming was having their eyes open wide to see what the animals needed. Bison are not domesticated animals and Vance says keeping them happy is about leaving them alone with their families, with mud to wallow in and open pasture.

The water buffalo, on the other hand, come in for cuddles and human affection; some even let adventurous *Homo sapiens* jump on for a ride. Cows and pigs, along with the other animals, roam freely. It's a welcoming place and the bison can inspire wonder and awe—just keep your distance, for your sake and theirs.



## NATURAL PASTURES CHEESE COMPANY (COURTENAY)

THE NATURAL PASTURES SHOP IN COURTENAY IS DEFINITELY worth a stop. (Spoiler alert: they will feed you cheese.) On Thursdays, the sweet-custardy ricotta—perfect for pancakes and fruit—is fresh, and, due to its short shelf life, only available in the area. It's the favourite of operations manager Doug Smith, who started the company with his two brothers. The Valley dairy farmers recognized a gap in processing and got into the cheese-making business. All of the cow and buffalo milk used in over 20 different kinds of cheese and yogurt comes from Vancouver Island.

— TRINA McDONALD



PHOTOS: TRINA McDONALD



# Style Your Edible Landscape

BY SOLARA GOLDWYNN OF HATCHET & SEED

GROWING A YEAR-ROUND EDIBLE GARDEN IS NOT ONLY POSSIBLE in the Capital Region, but it can also be one of the most rewarding things a person can do! By adding a few thoughtful elements to your garden plot, whether large or small, you can help to boost aesthetic appeal along with productivity, feeding your body and your spirit.

Here are my top five tips for styling your edible landscape:

## SPLASH SOME COLOUR

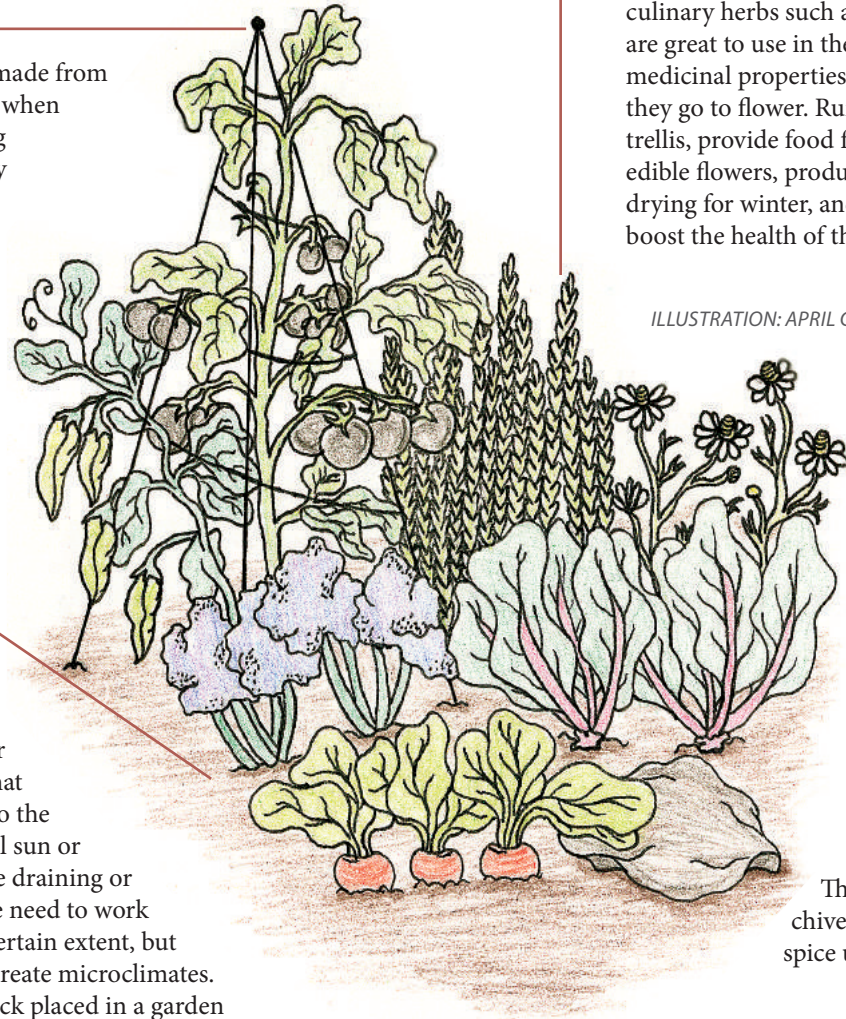
Explore wide varieties of edible plants to diversify your garden plot. Yellow and pink Swiss chard, purple broccoli, and black tomatoes are some of the colour swatches you can add amidst your greenery.

## USE VERTICAL SPACE

A simple circular trellis made from branches looks stunning when covered in peas, climbing nasturtiums, or beans. By using vertical space in the garden, we increase the square footage to produce more food. We also add diversity and aesthetic appeal. Place tall garden features to the north of your plot so they don't shade out what's growing in front.

## CREATE MICROCLIMATES

The west and north sides of a house have contrasting growing conditions. Observe your garden and figure out what conditions are intrinsic to the site. Is your garden in full sun or is it shady? Is the soil free draining or saturated with water? We need to work with what we have to a certain extent, but we can add elements to create microclimates. For example one large rock placed in a garden bed absorbs heat from the sun and radiates it outward, giving an extra boost to heat-loving plants nearby. The soil beneath the rock will be damp, allowing the roots of surrounding plants to access the moisture. Plus, it will look intriguing!



## ADD MULTI-FUNCTIONAL PLANTS

This section could also be called "valuing the full life of a plant." If you're short on space, choose plants that serve multiple purposes. For example, culinary herbs such as rosemary, sage, and thyme are great to use in the kitchen, but they also have medicinal properties and are great bee food when they go to flower. Runner beans, beautiful on a trellis, provide food for beneficial insects, have edible flowers, produce beans for fresh eating and drying for winter, and, as nitrogen-fixers, they also boost the health of the soil. Bonus!

ILLUSTRATION: APRIL GARRISON

## PLANT EDIBLE FLOWERS

Flowers can bring brightness and beauty to a garden and attract beneficial insects like butterflies and bees. If you have a small amount of space and want to grow as much food as possible, you can still have your flowers and eat them too! Nasturtiums, calendula, chamomile, violets, and roses are all edible flowers. The flowers of radishes, kale, chives, and mustard greens can spice up any meal.

Hatchet & Seed is an edible landscaping and regenerative land design business based in Victoria, B.C. [www.hatchetnseed.ca](http://www.hatchetnseed.ca)

## T'Sou-ke First Nation's Ladybug Garden & Greenhouse

BY CHRISTINE GEORGE

LADYBUG GARDEN AND GREENHOUSE IS IN ITS NINTH YEAR, growing fresh, affordable food for our T'Sou-ke Nation community. We grow a variety of vegetables at the gardens. Indigenous plants are gathered and brought to the gardens to adapt and be reintroduced to our Membership. We also promote medicinal teas, including how to administer and store them.

This 2016/17 Year in Review describes what we do best: from growing and preserving foods to teaching respect for our lands and the foods we harvest from it.



## WUI, CIST CEN, TOL – OUR YEAR IN REVIEW

LADYBUG GARDEN AND GREENHOUSE SUPPLIED FRESH FRUITS, berries, and produce for our weekly cultural gatherings, community luncheons, and for our community cooks and their Meals on Wheels program. Many community members, including Youth and Elders, participated in these gatherings.

We organized hikes and gatherings to promote exercise and a healthy lifestyle and improve self-esteem. Members of all ages, from two-and-a-half to 84 years, joined our outings. These gatherings took us to our Sacred Mountains up to the San Juan Ridge and down to our SIAOSUN beaches on our #2 Reserve.

We also had "workbee sessions" to create beds of food and clean grounds in the ideal areas for growing, with Youth as young as one-and-a-half to two years. Our Youth engage fully and passionately when they help and build beds at our gardens, something that comes naturally to them. Everyone always has a chore to do when we have our workbees.

We travelled to public schools to teach Indigenous students about our products so that they can serve and describe our teas at school events. We distributed our teas to members at our mini-wellness days.

We led guided hikes through our Traditional Territories to identify Indigenous plants and learn about their traditional uses and the importance of their survival. We taught the history and identified culturally modified trees and Cairns. We used our Traditional Territories as our "natural classroom" and created booklets about the food we would gather to promote teachings of our SENĆOŦEN language.

## COOL COOKS PROGRAM

WE HELD THE COOL COOKS PROGRAM DURING AUGUST. DAY One was a kitchen basics orientation with dos and don'ts. On Day Two, we visited our community garden to learn gardening basics, from seeding to harvest, then gathered foods to cook

for the participants' families. Day Three, we travelled to our Traditional Territories to gather medicinal teas and alpine fruits, including three varieties of blueberries, Labrador tea, and red huckleberries for jams. On Day Four, we created jams and berry cobbler, tasted teas, and fried bannock for the students to take home to their families.

The Youth learned how to prepare meals such as grilled cheese sandwiches, salads with fresh picked greens from our gardens, homemade trail mix from gathered berries, mac and cheese from scratch, jams, berry cobbler, bannock, and salmon and Indian tacos.

## SEAFOOD GATHERINGS

WE HELD SEAFOOD GATHERINGS AND TAUGHT TRADITIONAL methods of catching and gathering seafood such as crabs. We raked where you walk on our beaches at extremely low tide. Then, we walked out to the eelgrass beds to grab the crabs by hand. We dug clams like Manilas, littlenecks, and butters, and gathered mussels, rock stickers, gooseneck barnacles, sea urchins, limpets, and the occasional octopus.

We then demonstrated how to prepare food on the beach, cooking salmon on cedar sticks over an open fire and steaming the freshly harvested seafood. We only gather what we will eat so that nothing is wasted. We practice our Culture at these events by smudging before everyone heads out to gather foods. We offer prayers before lunch and always have a special Blessing by the Sea with our Elders using water collected from all parts of the world.



PHOTOS: CHRISTINE GEORGE

## MEMBER GARDENS

WE PROVIDE GARDEN AREAS FOR MEMBERS TO GROW THEIR own food. First-timers often plant a few items in their plots to learn about gardening and whether they are able to do the work required. Some members need to look after their children or can't find the time to tend their gardens due to other challenges. We will need to address these barriers for our members to grow some of their own food.

OUR YOUTH RESPECT WHAT WE PROVIDE FOR THEM. SOME HAVE participated for nine years or more, coming on all of our outings with us. We can safely allow some of these Youth to take guests out to demonstrate what we have taught them—and bringing our lessons full circle gives us a very satisfied feeling, knowing that we have been successful with our teachings. ♦

# BRANCHING OUT

How I escaped stay-at-home mom isolation by growing my gardening network.

BY HEATHER NEALE FURNEAUX

MY LOVE OF GARDENING BEGAN IN THE SPRING OF 2012, THE year I married my husband, Jeff, and carried our first-born daughter. I think the seed growing inside me sparked the idea that I could grow our food, too. It also helped that I moved into a house with a sizeable yard after years crammed into boxy downtown apartments.

I planted a variety of crops that bloomed on the “May Two-Four Weekend” as instructed by a few “green-thumb” friends of my mom, and I grew increasingly excited (and a tad smug) about nourishing my soon-to-be-born child with the fruits of our land: fresh organic vegetables free of waxy chemical by-products. I watered diligently for months (between “well-deserved” three-hour naps—I was making a human after all). And by mid-July, I thought the garden looked pretty impressive. Even if it was mostly thanks to the cheater lettuce plants I’d picked up already sprouted.

