

Food gardens: Seeds of a better community

Food gardens have the power to create instant community in urban environments

BY RANDY SHORE, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 6, 2015



Gardeners share the job of tending the vegetable patch at High Top Hub, the community garden at Bosa False Creek.

Photograph by: Dan Lum

Food gardens have the power to create instant community in urban environments that might otherwise promote loneliness and isolation.

The tenants of Bosa False Creek could easily have lived in the same building for years — passing in the hallway and riding silently in elevators — never getting to know each other. But that's not how it turned out.

Instead, many of the residents get together regularly to plant vegetables, harvest, cook and eat in their rooftop garden.

“I admit I was a bit of skeptic at first,” said building manager Dudley Knox. “I’m not a gardener, so I really wasn’t expecting much.”

But after a harvest and potluck dinner with his tenants, that changed.

“It’s a real social event, with people mixing and getting to know each other — it’s fantastic,” he said. “It’s really great for the tenants and I’m really proud of the garden now.”

The False Creek rooftop garden was facilitated by Can You Dig It?, a non-profit project of the posAbilities Society. They were brought on board by the Bosa Properties Foundation to design and manage the project, according to foundation chair Sylvia Bosa.

And ongoing management is key to accelerating the community building process.

“People show up with the idea they are going to grow food, but it turns out to be much more than that,” said Bosa.

Rather than dividing the space into allotment garden plots and assigning them to interested tenants to care for on their own — the more typical model in Vancouver’s community gardens — the gardeners plant and manage the entire space together.

“People really engage with planting a garden and a great harvest, but what it really does is bring people together for a shared project,” Bosa said.

The people that it brings together are as diverse a group as you could imagine: kids and moms, retirees and new immigrants all dig in.

“I had no previous experience or knowledge with community gardens,” said tenant Brenda Belo. “I had concerns how it would work and if I would get a big enough plot to make it worthwhile to put the work in.

“The choice to create a communal garden and grow enough for all was refreshing and exciting,” she said. “I have also been pleasantly surprised how co-operative the group have been. It feels wonderful to have such a great community working together for a common goal. Sure makes Vancouver an even more welcoming, warm city.”

Can you Dig It? projects across the city range from small spaces with a half-dozen allotment plots to large, 100-bed gardens shared by community groups, schoolchildren, people with developmental disabilities and neighbours.

“The idea is to create inclusive and welcoming spaces through food gardening, as a way to bring people together,” said Cinthia Page, the organization’s special projects coordinator.

It is a natural tendency for human beings to form groups that are exclusive, which enhances a feeling of belonging to something special. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

To function as a real hub for the community, “inclusion has to be intentional from the beginning,” she said. “It takes will to reach out to people in your neighbourhood who are vulnerable. You have to organize things in a way that is respectful of people and their abilities and make sure there is a way for

everyone to contribute.”

At False Creek, Can You Dig It? continues to work with gardeners to organize work parties, make watering schedules, harvest and plan pot luck dinners.

“We really like what they do because it’s about building community under the guise of gardening,” said Bosa. “Every few weeks we have a harvest party and a barbecue and we eat from the garden.”

Operating the community garden as a shared enterprise, rather than allotment plots, accelerates the community building process by years, which was a priority of the Bosa foundation.

The foundation was created in 2012 with the idea of returning a portion of the profits from each residential building to the community, often in the form of donations to projects targeting children and youth, homelessness and food issues.

The foundation is taking steps to ensure that the infrastructure for social connectedness is built right into their residential projects.

“(Social isolation) is a concern and we’d like to be proactive about the way we engage our homeowners and tenants,” said Bosa. “We want everything they need to be right there, so it’s never a concern,” she said.

Social isolation used to be a concern for the elderly, people with mobility issues and, more recently, new immigrants, but the digital revolution has conspired to place us all in silos, insulated from face-to-face contact.

As people spend more time camped out on their devices, they have less time to chat with the neighbours over the fence. The garden and its shared enterprise acts as a magnet for people who are craving social interaction.

“As the city grows you have more people living in isolation from each other,” she said. “In Vancouver we have such a melting pot of nationalities and ethnicities that when people arrive they sometimes aren’t equipped to jump right in to their communities.”

“Language and culture can be a barrier to communication and there’s a kind of fear that people have about putting themselves out there,” she said.

A 2012 report by the Vancouver Foundation found that people in Metro Vancouver are increasingly retreating from community life, and many respondents cited concerns about having little to offer. One third of people say they have difficulty making friends in the city or have no friends outside their ethnic group and one in four are alone more than they would like to be.

And that’s more than sad.

A white paper released earlier this year by the Happiness Research Institute put it bluntly: “Loneliness kills.”

The institute cites studies suggesting that loneliness among the elderly can be a significant health risk and lead to dementia and depression. A 2010 meta-analysis of 148 studies on social relationships and mortality involving 308,000 participants found that people with strong social connections are 50 per cent more likely to survive the period of the study regardless of age, sex and pre-existing health conditions.

“The evidence base is overwhelming on the impacts of this malaise of social isolation,” said Gord Tulloch, director of innovation at posAbilities. “Governments — federal, provincial and municipal — are starting to realize isolation is having all kinds of potentially expensive downstream effects.”

Physical well-being, mental health and even education success are all demonstrably affected, he said. The effects of depression and anxiety have similar effects on the body to long-term stress, eroding the immune system.

“Some research shows that social isolation was similar to smoking, obesity and sedentary lifestyle in its impact on health,” said Tulloch. “The ache of loneliness is more than just a feeling, it’s a precursor for all kinds of health effects. It has a disastrous effect.”

Moments of connection have, quite literally, the opposite effect, triggering the release of hormones that calm and heal, he said.

posAbilities launched Can You Dig It? as a way to help people with developmental disabilities integrate into community settings, but it quickly expanded to creating inclusive social hubs through food gardening in all kinds of settings.

“Seniors are still the most at risk of social isolation, but the realities of urban life have made it everybody’s problem,” he said.

Busy roads carve up neighbourhoods, working people drive straight into the garage at the end of the day, apartment-block dwellers cocoon with electronic devices and social media.

“Apartment blocks are really places of social awkwardness, where people who live near each other have nothing to say to each other,” he said. “It really intensifies people’s feeling of being disconnected.”

Creating common spaces where people might meet is one thing; bringing a group of people together for a shared project with ongoing opportunities for interaction, cooperation and celebration, is quite another.

“The Bosa garden really changes the texture of the living experience there,” he said. “When the gardeners rally to make a garden, they are making a place; now they are going from ‘my little plot’ to ‘this is ours.’”

rshore@vancouverson.com



Gardeners share the job of tending the vegetable patch at High Top Hub, the community garden at Bosa False Creek.
Photograph by: Dan Lum

