

Urban Agriculture from the Fringe: Pursuing a Greener Toronto

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Executive Summary

Urban agriculture is the growing and raising of plants and animals in and around cities (RAUF, 2010). The practice is increasing globally in reaction to swelling urban populations, individual and social health needs, economic opportunities, and current global ecological stressors (RAUF, 2010; Rees, 1997). Impediments to urban agriculture include: buy in from city officials and residents; lack of available funding; poor soils; and a lack of space (Kaufman and Bailey, 2000; Leshner, 2006). The forms urban agriculture include city farms, community gardens, allotment gardens, vertical farms, and guerilla gardening.

This report examines how to improve the opportunity for urban agriculture in the City of Toronto. Guerilla gardening activities in the City of Toronto are used as the report's case study. Guerilla gardening in Toronto is contrasted with the activities of the City of Toronto promoting urban agriculture. The two activities are contrasted using a devised analytical tool, based on four main ideas. The first has had a long-standing relationship with urban planning and the other three are emerging ideas in urban planning. The four ideas informing the analytical tool are:

Anarchy: a philosophy that removes authoritarian forms of social organization and replaces them with self-managed, non-hierarchical forms (Ward, 2004).

Non-Equilibrium Ecology Paradigm: it states ecological systems are open and that human thoughts and actions play a significant role as participants in the ecosystem (Pickett et al., 2004).

Phenomenology: "...a philosophical tradition that takes as its starting point the phenomena of the lived-world of immediate experience, and then seeks to clarify these in a rigorous way by careful observation and description" (Relph, 1976).

Organic Urban Design: the theory focuses, "...less upon the specification of a final form through schematic planning, and more upon the stepwise process by which a form might emerge from the evolutionary actions of a group of collaborators" (Mehaffy, 2008).

A triangulated methodology was used in this report to gain an in depth understanding of pertinent information. The analytical tool was devised through a literature review of relevant theories. The urban agricultural and guerilla gardening context was also built using a literature review. The case study included six semi-structured interviews, a review of literature, and a review of policy documents.

Findings illustrated that the guerilla gardeners and the City Programs share a common purpose to improve the urban ecology of Toronto through enhancing stewardship opportunities. Both used volunteerism, looked to improve the aesthetic qualities of the city, used a piecemeal design approach, were based upon ethical considerations and had common concerns to improve community participation. The greatest differences were that the guerilla gardeners did not look for permission to act upon their desire and thus could act with greater spontaneity. Other points that were found were guerilla gardeners were self-financed and that they reported a significant feeling of community and connection to nature through their work. Other findings from the interviews were a reported distrust of the City and a feeling that the City's efforts were insufficient to the needs of the City residents by guerilla gardeners. This feeling of insufficient efforts is displayed by the inability of the City to meet their 1999 mandate to have a community garden in each of Toronto's wards by 2003 (Toronto Parks and Recreation, 2008). The 2010 numbers indicate only 23 of the 44 wards have implemented community gardens.

The recommendations of this report are based on the need to improve the presence and opportunity of urban agriculture within the City of Toronto. The three main recommendations of this report, based upon its findings, are:

- Create Non-Plan Urban Agricultural Wards within the City. These wards would not require residents to seek approval by authorities to build gardens. There would be need for guidelines. These would be set through monthly community group discussions.
- Greater efforts by the City of Toronto should be made to make certain the Community Gardens Program is receiving the appropriate support to better reach their 2003 goal to have a community garden in each ward. This goal should also be reassessed and a greater goal should be put in place.
- Guerilla gardeners and Toronto's Community Gardens Program should collaborate on an experimental Box Gardens Program. Box gardens would be set up around the city to better increase access to gardening for those living in apartments or those who have difficulty getting to and from community garden plots.