The following growing season became more complicated. I was a new mother, still finding my parental feet, entertaining a baby who didn’t want to sit in a bouncy chair anymore while I watered in meditative bliss. (Our “automated irrigation system” amounted to me. With a hose.) So I planted less variety and held on for dear life.

After my second daughter arrived in early 2015, I found myself killing the snap peas with neglect and throwing seeds in the ground without so much as a quick glance at the package, because if I took the time for that, one of the girls would climb into the pond or make a break for the road and I’d lose my momentum. By 10 at night, I’d collapse face-first into bed, having (mostly) finished the dishes and laundry and picked up the Mega Bloks we were sure to curse when we stepped on them at two a.m., only to realize I’d forgotten to water. I wasn’t getting very far and felt alone in the struggle.

So with the birth of our third daughter this February, I had an epiphany. Everything else in my life involves community. I’ve always been, as my family likes to joke, “obnoxiously extroverted.” I take great pleasure in connecting with people all over the world through my other hobbies, dance and surfing. But with gardening, I’d worked alone, intimidated by how much everyone else seemed to know.

Sure, I researched tips for early planting and how to construct a rain garden. I even interviewed professionals on topics like hot composting, planting to help bee populations, and deterring crop eaters (like those cute but pesky deer we spot around the southern Island). But in five years of tinkering (and neglecting), tinkering (and flailing) around my back yard, I hadn’t really made any lasting connections with others who loved to harvest their own food. And by extension I hadn’t developed my garden or built on of what I’d done in previous seasons. So off I went

with a new mission: to cultivate my own personal gardening support group and develop a more robust planting operation while I was at it.

After a quick Google search, I called The Gordon Head Garden Club and spoke to past president Heather Atkinson. A delightful woman, Atkinson assuaged my fears about showing up to a meeting with limited knowledge.

“It’s an incredibly supportive atmosphere,” she reassured me. The club has been running for 62 years, and the members have become lifelong friends. “Clubs like this are sort of an Old World thing,” she said. Young people turn to online versions of the “club” concept. But there was nothing passé about her passion for the club or for growing in general. And I would argue that human connection in a thriving community environment never goes out of style.

In addition to monthly meetings where rotating members showcase small samples of crops or flowers, the club hosts speakers who cover a wide range of educational topics—everything from ways to build up your soil to new flowers on the market. The club also holds an annual May community plant sale to raise funds.

“Brian Minter from the CBC is coming at the beginning of March,” Atkinson said, excitedly. “You should join us.” I got off the phone feeling as though she’d just hugged me. Until that moment, I hadn’t realized how isolated I’d felt, at home with young kids in the middle of one of Victoria’s chilliest winters. Both gardening and “momming” had, until now, been somewhat solitary jobs. But that was about to change.

Next up: the Young Agrarians, a network of young (and young-at-heart) organic and ecological farmers that has spread across the country since its inception in 2012, becoming Canada’s largest umbrella network for new farmers. I heard about it through friends and liked the welcoming faces on their website. The Young Agrarians’ “Winter Mixer” was scheduled for late January at Camp

Pringle near Shawnigan Lake, Coast Salish Territory. The event hosted 125 new and potential farmers from around Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland with workshops on community building and business management, Indigenous land and food systems, and skills expansion. Evening potlucks gave guests a chance to meet new friends, share ideas, and let loose away from home. (To a stay-at-home mom with very little time to be an adult, this sounded like heaven.)

I ended up missing the event as I was eight-and-a-half months pregnant and contractions were upon me. (A mother’s plans are made to be broken.) But I followed up with organization founder and B.C. coordinator, Sara Dent, who reported a successful few days of learning and connecting. “It was a lot of fun,” she said. She filled me in on other events planned for summer.

Lastly, I consulted Facebook. While connecting with friends in person is my first choice, I’m quite often stuck at home with sleeping babies, sick kids, and no childcare. Online parent groups are a great way to curb isolation, develop new friendships, and stay informed. I figured there must be other parents out there struggling to pursue this hobby while raising tiny, adorable human time-suckers.

“Hey Mamas and Dadas, anyone avidly into gardening? How do you do it with the kiddos?” I pleaded. The response was overwhelming.

“My husband has planted over 40 fruit trees and works full time,” one woman said, attributing her partner’s high productivity to their tag-team-parenting system. (She watches the kids while he plants, or vice versa.) Another woman talked about giving her young son his own “little-person” tools to “work” with while she got her weeding in. Several other parents highly recommended a drip irrigation system on a timer. “This will save your garden and your life,” one woman insisted. “I had to compromise with half garden, half mud for the kids to play in,” admitted another. That sounded more like my reality.

Two things I took away from the discussion were: 1) Having a partner who’s also keen, and therefore happy to trade off the garden and/or the kids helps, and 2) Manual watering is ridiculous.

But the strongest thing I felt was this sense of non-judgemental support. No one put me down for “doing it wrong.” Everyone who posted comments offered helpful suggestions. There was camaraderie in our common struggle. And the medium—discussing it online—meant we could respond when we each had a moment, a good moment, when the kids were asleep or otherwise engaged, and we could offer each other support and validation in a leisurely, civilized manner. (Not with a fussy baby

tucked under one arm.)

“Give me a call anytime; I’d be super happy to chat about it,” read one post. Another inbox message offered, “If you want, I could come over sometime with the kids and give you some suggestions for your garden while our kids make mud pies?” Everyone could relate to lowering their standards a touch or calling in backup when it came to gardening with kids. No one batted an eye when I admitted to killing crops, cutting corners, and feeling deflated. In fact, publically acknowledging this stuff felt liberating, validating. Cathartic even. It felt like my very own personal gardening support group.

While a big part of connecting with others was about building relationships, I realized the other part of it was establishing a sense of accountability. If no one was checking in with me, then who cared if my snap peas lay limp and brown on crusty soil while I napped with my daughter. By that same token, no one clapped and cheered when they grew in lush and delicious either.

Scrolling through the Facebook newsfeed of “Gardening fanatics on Vancouver Island,” which some online parents had recommended, I glimpsed colourful greenhouse ideas, planting charts, questions about native plant species, proud homesteaders posting photos of their crops, and even some self-deprecating posts of failed attempts at new ideas.

That was what I needed—people to check in with, to share my successes and flops. People who also gardened with adorable, small moving obstacles, and who understood why it’s wonderful and challenging and heart-smashingly fun and next-to-impossible-sometimes, all at once. I needed accountability with love.

As I head into this next growing season, I’m committing to post photos of my own garden conquests online and to attend events and club meetings that will force me to own up to what I do or don’t do in the backyard these coming months. Much like parenting, it will take a little nerve for me to step out of my comfort zone and be vulnerable with others—even to show them the weed-fest that is my backyard at the moment. But if I’ve learned anything from having three children and talking with moms and dads over the years about our parenting insecurities, it’s that the more I stay with my fear and try and to do it all alone, to pretend “I’ve got this,” the lonelier I feel. The more I embrace imperfection and reach out to others, the happier and fuller my life becomes.

Stay tuned for incredible results this season. I anticipate a killer crop, a drip irrigation system that isn’t just me standing over the carrots with a leaky hose, and at least one child digging up the first few rows of seeds to hit the earth. ♦



MALIA FURNEAUX  
PHOTO: APRIL GARRISON

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GIFT CARDS

# Wild Gifts

Exploring the opportunities & responsibilities of foraging on the West Coast.

By JENNIFER FODEN

JUST OVER A YEAR AGO, I LEFT TORONTO AND MOVED TO B.C.'s south coast. I wanted to embrace the mountains, mild weather, and coastal vibes. I often have moments, when I'm outside in the vast, lush temperate rainforest, where I think about how grateful I am that I was able to relocate here.

Recently, while in deep conversation with Lori Snyder, I had a similar feeling of gratitude. Snyder was sharing her knowledge about the medicinal and edible plants surrounding us. Based on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples, Snyder is a Métis herbalist, storyteller, and educator who leads a number of wildcrafting workshops and walks in urban landscapes.

As we walked, she pointed out the bounty around us—rosehips here, dandelion root there. Oregon grape, pine tips, to name a few. She offered me a taste of honey and apple cider vinegar, which she had infused with plants she'd foraged nearby. We were standing in front of a beaver dam; birds played in the melting snow. And we weren't deep in the forest of Squamish, where Snyder grew up. We were in Hinge Park, at the corner of Columbia Street and West First Avenue, in an increasingly developed area of urban Vancouver.

"For most people, foraging is not about exotic plants and going out deep into the forest," Snyder said with a smile. "It's about finding what's in your own backyard."

Foraging, or wildcrafting, is a practice that has been around in most cultures, including the Coast Salish, since time immemorial. However, searching for wild food in this city—where residents shop in bulk or order food from their phone—is something most people aren't accustomed to. And this practice goes beyond just mushroom picking. We're talking edible plants, berries, teas.

However, the times, they are a changing. While there are no hard statistics on the growth of urban foraging in B.C., searching for wild food in an urban setting appears to be rising in popularity. The amount of resources, tours, workshops and experts available is increasing. In Canada, the search term "foraging" on Google has increased over the past five years. (The province that googles that term the most? B.C., of course.)

Camille Flanjak, a B.C.-based wildcrafter and the founder of MuseumEats (a company that conducts workshops, on understanding local food sources) suggests the increase in urban foraging is an intentional move to re-engage with the food system.

"I think humans are intuitively supposed to be collecting and eating wild food and are tired of being told what is appropriate," she said. "It's an act of defiance, as well as empowerment, to identify and collect food away from institutions like money or industry."

Flanjak also talked to me about how "foraged" has become a buzzword and when a product is affixed with a sales label it is "advertised to a specific kind of hipster." However, she maintains

that the appeal of foraging is growing. "It's not just superficial," she said boldly. "Foraging is an exciting, inspiring, satisfying, and delicious activity."

## INTO THE WILD

WITH A QUICK SEARCH, I COULD HAVE FOUND "THE BENEFITS OF FORAGING" on the Internet, but I wanted to hear what local foragers thought of searching for wild food in southern B.C.

Because of B.C.'s rich forests and outdoorsy culture, the region is teeming with knowledgeable and kind people who have been sharing their foraging practices for some time. Alongside both Snyder and Flanjak, we have Andy MacKinnon, author of *Plants of the Pacific Northwest* and the vice president of the South Vancouver Island Mycological Society, Kyle Pearce, the founder of Spirit Quest Adventures, a meditation and nature tour company, Dr. Michelle Nelson, a Bowen Island-based scientist and author of *The Urban Homesteading Cookbook*, and Nature's Chef Tom Kral, a private holistic chef based in Sooke on Vancouver Island, on the unceded territory of the T'Sou-ke First Nation.

"Foraging is an excellent way to get to know the environment that you live in, and to better understand the seasons and what is available when in your local landscape," says Nelson. "It improves food security and self-sufficiency, and can be a great way to meet your neighbours and build community."

