

Urban Agriculture – Learning from Cuba’s Example

Presentation by Marjorie Willison, ACORN Conference, Halifax, March 15, 2003

Shrinking oil reserves and rising fuel prices, linked with a food system heavily reliant on fossil energy, will lead to rising food prices. A human population growing faster than the food supply will lead to food shortages and rising food prices. Currently, less than 20% of what most people eat comes from the Maritimes. The time has come for us to start feeding ourselves close to home.

Currently, 200 million urban farmers feed 700 million people. The FAO (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (www.fao.org)) states that urban agriculture – growing food in and near cities – must be the way of the future in order to meet the food needs of a rapidly growing human population.

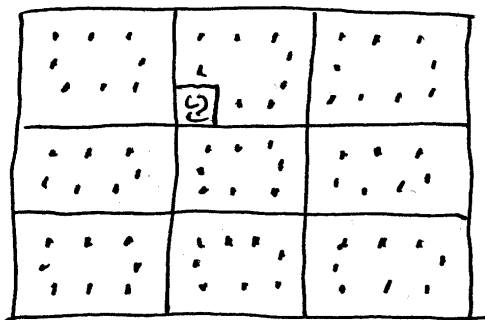
We have heard how Cuba is a leading example of urban agriculture in our part of the world. I would like to suggest ways that we can grow more food in and near our own towns and cities, in order to help supply at least 80% of our food needs from within the Maritimes. Many of the following ideas are gleaned from “A Pattern Language”, Alexander, Ishikawa, Silverstein, 1977, Oxford University Press.

Land We need to develop our cities in ways that protect agricultural land and do not consume huge amounts of potential food-growing land. At the same time, humans want connection to nature, and wild animals need to live in connected, contiguous green space.

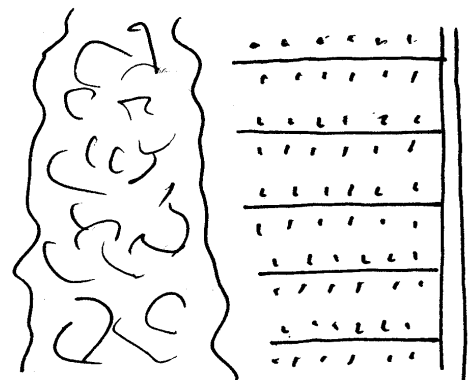
One way to do this is to have housing clusters or fingers of housing within green space, instead of pockets of green space scattered amongst housing as we do now. To accomplish this, we need more medium-dense housing, such as walk-up apartments, row housing, and town houses, and a lot less low-density housing that society seems to value now. Research shows that medium-dense housing

- ♦ consumes less land
- ♦ uses fewer resources for roads and infrastructure
- ♦ enables more people to get around without cars, and reduces the number of car owners
- ♦ promotes greater social cohesion among residents (e.g. more people feel it is safe to let children play outdoors unsupervised).

Land for growing food should be within walking distance of all neighbourhoods.



One bit of green in several city blocks of low-density housing, with passing traffic on any of the streets. Houses set far back from sidewalks reduce conviviality.



Connected green space and medium-dense housing on quiet side streets, with passing traffic on one main road. Houses are set close to sidewalks.

Convivial Communities We need a strong social fabric, so that people know and trust their neighbours. Again, the way cities develop is crucial. We can promote social cohesion by building town and city neighbourhoods with

- ◆ no more than 400 to 500 residents per neighbourhood
- ◆ definable neighbourhood boundaries, such as water bodies, major roads, or swaths of land at least 200 feet wide
- ◆ major roads outside of neighbourhoods, to keep passing traffic out of the area
- ◆ local traffic patterns resulting in fewer than 200 cars per hour (as the number of cars above 200 per hour increases, the number of friends and acquaintances in neighbourhoods decreases)
- ◆ narrow streets and house fronts close to sidewalks, to promote chatting and neighbourliness
- ◆ street design that clusters housing units in groups of 6 to 12 varied households
- ◆ public meeting spaces such as parks, public squares, coffee shops, walking trails, and common green space (at the boundaries between neighbourhoods)
- ◆ garden clubs or other ways for people to learn about growing food.

Commons We need a revival of the concept of commons, or shared ownership. Examples are

- ◆ public green space or commons
- ◆ shared ownership of land in neighbourhoods, or long-term leases
- ◆ public meeting places such as parks, public squares, public service buildings, and trails
- ◆ community gardens and allotments
- ◆ urban farm land protected from development, possibly through easements
- ◆ neighbourhood tool banks for lending tools to gardeners (e.g. Urban Farm Museum Society).

These strategies help to reduce energy inputs to the food system.

Other places to grow food We need to be creative in finding lots of places to grow food, as individuals and as communities.

- ◆ rooftops, with changes in building codes that result in useable rooftops
- ◆ half-empty parking lots converted to growing food
- ◆ vacant lots for community gardens
- ◆ home food gardens, viewed as society's norm and essential to running households
- ◆ raised beds in areas with little or no soil
- ◆ containers on windowsills, balconies and decks.

Water We need to treasure water as the valuable resource it is.

- ◆ route household greywater to gardens
- ◆ collect rainwater from rooftops and in cisterns
- ◆ limit parking to 9% of surface area in a neighbourhood, and make hard surfaces 'porous' to water.

Urban Animals We need bylaws that enable people to raise food animals in towns and cities. My husband and I really enjoy the eggs we get from our two hens that scratch around in the back yard. There should also be allowance for other kinds of poultry, goats, food rabbits and so on. Humans have a long history of living with animals, not only in rural areas but also in ancient cities. We have lost that in modern cities, and need to recapture it.

Federal responsibilities and supports More and more people with jobs are complaining that they have to work longer and longer hours, which certainly discourages home food-growing due to lack of time.

This trend could be reversed with a change to federal employer expenses. Currently, employers contribute to employment insurance, pension plan, etc. based on the number of employees, so it is in employers' interest to have few employees working long hours. Instead, federal employer expenses should be related to hours worked, so that the number of employees becomes irrelevant.

Provincial and municipal responsibilities and supports

- ◆ reduce taxation rates on urban food-growing land
- ◆ introduce zoning designation for urban food production
- ◆ alter development regulations to enable urban food production
- ◆ introduce bylaws to allow animal food production
- ◆ support community gardens and shared garden space with
 - city recreation staff and
 - access to water.

Montreal is a shining example of how cities can support community gardens.

Changing our food habits

Eating closer to home, whether through urban agriculture or farmers' markets, means shifting our food choices.

Choose these foods more often

potatoes
apples
apple juice
cranberry juice
water
eggs, nuts, beans
sunflower seeds
hazelnuts (filberts)
local herbs
cabbage in winter
strawberries
blueberries
wheat crackers
canola oil
Maritime carrots and other vegetables

Choose these foods less often

rice
bananas
orange juice
grapefruit juice
pop
meat
cashews
almonds
exotic spices
imported lettuce in winter
mangoes
pineapples
rice crackers
olive oil
imported carrots and other vegetables