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Food & Harvest Special: BUGS

The city's growing infestation

Sara Falconer

BUGS is one way of eating more locally

Still feeling the effects of your Thanksgiving feast? You may not be the only one. On average, each ingredient on a North American table has travelled over 1,500 miles. It's a diet that has a wide-reaching impact on the environment and local farmers, but with community gardening projects blossoming in Ottawa, it's easier than ever to think globally and eat locally.

Montreal-based researcher and gastronome Catherine Macpherson explains that it boils down to "food miles" - how far our food has to travel to get to us. Add those wasted fossil fuels to the other ills of industrial farming, like chemical fertilizers and the destruction of forests, and it's easy to see why the "local-vore movement," as Macpherson calls it, has taken off.

In 2005, Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon decided to try a year of eating food available within 100 miles of their apartment in Vancouver. Their experiment, which they shared on a website and later a book, became known as the "100-mile diet."

Some advantages are obvious, like supporting the local economy, the health benefits of eating fewer processed foods and the vastly superior taste of fresh produce. But there are also hidden perks, like the opportunity to socialize more: A farmers' market is a place to meet and greet, unlike the cold aisles of a chain grocery store.

The 100-Mile Diet site (100milediet.org) has a handy tool that generates a map of your own 100-mile radius, including listings of local food providers.

"It's pretty extreme," Macpherson admits, "but it got people thinking about where their food comes from."

Start with one dish, or one meal, or just try it for a week, she suggests. Have a potluck with friends to celebrate in-season foods like fall's apples, pumpkins and squashes.

In our cold climate, canning food is one of the keys to enjoying local foods year-round. It's not a skill that many 20- and 30-somethings have, although that's changing with the popularity of DIY culture.

"I've actually seen a real boom in young people canning in the past couple of years," she laughs. "I kind of see canning as the new knitting."

You'll never be short on canning material if you grow your own fruit and veggies, and there are plenty of spaces to do just that in Ottawa.

Bytowne Urban Gardens (BUGS) was built by two graduate students on Beaver Barracks in 1996. The space has continued to evolve organically into 29 plots, each roughly 10 by 10 feet, according to co-ordinator Susan Wellisch. Although there is no charge for the plots, there is currently a waiting list.

"People make friends who probably wouldn't meet each other. These relationships build the community," she says about one of the benefits of joining a community garden.

Indeed, community has been a major focus of the project since its inception, and its organizers have worked to build partnerships with other groups.

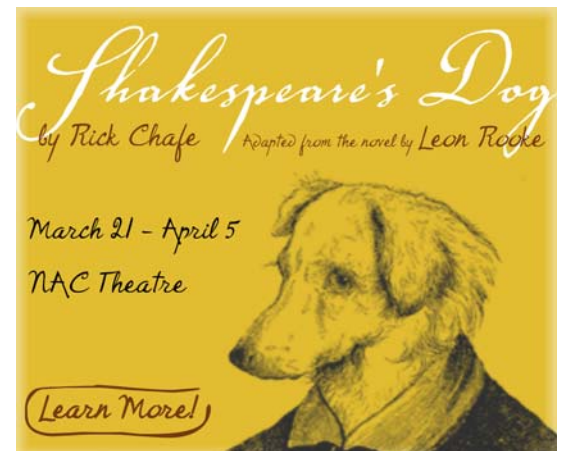
The Canadian Mental Health Association has the biggest plot, which is used in horticulture therapy workshops, while another plot is used by children at the neighbouring YMCA to understand how to plant and care for vegetables. BUGS also runs a neighbourhood composting program, and even has a program to deliver flowers to shut-ins.

In 1999, BUGS started lobbying for more long-term security. "We made the argument that housing plus gardening



The Bytowne Urban Gardens (corner of Metcalfe and Catherine)

photo: Tia Loftsgaard



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equals community."

As a result of that campaign, the city decreed that the community garden has to be preserved on the property. Wellisch looks forward to building BUGS alongside the property's new developer, the Centretown Citizens Ottawa Corporation, a non-profit, private housing provider.

"It's a happy ending," she says. "We hope that this is a model for the city and for other developers in the future."

BUGS is a founder of the ever-expanding Community Garden Network, which now encompasses 17 Ottawa projects. Visit www.flora.org/cgn-rjc to learn about gardens near you.

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