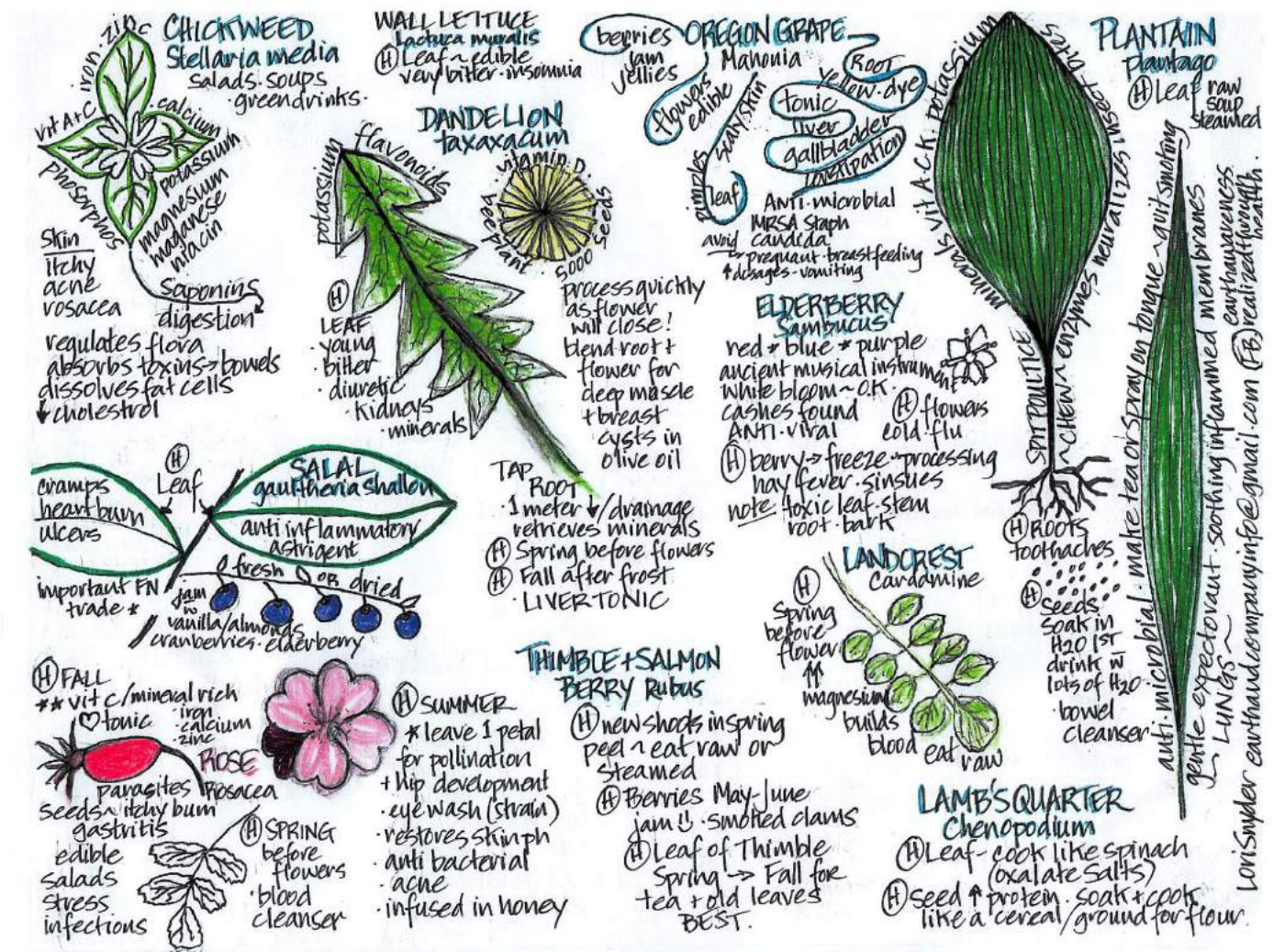
Other thoughts from the group include time spent outdoors connecting and appreciating nature (especially for those foraging in an urban setting), removing and eating invasive species, accessing nutritional and medicinal properties, and gaining access to foods that aren't often available.

Identifying the bounty that can be found in the parks, backyards, alleys and forests of B.C. can feel overwhelming, so Snyder recommends picking two or three items in your backyard or on your street that resonate with you. (See her beautiful hand-drawn lists for ideas.)

"Learn them really well and know their lookalikes. From there you can find new things on a new street, and learn them really well," Snyder says. "It's a lifelong learning process."



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## THE LAY OF THE LAND

DESPITE THE BENEFITS OF URBAN FORAGING, THERE ARE A number of complications. Indigenous land rights and sustainability are major concerns. If wild foods and medicines continue to increase in popularity, will foraging practices negatively impact plant abundance and existence as well as the Indigenous communities that rely on the plants for their cultural and medicinal purposes? Many argue that foraging already does. The simple answer for individuals who just want to harvest for themselves is to not look far from home.

"I think we should be looking in our own backyard before harvesting elsewhere," says Kral. "You would be surprised how many things are around you to use as food or medicine."

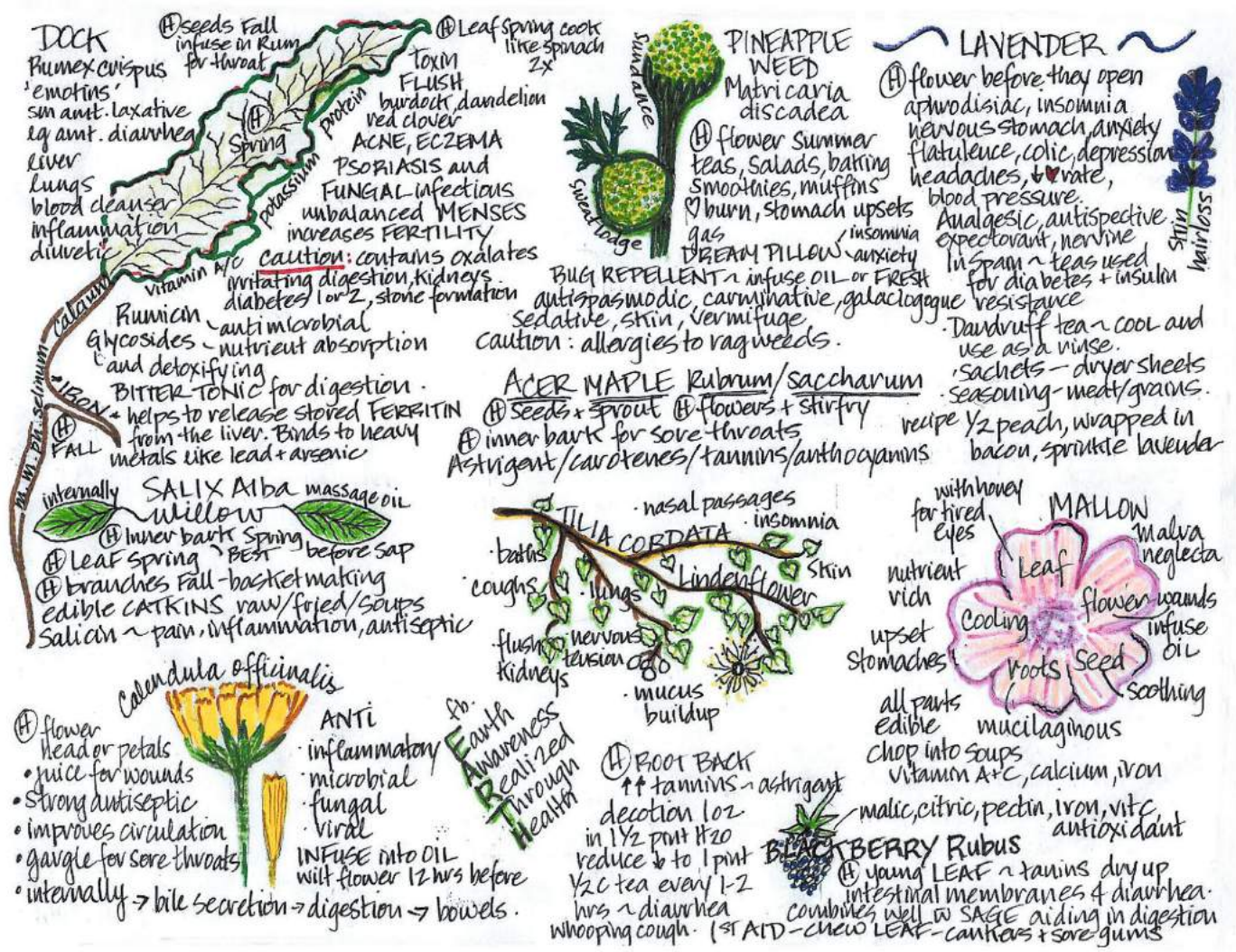
However, what about people who want to branch out of their backyard into urban parks and forests? What about businesses that profit by selling foraged goods to restaurants, grocery stores, and at markets?

Beyond sustainability, there are health implications with foraged and wildcrafted goods. "This is a really sticky situation," says Flanjak. "I've come to the realization that it is dangerously unregulated. This means any noob can pick a plant, market it as something delicious, and sell it, unidentified by an expert, to restaurants to be consumed by the masses. The way to get around this is to trust your supplier and buy from experts and First Nations people."

Again, a simple solution: if you want to forage, you must have a licence. In the interim (since that's not currently the case in B.C.) people will have to get educated, forage responsibly, and hope others do the same. "Study more," says Flanjak. "Understand ecology and the role plants and fungi play in the whole system. Learn how to harvest in ways that encourage regeneration and healthy regrowth, possibly even influencing more abundance in the future. For example, pruning wild fruit trees encourages more energy to be drawn toward the buds the following year, which means a healthier tree structure and more fruit."

There's also concern that settlers are foraging on unceded Indigenous territories under stewardship of First Nations. Currently in B.C., non-Indigenous people can't forage in provincial or regional parks, but they can harvest on Crown land (land owned by the government, though it is often unceded). Again, this situation could potentially be regulated with licensing, if the governing body was run by or largely represented with First Nations herbalists and elders. However, before that happens, the solution: ask permission.

"If, like me, you want to learn how to connect with this land, learn from, and eat from it, please ask and pay First Nations people for their expertise," says Flanjak. "Also, use Google. I know this seems ridiculous, but not everyone has time to teach you why it's racist to strip the bark from cedar if you didn't grow



ILLUSTRATIONS: LORI SNYDER

# I FISH, YOU FISH

Community Supported Fisheries reconnect consumers and fishing families to rebuild the sustainable seafood industry

By Sarah Hughes

IF THERE'S ONE THING I FEEL MOST CONFLICTED ABOUT EATING, it's seafood. My biggest guilty pleasure is built on one of the most unsustainable food industries on our blue planet. Scummy fish farms, excessive by-catch, destructive bottom trawls, inhumane shrimp—the list goes on and on.

Luckily, for people like me, there is a new solution to the problem-ridden industry. Community Supported Fisheries, or CSFs for short, offer the best way of getting my fish fix and signal the dawn of a new era for seafood.

Much like their terrestrial counterparts, CSAs that offer fresh produce from farmers on a weekly to monthly basis, CSFs are based on the direct producer-to-consumer model. The middlemen that handle the packaging, processing, and shipping are scratched from the equation. The model ensures farmers and fishing folk receive a fair price for their work and provides the capital upfront. From there, the company (or sometimes co-op) can plan for costs before the season begins. For fishermen, this usually means acquiring a licence, buying gear, and maintaining their boats. Once the season kicks off—a date that varies for each type of fish or shellfish—the fishers catch their quota, return to the docks, and hand the product to the consumer within days of the harvest.

At least, that's the simple way of looking at it. I caught Skipper Otto's owner Shaun Strobel, by chance when I walked down to Fishermen's Wharf near Granville Island one rainy afternoon in Vancouver. He and a colleague were preparing to leave on a three-week herring-fishing trip the next day. Amidst the hustle of collecting nets and tackle, finishing off paperwork, and dropping off fish to neighbouring stores on

the docks, Strobel welcomed me into the storage-space-turned-office, pulled out some folding beach chairs, and turned on two space heaters. Classic salt and pepper beard, navy crewneck sweater, and the nest of crow's feet around his blue eyes typecast him as a fisherman. Strobel spoke fast and with his hands, running through the questions, with an anecdote to illustrate each fact.

Conceived in 2008, Skipper Otto's CSF appeared on the scene the following year during one of the largest salmon crashes of the past decade. Luckily, Strobel's old man, Otto Strobel, was fishing up North and caught a decent load of sockeye, which they offered to the first 40 members who had signed up. Seven years later, they have 1,500 members and counting, mostly in Metro Vancouver.

"We're trying to set an example," Strobel says. "As an education forum, it's really working. I'm meeting people who have read more about fish, have watched *Salmon Confidential*, and are like 'Okay, I won't eat it if I don't know who caught it! That's it, I just don't trust people.' And they're kind of right to. I mean it's pretty shady out there. So in that way there are a lot of people getting fish who otherwise wouldn't."

A CSF membership varies from one company to another. At Skipper Otto's, members can join at three different stages throughout the year and pay \$100 for a share. If they want more than \$100 worth, they can buy a share multiple times. The share is a credit and the dollar cost of seafood is subtracted when members pick up from the docks or drop locations. What members get for a \$100 share depends on what they choose; if they select sidestripe shrimp and halibut, they won't take home

up doing it. If you see something that seems remarkable, chances are that it is, and you should learn about it and respect it—there will be lots of information on it somewhere," she says.

Lori Snyder adds to the conversation. "Everyone should have the opportunity to forage for food, as our ancestors once did," she says. "Just ask for permission."

## EDUCATION IS KEY

ONE OF THE BIGGEST POTENTIAL DRAWBACKS OF FORAGING: accidentally consuming something deadly. In October 2016, a three-year-old boy died after he ate a "death cap" mushroom he found in downtown Victoria, steps from a sidewalk in a residential area. It is the first recorded death in B.C. from a death cap mushroom (one of the deadliest mushrooms in the world, responsible for 90 per cent of mushroom-related deaths). The death cap is not native to B.C. and first appeared in Victoria approximately eight years ago with imported hardwoods. It is more common on boulevards than forested areas.

"There are only a handful of deadly plants and fungi that ruin the magic of wildcrafting," says Flanjak. "Don't let fear talk you out of learning." Education is key here—from municipalities, in schools, on trails, in the media, and self-directed education for individuals, training, and licensing for larger scale ops. Some suggestions from our group of pros? Focus on well-known

plants, eat small amounts, join an in-person or online group where you can ask questions, read books, study the most deadly lookalikes of what you're after, and, most importantly, don't consume unidentified plants or mushrooms.

## THE FUTURE

WITH BETTER LICENSING, POLICY CHANGE, AND EDUCATION reform, could B.C. become a North American leader in responsible foraging and wildcrafting? No doubt there's a lot of work to do. Members of Victoria's Gather, a community-based educational resource, want to lobby city council to change policy.

"We hope to form partnerships with local urban farms and community gardens that would allow foraging in mutually agreed designated spaces with appropriate safety measures in place," says Danielle Prohom Olsen, one of Gather's founders. "If we can get this accomplished then we will have more grounds—and hopefully support—to move forward in an effort to institute larger change at the government level."

After an hour or so of walking around Hinge Park, Snyder hugged me goodbye and I thought about that Margaret Mead quote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I apologize for the idealism—it's the thankful-I-moved-west vibes talking. ♦



PHOTO: SARAH HUGHES



“Our first delivery was in 2011 and we did a six-week trial run because I did not want to lose my shirt,” Larsen says with a laugh. She ran Siren for two years while working her day job at North Coast. “The first year and half was really just me and I had a Honda Civic hatchback. Me and my little car and I had a tarp and coolers and I would be the one sitting in Mission Pie handing out the fish. I did that till I was too pregnant to lift up the coolers.”

Siren grew to 1,300 members over the next six years and now has up to 50 drop locations. Working at North Coast gave Larsen a leg up in the business. She could contact her preferred fishers through North Coast’s database (those using sustainable hook-and-line methods, for example) and use the processing plant for a premium.

“Had I gone independently, like hired my own packers and got my own facility, it’s hard to know which way that would have gone,” Larsen says. “My margin would have possibly been better but there’s a lot that can go wrong with that. There’s a lot more overhead, there’s a lot of issues that can come up.”



SHAUN & SONIA STROBEL OF SKIPPER OTTO'S WITH LYNDON & OLIVER  
PHOTO: CLARE WHEELER

### DISTRIBUTION WOES

THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE LARSEN HAS FACED WHILE RUNNING Siren Fish Co. is distribution—as it is for many CSFs.

After years of buying her vegetables and meat from local CSAs, going to different places for artisan bread and probably organic wines (she lives in California, after all), Larsen had her first child. With that came a light bulb moment.

“Coming up for air, it made me realize how inconvenient it was to have to go to a separate place just for my fish,” Larsen says. “I didn’t have the bandwidth and it gave me a better understanding of how inconvenient the distribution part of the model is.”

For many people (see: middle-to-high income single folks without children) picking up fish from a drop point isn’t a big deal. Many of Siren’s members are fish savvy and the superior quality, sustainability, and story of the fish trump the inconvenience. But for those who can’t schedule around a seafood pick-up time, something’s got to give. Otherwise, they’ll

the same amount as if they chose lingcod fillets or pink salmon.

Skipper Otto’s works closely with different fishing businesses that catch a variety of seafood along the West Coast. Fishermen and families with decades of experience independently own all the boats and sell direct to Skipper Otto’s. The roster includes 15 salmon gillnetters, a halibut boat, a lingcod boat, a tuna boat, and a shrimping boat. Strobel pulled out the list on a long pad of yellow paper and showed me the names of the fishermen and women with their boat names, fishing methods, and catch regions. The relationship between Skipper Otto’s and the suppliers is tight but not tied down.

“We’ve helped line up start-up costs, or at least a licence or secure quotas,” Strobel says. If the fishers play fair and agree with the seafood pricing, Skipper Otto’s will happily keep working with them. Unlike with large industrial fishing operations, there are no binding contracts that paint small fishing ventures into corners by selling their catch at lower prices or tying them to loans for quotas.

“If you can do some side deals with some restaurants and make some extra money that’s the whole point: keep the people who are doing it right going.” Strobel raises his hands and shrugs. “We’re not changing the world here, but we’re helping the odd person.”

### SIREN SONG

ACCORDING TO LOCALCATCH.ORG, THERE ARE ABOUT 75 Community Supported Fisheries in North America. Most operate in the U.S., with only five in Canada: two on the East Coast and three in B.C. Fish enthusiast Joshua Stoll founded Localcatch.org in 2011 to connect American consumers to local fishing businesses. Using the map and list, consumers can find a nearby CSF for a fish share.

From that list, I picked Siren Fish Co. based in Santa Rosa, California. Anna Larsen, the founder and now director of Siren, met with me in her office and launched into the story of her CSF.

A trained opera singer, Larsen switched gears when she tasted success in the musical world and realized the fast-paced L.A. lifestyle wasn’t for her. She moved back to Sonoma County, where her father ran a boat in neighbouring Marin County. She applied to every food-related gig under the sun and landed at North Coast Fisheries, a large distribution hub and processing plant, and was swept away by the multi-faceted world of the seafood industry. After attending Eat Retreat, a networking conference for all-things-food, Larsen met the editor of *Edible San Francisco*, who insisted she start a CSF. She agreed.

buy their fish from the grocery store.

For the three months after her son was born, Larsen imagined a different plan. She partnered with Tara Firma Farms, a local farm in Petaluma that runs a meat and poultry CSA, and started sending out 200 weekly home deliveries of fresh fish. This only covers a portion of her members. The rest of the shipments go out frozen through another distributor once a month.

“I think it’s important to be experimental when there’s an obvious problem and there’s not an obvious solution,” says Larsen. She will keep the drop locations that members have stuck with for over five years, but she wants to nail down a solid distribution plan to cut costs and emissions.

As a newer seafood model, it’s no surprise CSF companies such as Siren Fish Co. run into problems with distribution and packaging. Many CSFs have different methods of handling deliveries and, depending on the size of the company, it can take years to smooth out the kinks. Sonia Strobel, Shaun’s wife and Skipper Otto’s co-founder, manages its 16 drop locations in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, along with shipments to Kelowna, Fort St. John, Penticton, and 10 out-of-province locations.

### TAKE THE HELM

IF YOU LIVE ON VANCOUVER ISLAND AND CAN’T WAIT TO JOIN A local CSF, you’re in luck. Cowichan Bay’s Michelle Rose CSF offers monthly shares of salmon, crab, and prawns (and at times, octopus) to members on the south Island. Owner and operator Guy Johnston sells off the fishermen’s wharves in Cowichan Bay and Sidney.

Johnston started his CSF in the early 2000s as a fallback option when his conventional fishing business was floundering. Farmer friends suggested he try the CSA model, and when he did it took off. “I was astounded that people sent me money without ever seeing me before and on a promise that I’d have salmon for them four months later,” he says.

Johnston keeps his CSF small and local, with about 150 members on the Island. With only one boat, the Michelle Rose, he and his crew venture up B.C.’s coast to Alaska to troll for salmon. They use hook-and-line for fish and trapping for prawns, two low-impact methods that earn green ratings in the Vancouver Aquarium’s Ocean Wise program.

Acutely aware of how our changing climate affects fish stocks—he’s noticed fish patterns and migration routes changing first-hand—Johnston has modified his boat to reduce fuel costs and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Simply not sending fish around the globe for processing and packaging also helps.

The fishing industry is notorious for having the most

undignified transportation system in any food trade.

Conventional modes send fish flying (literally) from one country to another to be processed and packaged. Then the fish return to the grocery counters of our local supermarkets. They often become something they’re not via mislabelling. When you buy a pack of white fish fillets, you’re playing Russian roulette with what the species it might be.

As acclaimed chef Anthony Bourdain wrote years ago in his book *Kitchen Confidential*, it’s never wise to order fish on a Monday at a restaurant. Why? The fish sitting on the bed of ice has probably been in and out of freezers since the Thursday or Friday prior. Jumping between handlers and freezers causes fish to lose its quality. If you want “fresh” fish as a fancy meal out, order it on Tuesday, when the chef has reordered the load for the week.

You will probably never buy a truly fresh fish from a supermarket or even a CSF. The freshest you will get is something you catch with your own rod, net, or hands. But CSFs are still the way to maximize the freshness of any seafood you buy.

“Traditionally, what gets frozen in the seafood business is the stuff that is about to go bad,” says Larsen of industrial seafood. “[They] freeze it so [they] don’t make a total loss.”

She adds: “The experience of eating something that’s been frozen on the day it was caught is entirely different and, if it’s done correctly, that should be the case.”

Johnston says that the fish landed on his boat goes in the freezer within hours, at -40°C, which preserves quality to near freshness. “If you fish Haida Gwaii, it’s going to be frozen product. It’s too complicated to get a fresh product down to Vancouver Island. So I think people understand that frozen is a reality and I think frozen product is really high quality.”

What CSFs like Siren, Michelle Rose, and Skipper Otto’s offer is a world beyond the concerns of frozen fish. They work closely with the people in the boats, and have re-sparked a dying connection that links seafood lovers to the seafarers who ply our oceans.

“One thing about running a CSF,” Johnston says, “is you give a real face of the fishing industry to the general public. Most people don’t know fishermen anymore.”

If the future of fish and our oceans seem dire, that’s because it is. But if you’re like me, and still crave the melt-in-your-mouth sweetness of pan-seared tuna, or a plate of grilled octopus, choosing to support local fishers who apply sustainable practices to their catch is one way of curbing the guilt and creating positive change. At least, it’s better than going vegetarian. ♦

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# THE GENTRIFICATION EFFECT

## Victoria is growing up fast. Can we balance urban food production with housing?

By Trina McDonald

### CHANGE ON THE HORIZON

ON A CLEAR MORNING, A WEEK BEFORE THE WINTER SOLSTICE, slivers of light overtake trees and distant buildings, strike the frost-covered ground, and awaken microbial life in the soil from a cold slumber. It's one of the rare mornings when Jessie Brown and Julia Ford of Mason Street Farm are not outside in the garden—it's too cold to work the soil.

From inside the old house, the 30-something-year-old farmers, with perpetually tan skin and strong hands, look out over neat rows of frigid salad greens, greenhouses, and chicken coops. Speaking about farm life, Brown lights up. "One of the things I see most in strangers is a sense of awe that this exists in the middle of the city," he says.

It's true. If not for the clang of metal and roar of machinery across the road, you could forget the city around you. By February of 2019, the machines will be gone, but so will the rays of mid-winter sunshine now warming the furthest reaches of the farm, as the ironically named BlueSky Properties development will block the light.

Buildings are rising into Victoria's skyline at an astonishing clip; new residential building permits have gone up almost 30 per cent since late 2015 and 58 per cent over the past seven years. You can see the rate of growth by glancing up from street level anywhere in downtown Victoria; the cranes and skeletons of new structures rise like towering creatures. A real-estate boom has lured large development firms that promise to improve the crisis of a 0.5 per cent vacancy rate (the lowest in the country) and serve Victoria's expected population increase of 20,000 people (above the 85,000 current residents) in the next 30 years.

Simultaneously, another kind of development is taking off in Victoria. Urban farming sites are springing up in backyards, vacant lots, and on rooftops across the city. Urban food production and affordable housing are priorities to many of Victoria's citizens and officials, but the task of balancing growth with community values is not straightforward—it happens one decision, one policy, and one relationship at a time.

North Park is one of Victoria's oldest and most diverse neighbourhoods, encompassing about a square kilometre between Cook, Blanshard, and Bay Streets and Pandora Avenue. At its heart, the section of Mason Street where the farm sits looks like a rural laneway: small, old houses and the farm on one side, a children's park and, until recently, the St. Andrews school-field on the other. The street's single direction deters traffic and emboldens cyclists and people pushing strollers and shopping carts to occupy its centre on their way downtown. BlueSky, a division of Bosa Properties, will change that ambulatory vibe. The giant crater where the school once stood will soon be occupied by a mid-rise mixed residential and

commercial building. What some see as the efficient use of space that sat empty after the school moved in 2013, others mourn as the first of many losses to come.

Over the three years between Bosa's first proposal in 2012 and the final decision in October 2015, the North Park Neighbourhood Association (NPNA) voiced significant concerns in conversations with the developers and letters to the City of Victoria. The building's single-mass lacked safe pathways and green space for the community. Houses on Mason Street and the park would be shaded out and traffic would increase along the bike- and pedestrian-friendly greenways of Mason Street and Vancouver Avenue. Bosa's revisions included lowering the Mason Street side from six to three stories and providing courtyard gardening space for residents, as well as 11 units of below market-value rental housing. Still, the NPNA did not think its concerns were adequately addressed.

At the final hearing at city hall on Oct. 8, 2015, people stood shoulder-to-shoulder. Supporters of the development in suits and neatly coiffed hair murmured and shook hands, while opponents in jeans and colourful fabrics held squirming babies, hugged each other, and hoped for the best. The room buzzed with opposing viewpoints about the neighbourhood's future. City councillors faced a difficult decision: choose a plan that many considered imperfect, or hold out for a better offer and risk the site sitting dormant. After hours of debate, and despite Mayor Helps' final comments that the land-use process was "flawed" because it failed to support council in its strategic plan to "innovate and lead" and "engage and inspire community," city council voted six to three in favour of BlueSky.

The development's potential impacts on Mason Street Farm fuelled the opposition. From Victoria's first intensive backyard chicken operation to its recently developed aquaponics system and internship program, the farm has influenced policy and opened eyes to urban farming since it opened in 1989. Mayor Helps—herself an urban food producer—and city councillors wanted to know the potential effects. Those were difficult for owner and operations manager Jessie Brown to predict. Many variables determine how a site responds to new conditions.

From shade castings, he knows large portions of the farm will be completely shaded out for a few months of the year. This has never happened before.

"The ground has always gotten sun," says Brown. The loss of light will shorten the growing season and could impact the long-term viability of the business. Unfortunately, the farm's lack of tenure or protective covenant means the landowner could sell or redevelop at any time, so the farm's fate had little influence on the final decision.

According to City of Victoria senior planner Kristina Bouris, North Park is part of the urban core, an area that will house approximately half of the 20,000 people the city plans to accommodate over the next 30 years. Bouris says the vision for the city is to bring "people into downtown, to not just visit and work, but also to live."

However, BlueSky could help displace some current residents. Regardless of how Mason Street Farm adapts to new conditions, Brown says his real concern is "gentrification." He survives on his farmer's income. "North Park is one of the last places that people can afford to live in Victoria," he says, as the wood stove battles the draft from his single-pane windows. "People who are not making \$60,000 a year or more."

"North Park is one of the last places that people can afford to live in Victoria"

Bosa's agreement to keep 198 units in the rental market for 10 years won over councillors. But for the 42 per cent of North Park residents who live below the poverty line, all 209 units (including those below market-value) will remain out of reach—as will the food growing in the courtyard garden. Neighbours spoke in favour of holding out for a development that would address housing insecurity and social issues related to the site's proximity to a planned supervised consumption site and Our Place, a drop-in centre for homeless people. "We want to help make the conditions better, as opposed to pushing people somewhere else," says Jenny Farkas of the NPNA.

Meanwhile, not everyone appreciates North Park's "gritty" character. There are different ways you can interpret what Bosa Properties senior vice president Daryl Simpson meant when he told the *Times Colonist* that the development "will act as a catalyst for the renewal of the neighbourhood." Brown believes it means property values will rise, motivating landlords, including his, to sell.



MASON STREET FARM  
PHOTOS: APRIL GARRISON

### THE FUTURE OF THE CITY

VICTORIA'S PROLIFERATING construction brings to mind science fiction writer Isaac Asimov's story about the planet Trantor. Urbanization covered the planet's surface and forced its civilization to rely on outlying planets for food. A limited land base puts Victoria in a similarly precarious situation. The many factors and viewpoints planners must consider when striking a balance between development and food make it easy to see how Trantor got it wrong.

Planning decisions centre around the Official Community Plan (OCP), updated in 2012, and 13 neighbourhood plans, 10 of which are under review. Bouris forays out of her office to hear the values and concerns of neighbourhood associations, First Nations, and stakeholders as she works on the updates. She has heard citizen support

for urban food production "loud and clear."

Even so, the OCP states, "Victoria will continue to rely on agricultural lands outside the city and the greater global food market to supply a large share of its food." Though it seems to contradict support for urban farming, underlying this statement is the agricultural protection strategy of "densification." Focusing development in the urban core, where schools, hospitals, jobs, and infrastructure like sewers and power stations already exist, preserves land. As a strategy for increasing the food supply, densifying is not enough. The rising cost of farmland, environmental impacts of industrial-scale agriculture, rampant development in farming regions, climate change's effects on global food supplies, and the aging demographic of farmers complicate things.

For the City of Victoria, concedes Bouris, "there are no easy answers."

Julia Ford suggests growing as much food as we can in the city. Besides being the nursery manager at Mason Street Farm, Ford is an Urban Farmers' Alliance member and works with the LifeCycles Fruit Tree Project. She takes a permaculture perspective and envisions the challenge as a "food system puzzle," starting in our own backyards and balconies, then moving outwards.

According to Ford, when urban food production is an afterthought—something to do if we have spare time and on land that is not currently needed—"we are continuing to put ourselves at the mercy of economic and environmental forces beyond our control."

### GROWING IN THE CITY

WHILE THE THRUST OF VICTORIA'S OCP IS TO GET FOOD FROM afield, the City has shown that it values urban agriculture. In the fall of 2015, Victoria embarked on a year-long initiative called "Growing in the City" to update and expand policies and regulations that support it. A food systems coordinator position was created, now occupied by Virginie Lavallée-Picard. She consults with the Victoria Urban Food Table, a committee that

gives direction and input on food policies. The City also set up booths at summer markets where citizens shared their visions and raised their concerns. Recommendations included: allowing small-scale commercial farming in all zones, side-walk market stands, removing height restrictions on rooftop greenhouses, and providing voluntary guidelines for boulevard gardening. The resulting amendments simplified application processes, clarified the rules, and made it easier to run an agricultural business in the city.

Though the initiative and its outcomes were generally embraced, one proposed change was not. On Sept. 8, 2016, nearly a year after the approval of BlueSky's development, many of the same folks were again lining up for the podium at city hall to speak against an amendment to the OCP's Section 17 (on food systems). The proposed amendment would make food production "subservient to the density, built form, place character and use objectives in the Official Community Plan." In Ford's correspondence with director of planning Jonathan Tinny, he explained the policy intended to clarify to urban farmers that food production is an "ancillary activity" within the urban fabric and that farms could be displaced by development. As an example, Tinny said if an established farmer objected to a taller building blocking sunlight, the onus would be on the farmer to know the zoning on adjacent properties.

Ford thought the amendment was "weird." She says, "it clearly undermines the stated intent of all of the other policies." She carefully sifted through "Growing in the City" consultation records, finding concerns about aesthetics, smell, and rodents, but none about conflicts between food and development. At the public hearing, Coun. Ben Isitt asked Tinny what had inspired the amendment. He responded that it was from conversations with and feedback from the development community. In an interview, Tinny explained that city staff hoped the change would avoid future "farm versus development" conflicts caused by confusion between OCP policies that encourage growing things and "very strong policies" in regards to urban development.

As a result of what Ford calls "a lucky catch," the mayor and council struck down the amendment, favouring a case-by-case approach to land use decisions. While the change may have mitigated conflicts by favouring development, Ford says the heavy-handed approach could have left urban farmers without recourse to debate adjacent land uses and therefore without the security to make long-term investments.

Many urban farms remain insecure due to their temporary status on lands held for future development. While Ford agrees with the use of marginal lands to grow food and applauds the creative ways it's happening in Victoria, she worries that densification has become a red herring to quickly approve building projects. Ford wants the City to slow down and "keep an open mind" about how land could be used in alternative ways, such as acts of reconciliation towards the Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ peoples, whose unceded territories it is, or to feed and house the homeless. "It's important to hold that kind of space," she says, "and not automatically and reflexively privilege development without looking at who it is for and who is benefiting."

"Ultimately," says Ford, "we are looking at the future of cities."

## THE NEXT LEVEL

THE TERM "SMALL-SCALE URBAN FOOD PRODUCTION" USED BY the City of Victoria clarifies that the conversation is not just about urban farms. Many see balcony and rooftop gardens as a viable middle ground, allowing buildings to be the primary land-use objective while simultaneously improving food security. Urban Food Table co-chair Aaren Topley says, "it is really important for us not to pit food security against development." Topley warns against the "slippery slope" of saying densification goes against Victoria's urban food production goals. "There is a way to bridge those two pieces together," he says.

The urban agriculture business Topsoil is a prime example. In 2015, a rooftop on Blanshard Street between Fort and Broughton teemed with tomatoes and salad greens headed for nearby restaurants. Topsoil owner Chris Hildreth has worked for four years to develop his scalable, mobile model. The mountain of logistical barriers required to place his containers and workers on the roof (engineering certifications, WorkSafeBC permits, insurance, and municipal approval) would have scared off many developers, but Hildreth found early support in the Jane and Suzanne Bradbury of Fort Properties. They emphasize health and sustainability and were excited to help him bring his trial garden to life.

"We are looking at the future of cities"

In 2016, Topsoil began its first official year of operation in a temporarily unused gravel lot on the Dockside Green development in Vic West. Topsoil grew over 7,000 pounds of produce for three restaurants. With that lot now under development, Hildreth negotiated a new space with Dockside, where he envisions growing 100,000 pounds of produce over the next two years. "We are going to take it to the next level," he says.

Topsoil models how developers and food producers can work together. According to a 2010 University of Victoria study published in *Making Food Matter*, Vancouver Island needs around 350,000 hectares (a hectare is a similar size to a football field) more farmland than is held in the Agricultural Land Reserve to feed the current population with a vegetarian diet. Hildreth believes farms on gravel lots and rooftops are a viable solution that could rival what Victoria gets from California.

## WHERE URBAN FARMING FITS IN

ARGUABLY, ROOFTOP GARDENS WILL NOT MAKE GROUND-LEVEL urban farming obsolete. There's more at stake than salad greens. The Urban Farmers' Alliance represents some of Victoria's more visible urban farms: Mother Felker Farms, City Harvest Co-operative, Donald St. Farm, and Mason Street. Their food is available at local restaurants, through CSA's and box programs, at market stalls, and, as a result of a new Victoria bylaw, it will soon be sold at urban farm stands.

Julia Ford says the alliance was formed to share marketing resources and provide a cohesive voice. She has heard the

argument that the amount of food provided by these sites will never feed us all. "No one is arguing this," she says. While Ford advocates for urban food production to build a more resilient food system, she adds, "there are social, environmental, and spiritual benefits that come with that."

The central focus of Mason Street and other local urban farms is education, fulfilling an OCP goal of providing the skills, knowledge, and resources people need to grow their own food. School groups and tours come through the hand-made bicycle-rim gate and a steady stream of people use the farm for less formal learning opportunities.

The therapeutic benefits of urban farms like Mason Street are more challenging to articulate to policy makers. When citizens say they walk down Mason Street because they like the way the farm smells, Jessie Brown tells them it's the microbial life in the soil. Government workers show up on their lunch hour to flip compost, "just to get that release and to be doing something natural." While parks have some of those benefits, Brown says that "this is basically a park that produces and people can interact with."

If we're talking quantity of celery sticks, urban farms could be replaced by rooftop gardens. But Brown doesn't think "the average Joe is going to have the ability to grow food on a rooftop." It's difficult and expensive to transport soil, tools, and water to a spot that might suffer from an excess of sunlight. "It's such a harsh environment," he says.

By contrast, the accessibility of urban farms and community gardens encourages city dwellers to learn about growing food. As densification and gentrification threaten urban farmers who don't own their land, stakeholders are looking for other solutions.

## BUILDING SOIL AND RELATIONSHIPS

TAKE YOUR BICYCLE ON THE FERRY AND HEAD ACROSS THE Salish Sea. The SkyTrain zips you and your ride into Vancouver, where you can link up with bike routes into urban neighbourhoods. You will soon come across a community garden, with hand-painted signs, homemade benches, and trellised peas and raspberries. At last count, Vancouver boasts 120 community gardens, 50 per cent on city-owned lands. (Victoria has six community gardens and two orchards.) Many were a direct result of Vancouver's 2013 Food Strategy, which aims to increase food assets by 50 per cent for 2020. The strategy includes community gardens and orchards, community kitchens, and compost centres, along with supporting organizations to run them. By fall 2016, Vancouver reached a 42 per cent increase in assets and earned a Milan Pact Award, which supports cities' efforts to strengthen urban food systems. "There is a lot of momentum," says Vancouver social planner James O'Neill.

Victoria has followed the big city's lead and borrowed Vancouver's boulevard gardening guidelines, releasing an inventory of city-owned land that can be used for food production. Still, there is more to gain, such as Vancouver's efforts to bridge ethno-cultural gaps in the food movement through engagement and grants to cultural organizations that work on food issues. The Vancouver Park Board has enabled the strategy's success by allowing food-related uses in city parks. So far, Victoria has not shown the political will to have more than what Coun. Ben Isitt calls "a smattering" of edible



plants in parks. He hopes to see support for this action in the soon-to-be-released Parks Master Plan.

Further abroad, the urban food movement received a boost in 2016 when three organizations based in London, Oslo, and Stockholm donated a total of US\$8.7 million to form the EAT Foundation, which lobbies policymakers to transform the global food system. EAT held a conference on urban food systems at the UN General Assembly last September. Organizers offered examples such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, which Vancouver signed on to, as well as strong procurement and distribution policies to support urban agriculture.

Urban farming is about more than digging in the dirt; it requires a vision and constant policy tweaking to get it right. Vancouver has learned that if you build community gardens, you still need people with skills and leadership to fill them. That's where farmers like Ford and Brown come in. The hours they spend nurturing their gardens and communities make them the true assets of the movement. As developers race to cash in on gentrification and densification, Ford and Brown's bottom lines include maintaining our delicate relationship with the land, reconciling with First Nations, and feeding and housing a growing number of people in need. And they need as much support from the City as they can get.

People often ask Brown why farmers want special treatment. He tells them to consider where we'd be if produce was sold at its true cost and then replies: "Honestly, it's because we are special."

A late start to Victoria's spring hasn't held back Mason Street's farmers. In February, Brown and Ford are prepping beds and making plans. It's still possible, as Mayor Helps suggested at the BlueSky public hearing, for the community to form a land trust, raise funds to buy the farm, and turn it into the community "hub" that Brown envisions—where people walk over with wheelbarrows to pick up mulch and chat about the weather.

Or the owner could sell to a developer, as many others are doing. Despite an uncertain future for farming in the North Park neighbourhood, Brown and Ford continue to plant seeds. ♦

# Contain Yourself

Freight container farms are popping up in cities around the world. Are they the best bet for food security in all climates?

BY QUINN MACDONALD

ON FAIR VANCOUVER ISLE, WE OFTEN BRAG ABOUT FARMING and golfing year-round. But that gloating came back to bite us this year. It was a long, hard winter on the West Coast—at least by West Coast standards. According to a March 22 *Check News* article, Victoria averaged 2.7°C, two degrees below the 4.6°C average and the ninth coldest winter on record. The prolonged frozen ground killed crops and meant a late start for planting.

The winter weather caused trouble for regions more acclimated to the cold, too. While the Island's three-day supply of food is a much-discussed concern, the same is true for rural B.C. communities. When severe weather closed highways, cutting the Lower Mainland off from the rest of the province, it only took a day for grocery stores in places like Prince George and Terrace to run low on produce. Meanwhile, a recent blizzard in Manitoba isolated the northern town of Churchill for a week, creating a mini food crisis.

A solution is popping up in towns and cities around the continent: a two-acre farm inside a converted shipping container. Several companies now deliver the custom container growing set-ups to farming entrepreneurs, along with a business plan and access to a supportive community.

The first container farm in B.C. touched down in Brentwood Bay. Tamara Knott purchased a “Leafy Green Machine” (LGM) from Boston-based Freight Farms last summer, and founded Bright Green Farms.

Originally from Edmonton, Knott has lived in Victoria for 15 years with her husband and two children, a daughter, 19, and a son, 11. With short, tightly curled brown hair and a ready laugh, she often emphasizes her points by doubling up her adjectives. She is really, really happy with how the first eight months have gone. “Every day, it’s just a little miracle,” says Knott about watching the plants grow. “It feels good to know that people are enjoying what we’re growing and that they value it and what we’re doing is worthwhile.”

## A DAY IN THE FARM

INSIDE THE CONTAINER, THE LOW-ENERGY LED LIGHTS RUN for 18 hours a day, starting at two or three p.m. and turning off around the same time as Knott arrives in the morning. Two days a week, she transplants 400 seedlings and then plants their replacements into moulded peat moss plugs. The seeds come “pelleted” in clay, which primes them and increases the germination to Knott’s current rate of nearly 100 per cent.

Wednesdays though Fridays are spent preparing orders for restaurants. Her current roster includes Brentwood Bay Resort, Truffles Catering, Artisan Bistro, Part and Parcel, Marina Restaurant, Sooke Harbour House, and Saveur. Bagged salad mixes go to nearby Carnivore Meats & More so customers can “grab some greens” to round out their meal. Restaurants often keep the lettuce heads still rooted in the plug so they stay fresh

even longer. Any discarded plugs and root systems feed the resident chickens.

Leafy greens and delicate cool-weather crops do best with container technology. Knott currently grows Tuscan kale, flat-leaf parsley, and six to eight different types of specialty lettuce. To add variety, Knott converted the suite in her house into a second indoor growing location. This warmer and less humid spot works better for basil and microgreens. “It’s nice to have something different for customers every week,” she says.

Besides the restaurants, Bright Green Farms also participates in the Esquimalt Farmers’ Market and has farm-share customers—a segment she hopes to grow for the next year.

## ALL THE RIGHT TECH

KNOTT HAS A BACKGROUND IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, BUT didn’t want to return to a desk job after some time off. “At my age, it’s not a healthy thing to be sitting for 14 hours a day,” says Knott. She gardened when she was growing up and knew there was a strong market for her fresh produce in the Victoria area. “It came together in terms of all the things that I enjoy,” she says. “I love technology as well, and of course you can see this thing is full of gadgets and computers and neat stuff. For me, it was a really good fit.”

Knott explains how the Leafy Green Machine works as she deftly moves around inside the 40’ x 8’ x 9.5’ space. The smaller area near the door has shelves and a workstation, while the rest houses 265 hanging towers of greens. A long walkway runs down the middle. Recirculating pumps pass water sensors from each of the tanks, which check the pH, temperature, and nutrient levels. Below the main counter, the seedling tray has its own tank, which floods the tray every eight hours. The 550-litre main water tank sits underneath the “farm.” For 15 minutes every hour and a half, it pumps water to the top of the towers, which then runs down the inside, through the peat moss plugs, and into the gutters, where it gets filtered back into the tank. This system waters all 7,000 plants with only 38 litres per day, about 90 per cent less than would be needed for the same amount in a field setting. This efficiency makes container farming a good choice for areas where fresh water is scarce.

The towers unhook and slide to allow for quick planting and seeding. The main controller, or “brain,” is mounted on the wall by the door and controls the settings for irrigation, lighting, and climate; the container is cooled by an air conditioner. The LGM is web-enabled, so Knott can check and change the settings from anywhere via her smartphone—a handy option when windstorms knock out power on the peninsula. If that does happen, the plants are well watered and safe for a day or so inside the insulated container. The high-tech connectivity extends to the four high-quality Bluetooth speakers, through which Knott listens to TED Talks while she works.

Bright Green Farms’ seeds and imports are all organic and don’t need any chemical pesticides or herbicides. Knott cleans the inside of the LGM with vinegar and hydrogen peroxide. Despite this process, Bright Green Farms cannot be certified organic in Canada, since it’s a hydroponic grower. “There’s a whole bunch of politics around that and I was just not going there,” says Knott, who says it doesn’t matter to her customers, many of whom have visited her set-up. “I know what I’m growing and how I’m growing it, and we’re really satisfied with that and know it’s safe.”

While all this technology may seem intimidating, Knott says it’s pretty easy to use and comes with an active support network. Beyond a manual, new freight farmers fly to Boston for training. Then someone from headquarters comes to help them launch when the container is delivered, staying until the freight farmer feels comfortable. “Plus, they’re only a text or an email away,” says Knott. “We have ongoing support and they’re always checking in on us. With online forums and places we can go for information and support, it was a really, really good process.”

## COLD-WEATHER CONNECTION

ALONG WITH FREIGHT FARMS, THERE IS BRAMPTON, Ontario-based Modular Farms, Atlanta’s Pod Ponics, and Vertical Harvest Hydroponics, located in balmy Anchorage, Alaska. Vertical Harvest Hydroponics describes its “Containerized Growing Systems” as “arctic ready.” According to its website, the Vertical Harvest founders were inspired to create the business after finding a \$18 head of lettuce in Resolute Bay, Nunavut, in 2011: “At VHH, we are all about creating a designing smart farming opportunities for the North and remote areas.”

Knott has her own Arctic connection. After grad school, Knott worked as an economic development manager in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut. She met her husband, who was working as an accountant in Yellowknife, when he got stormed into the Inlet. “He’s my souvenir,” she says with a laugh. “It’s a very harsh place to live,” she continues, her tone turning serious. “Socially and climactically, it’s very challenging, but great to learn about.”

Knott says she and her husband experienced something similar to B.C.’s stranded highway situation—except long-term—when they had to wait for the Mackenzie River to thaw in the spring or freeze in the fall. “We’d have very, very little fresh produce, or it would have to be flown in, which is a tremendous expense, and also extremely wasteful,” says Knott. “A lot of northern communities would definitely benefit from this.”

Knott doesn’t think her model would work for entrepreneurs in remote locations, because of the steep energy costs that come with using diesel, but could be a way for hamlets and towns to supply their residents. Alternatively, container farming in cities

like Yellowknife and Whitehorse could ship to the surrounding regions for cheaper than it would be to fly fresh vegetables from the south.

And how did the Leafy Green Machine do with Victoria’s comparatively-mild-but-still-cold winter? “It pretty much ran as normal. It’s very well insulated because these are refrigerator containers,” says Knott. She again points to the Freight Farm network and says she talks to other owners in much colder areas of Canada and the United States. “So far we’re the only ones in B.C. with this technology, but I see that it has tremendous potential. I’d love to see more,” say Knott.



PHOTOS: APRIL GARRISON

“I think here on Vancouver Island, more indoor hydroponic farming would really only displace off-Island imports,” Knott continues. “It ends up being a much healthier and fresher product with a lot less waste.” She mentions the clear plastic clamshells of greens from California. “[You] bring them home and it’s half slimy in the middle already and have to huck it out, and whether or not you huck it out in the garbage or in the green bin, it’s still so wasteful.”

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## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

WITH THE TWO LOCATIONS, BRIGHT GREEN FARMS MAKES UP A FULL-TIME JOB FOR Knott, though her husband occasionally helps with the seeding. While she says she's found demand for more product, she's reluctant to add another farm as she would need to hire someone—landing her back at a desk doing payroll and admin work. “We're going to run for another six months and see what our next step is going to be,” she says.

If Knott did want to expand, the decision might come down to where the second container could go. Bright Green Farms sits on a friend's 30-acre property off West Saanich Road in Brentwood Bay. Since the property is within the ALR, it was easy to set up and the LGM counts as a farm building (like a greenhouse). But this wasn't her first choice. Knott first approached Victoria and then Saanich, but ran up against restrictive municipal rules and regulations.

Knott would have had to spend \$6,000 to bring a specialist engineer from Vancouver to provide the District of Saanich with letters of assurance certifying the container. She decided it wasn't worth the cost.

“For example, we have a door, it has a door knob, and hinges, and it works like a door, so they wanted engineer letters for that,” says Knott. Officials also needed to know if it had sufficient air changes, to keep people from suffocating—it does 22 air changes an hour and there are 7,000 plants pumping out oxygen—and they wanted it certified for wind and snow load. “They're engineered to be stacked nine high on barges in heavy seas, fully loaded with heavy stuff,” she says. “So yeah, I don't think there's anything Victoria could throw at it that it's going to notice.”

According to City of Victoria foods systems coordinator Virginie Lavallée-Picard, shipping-container farms would need to follow the Zoning Regulation Bylaw. If the chosen zone did not allow for the shipping container, farmers would need to work with development services to find a solution, such as a variance or rezoning.

Farmers would also need permits. A building permit for constructing or installing anything over 10 square metres. An electrical permit to install, alter, repair, or maintain electrical equipment. A plumbing permit to construct, extend, or repair any plumbing system, or to connect to any sewer system. (Knott claims all she needs to set up somewhere is “a plug-in and a hose.”) And, of course, a sign permit to install permanent or temporary signs over 0.185 square metres or two square feet.

Oh, and those looking to sell their products will need a business licence for on- and off-site sales. Despite the City's support for small-scale food production, Lavallée-Picard says there are no plans to change the regulations because of the small lot sizes and the possible impacts on neighbours.

Knott says the newness of the technology is a challenge for Canadian municipalities. She was surprised by Victoria's red tape as she had always considered the city pro-food and farming.

“They're quite happy to sell residents \$100 business licences to sell some peas or whatever in a little stand in front of their house in James Bay, but really, honestly, this is proven technology,” she says. “You go to Boston and they've got them tucked on the cement under underpasses, all kinds of those unproductive spots, and you can turn it into two acres of land and farm it. So easy, so simple.” ♦

# Mowing it Over

Turf the grass for your very own produce aisle

BY ALEX HARNED AND MICHAEL FRASER

STARTING A VEGETABLE GARDEN IN VICTORIA CAN BE A SIMPLE and rewarding practice. Given our temperate climate and high annual precipitation rates (we live in a rainforest, after all), bundles of hardy spinach and kale, crisp rainbow carrots, and brassicas can be grown year round. Curate your own favourite selection of fresh veggies while offsetting your carbon footprint. Provided you follow a few simple steps, you'll have no trouble cultivating a small but important vegetable oasis.

## GARDEN DESIGN

YOUR GARDEN'S DESIGN WILL BE DETERMINED BY AVAILABLE space, access to materials (e.g., recycled cardboard), and light. Although this list is not exhaustive, there are three main designs common to urban gardens: sheet mulching, hugelkultur, and raised beds. Using one or a combination of these styles will let you plant veggie crops immediately.

## SHEET MULCHING

ONCE YOU'VE FOUND A PLOT FOR YOUR GARDEN, SHEET mulching can suppress pesky grass. Imagine a soil-based lasagne comprised of cardboard, compost, all sorts of micro-organisms and fungi, and leafy mulch (save those bags from the fall!). Start by spreading a layer of manure or compost directly onto the grass, followed by a layer of wet cardboard. Finally, add another layer of leafy mulch followed by a layer of soil.

By the next year, the grass and cardboard will have decomposed into a rich base for your garden. But don't wait until then to plant your veggies—start right away! A single afternoon of sheet mulching will transform your front lawn into a bountiful source of food for your family and friends.

## HUGELKULTUR

THIS LONGER-TERM PROJECT CONSISTS OF BURYING LOGS OR cuts of untreated wood beneath a thin layer of soil and compost to form a mound that will build up microbial life. You can start this multi-year process over a weekend. Plant your veggies immediately to help combat erosion.

## RAISED BEDS

THE MOST MANAGEABLE OPTION FOR BEGINNERS, THE RAISED bed will line the perimeter of your garden plot and sheet mulching will form the base. There are a number of ways to cobble a box together. Get creative and choose a geometric shape that fits your space and taste. Pick up a set of cedar planks from your local hardware store and join each corner with a brace. Alternative materials include driftwood from the beach, bricks, stones, cinder blocks, or untreated wood. The process should only take two to three hours.

## THE TRANSFORMATION

THERE'S NO REASON TO SHY AWAY FROM FRONT YARD OR boulevard gardening. A highly visible front yard garden contributes to your community's sense of food security and literacy, and may even encourage your neighbours to start their own. Local permaculturist and ethnobotanist Hannah Roessler suggests going one step further to partner with neighbours. Vegetables such as zucchini yield large crops. “You only need a few plants to feed several households, so think about how you can share the fruits of your labour,” says Roessler. Whether you are starting a garden or have been at it for a while, the three key elements to success are light, soil, and irrigation.

## LIGHT

THE BEST LOCATION FOR YOUR GARDEN IS ALMOST WHOLLY determined by sunlight. Does your prospective plot receive morning, afternoon, or evening light? Most vegetables require at least six to eight hours of direct sunlight per day. Although plants like mint, thyme, oregano, and kale can thrive in limited light, it's best to seek out the sunniest location when staking your plot. Too much shade can lead to less produce and increased susceptibility to pests. Plants eat light, after all.

## SOIL

KNOWING YOUR SOIL WILL INCREASE YOUR GARDEN'S YIELD AND make it resilient to pests. Most vegetables thrive in well-drained soil rich in organic matter such as compost or peat moss. Kayla Siefried, education coordinator for the Compost Education Centre, says the best way to know your soil is to “feel it, smell it, dig in it, explore it! Learn about soil texture, nutrients, and how to improve your soil quality.” The CEC provides workshops, a free assessment of heavy-metal content, and remediation options for unhealthy soil.

Introducing plants such as sunflowers to absorb heavy metals and fungi such as oyster mushrooms to break down petroleum products are common remediation methods. You can source soil from large delivery companies like MacNutt Enterprises or work to feed your own. For the latter, try vermicomposting with red wigglers, compost teas, and backyard composting. Ask around at a local farmers' market for seasonally available compost and mushroom manure to build up and enrich your soil. If that fails, a number of companies in town deliver garden soil for a modest price.



## IRRIGATION

THE AMOUNT OF WATER YOUR GARDEN WILL RECEIVE VARIES seasonally. Most vegetables aren't drought tolerant (although native berries tend to be), so you'll need to give them a drink during dry spells. Get close to your garden. Stick your hand in the soil to see how dry or moist it feels, and to what depth. Long, deep watering is better than short and shallow and rainwater's always best. Make watering easier by keeping your hose or rain barrel close to your garden.

## PLANTING

### WHAT

WHAT YOU GROW SHOULD REFLECT YOUR TASTES. START SIMPLE and sow kale, chard, snap peas, spinach, and beans. Barefoot Organics farmer Derek Powell recommends growing veggies that excite you while developing a “gardener’s language” and learning how the plants’ characteristics suit your needs.

Save for their leafy tops, carrots, radishes, and beets produce only once, and require successive re-plantings, while tomatoes, kale, peppers, and squash (and their flowers!) provide throughout the growing season. For local organic seeds sources, Ravensong Seeds, Full Circle Seeds, Omega Blue Farms, Brothernature are all great places to start. The Compost Education Centre, Mason Street Farm, and local farmers’ markets host plant sales throughout the growing season.

### WHEN

GREATER VICTORIA HAS A RANGE OF MICROCLIMATES, SO you need to gauge not only your garden’s “zone,” but also the seasonal conditions in your region of the city. Victoria is almost uniformly in Zone 9, given temperatures rarely exceed 19 to 30°C in the summer or drop below -7 to -1°C in the winter. Most seed packages will indicate which zone works best.

During the spring, summer, and fall, you can sow most seeds directly into the soil. However, some seeds will need encouragement to germinate. They will thrive in a sunny windowsill in an egg carton doubling as a seed tray or a half-cut

pop bottle acting as a greenhouse. Don’t forget to mist your seedlings on a daily basis. Transplant seed starts outside after the last frost. This window of opportunity varies, but tends to coincide with spring’s first cherry blossoms.

### HOW

HOWEVER YOU MAP YOUR GARDENING PLANS, KEEP NOTES IN a journal. “[I] still look back at them to remind myself when I planted things,” says Roessler, “how much and of what variety I liked at the time.” Understanding the basic needs of your favourite veggies will help you plan the ideal conditions for them to thrive.

There are two main approaches to planting. The first is “row planting,” which produces a higher yield in the short term but leaves gardens more vulnerable to pests. This approach also requires rotating crops so as not to deplete the soil of nutrients and minerals. The second, more ecologically responsible method is “companion planting.” Over time, this method requires less work: you won’t have to replenish your soil’s nutrients as frequently and you will attract more beneficial insects and pollinators.

Derek Powell encourages everyone “to plant vibrant flowers for butterflies, bees and, of course, for yourself.” If you encounter unforeseen challenges or frustrations, spark up a conversation at your local farmers’ market. Remember that gardening is a labour of love with immeasurable benefits for you and your community. ♦

## Material List

- Spade (can source used): \$3-20
- Trowel (can source used): \$3-20
- Basket to move mulch or soil: consult local thrift store

Specific costs for a 4x4’ bed:

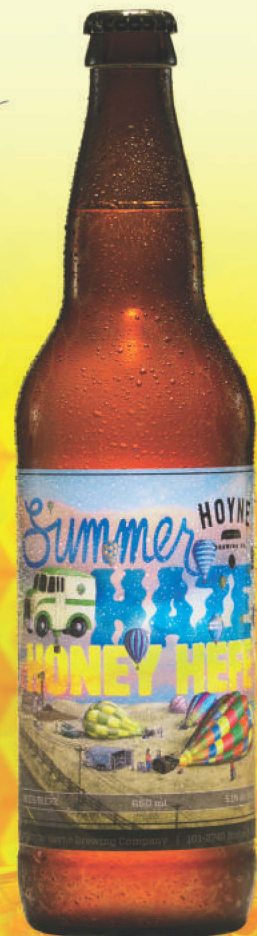
- Two 1x8’ cedar planks: \$39.00
- 3 feet of 1x1 pine stakes, cut into four pieces for corner braces: \$13.00

Seed Suppliers:

- Ravensong Seeds
- Full Circle Seeds
- Omega Blue Farms
- Brothernature
- Salt Spring Seeds

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WHERE: 3295 COMPTON RD, VICTORIA  
WHO: ANN AND GORD BAIRD

NESTLED ATOP A WINDING DRIVEWAY IN THE Highlands, Eco-Sense feels worlds away from the LEED-rated modern buildings of downtown Victoria. The 7.5-acre lot features nature as the primary architect, with a home, workshop, eco-hut, and gardens all constructed from natural materials. Eco-Sense was the first residence in the world to be rated under the Living Building Challenge program—the world’s most rigorous performance standard for buildings.

Just over 10 years ago, Ann and Gord Baird set out to build a home that was regenerative to the land. The couple wrote out their proposed plans and consulted multiple municipalities in search of farmland.

“Our goal was to live and build reflecting our values, which is difficult these days because how do you break out of the system, right?” says Ann. They ended up with damaged land previously owned by a junk collector. Scotch broom, ivy, and Himalayan blackberries had taken over and the whole lot was situated on a giant rock.

Despite these challenges, the Bairds designed and built a cob home that uses 90 per cent less electricity and water than the average home. “What we’ve learned is that you can’t impose your own ideas on the land,” says Ann. “The land tells you what you can and can’t do.”

In October 2010, Eco-Sense received Petal Certification under the Living Building Challenge. The rating system focuses on making sure the built environment is regenerative not destructive to the surrounding ecosystems. Eco-Sense met the strict regulations and received Petal recognition for four categories: site, water, health, and beauty.

Built entirely of non-toxic and natural materials, Eco-Sense features solar energy, composting toilets, grey water recycling, rainwater harvesting, living roofs, and solar thermal hot water. The Bairds chose cob for its suitability to the south Island climate, inexpensiveness, and structural stability. The home embodies a modern and affordable vision of earthen architecture.

Eco-Sense is heated by a highly efficient wood gasifier. It ties in with the solar thermal hot water to act as a combination system



to warm the space and the in-floor heating and also provides domestic hot water. In the summer, the excess heat filters into a solar dryer that dries fruits and vegetables. The composting toilets are highly efficient and productive. After a two-year composting cycle, all the materials can be used in the gardens.

The home has all wood countertops and recycled earthen features, staying away from the “red list” of toxic materials the Living Building Challenge outlaws such as mercury and cadmium. “Our home is a lot of high-tech things mixed with mud,” says Ann. “Our home could last over 500 years if the roof is maintained.”

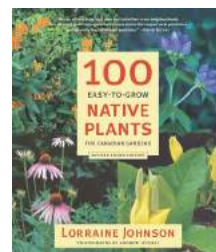
Although Eco-Sense did not earn Petals in the energy and material category, it achieved net-zero energy, producing all of its own electricity. Petal certification requires that structures be built out of 100 per cent recycled material. Eco-sense fulfills this—with the exception of wood features—which were 90 per cent sustainable.

Along with building a home to suit its environment, Ann and Gord have protected much of the site with a covenant. They have kept their impact to areas that were already damaged while simultaneously regenerating them. They produce all of the fruits and vegetables they consume and their plant nursery is open to the public in the spring and summer.

“It’s amazing how much food we can produce on a rock,” says Ann. “There is a way of fulfilling our needs while still enhancing the natural ecosystem.”

Eco-Sense shows the potential for modern technology and nature to exist as one. “Everything we’ve done here can be done in a city,” says Gord. “Use what suits and preserves the environments you are in.”

— SHAYNA KUFFERT

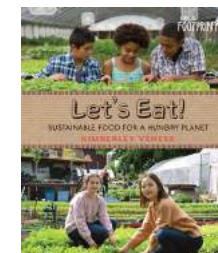


100 EASY TO GROW NATIVE PLANTS FOR CANADIAN GARDENS BY LORRAINE JOHNSON DOUGLAS & MACINTYRE

AS LORRAINE JOHNSON NOTES IN HER INTRODUCTION TO this revised third edition, interest in native plants has grown significantly since *100 Easy-to-Grow Plants* was first published in 1997. Not only are native plants better for the surrounding ecosystem, they’re also less work and more resilient to drought and pests. This book helps those looking to learn about their local environment and those who want to restore native habitats in their backyards and beyond. You’ll discover how to maintain native plants, what to plant with them, what they do for wildlife, and other “miscellany.”

The only drawback is that it’s a bit too broad geographically to be useful for local gardeners and the content feels weighted more to the Northeast. But readers can treat it like any good book: take what you need, and then pass it on.

— QUINN MACDONALD



LET'S EAT! SUSTAINABLE FOOD FOR A HUNGRY PLANET BY KIMBERLEY VENESS ORCA BOOK PUBLISHING

OUR GLOBAL FOOD SYSTEM IS NOTHING IF NOT COMPLICATED. When kids ask where their food comes from, most parents may find themselves at a loss. Luckily, *Concrete Garden*-alum Kimberley Veness is here to help with her authorial debut, *Let's Eat! Sustainable Food for a Hungry Planet*, published by the Orca Footprints series for young readers.

Veness draws on her experience as a small-scale homesteader and a stint as a farm kid in Saskatchewan as she tells the story of our food, including a brief history of industrial, large-scale agriculture, raising livestock, organic gardening and permaculture, urban agriculture, and some future innovations like lab-grown beef. This book is packed with great photos, fun farming facts, tips to eat more sustainably, and ideas for projects such as how to set up a kid-sized food truck.

## Plugged in to Farming

FOOD GROWERS HAVE LONG RELIED ON THE STEADINESS OF THE Farmer’s Almanac as a guide through changes in climate and technique, but the times they are a-changin’. Nowadays there are many new information sources, tech innovations, and tools. Here are a few we’re excited about.

The Female Farmer Project is a multi-platform documentary project that chronicles the fastest growing demographic in agriculture: the female farmer. Run out of the Pacific Northwest by Audra Mulkern, the project covers women around the world and has added a podcast. Only two episodes in, it has featured ranchers and Indigenous farmers and tackled non-traditional financing models like crowdfunding. Learn more at [www.femalefarmerproject.org](http://www.femalefarmerproject.org).

Backyard growing welcomes the arrival of agricultural robots with the FarmBot Genesis, the first open-source CNC (computer numerical control) farming machine. Attach the lightweight frame to the box of a raised bed and control the Genesis with a smartphone app, signalling the machine to plant, seed, water, and weed by automatically moving its arm to complete the tasks. You can buy a preassembled FarmBot for US\$3,100, but since it’s an open source project, users can access data files to build one with their own materials at no cost. The platform provides access to a community of FarmBot users who support one another to make their own systems. Add modifications including a weather vane, solar panels, rain catchment system, or even grow light. Learn more at <http://farmbot.io/>.



If you’ve decided to take on urban beekeeping this year, the handy Beetight (beeta!) app could be a bee saver. This free web application for beekeepers is the best way to manage your hives and track them online or on your phone. All hive types are supported (including Langstroth, WBC, Beehaus, National, and Warre). Keep records of your apiaries (including a map), colony inspections, harvested honey, and catalogue your hives as needed. Visit [www.beetight.com](http://www.beetight.com).

Finally, the Canadian Forest Service has gone digital with the My Tree app, a useful tool for exploring urban forests in your community. The app uses your location to identify climate hardiness zones and then suggests trees species that might work well in your yard or garden. It is free and available for iOS and Android.



— DIANDRA OLIVER



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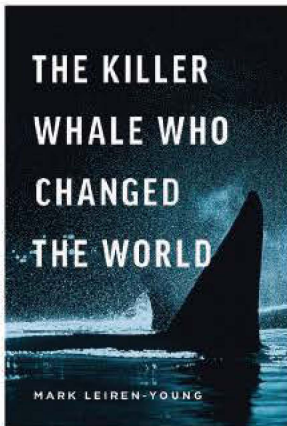
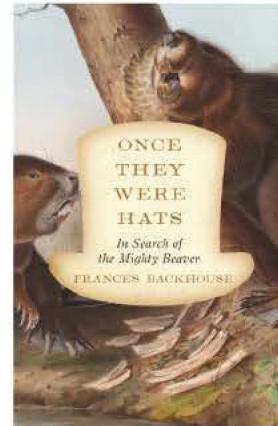


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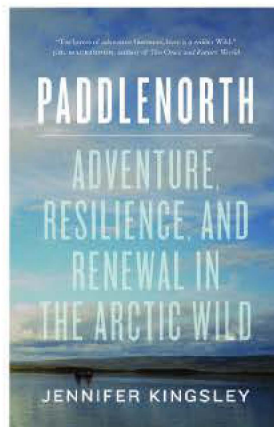
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