

COLLECTIVE AND COMMUNITY GARDENING

a contextualized analysis of urban agriculture in Montreal

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Introduction

In the past few years, the questions of where our food comes from and how it is produced have emerged as key issues in the urban sustainability debate. These questions have fed a resurgence of urban gardening as an answer to urban food security issues and concerns with the globally commercialized system of industrial agricultural production that dominates the urban palate. In North America, Montreal is well known as being home to a strong urban agriculture movement; between community, backyard, rooftop, balcony, collective, and guerrilla gardens, 1.5% of Montreal's population is involved in urban food production.¹ The purpose of this paper is to dissect the differences between Montreal's community and collective gardens – and the reasons for citizens' involvement with them – in order to better understand the roles urban agriculture currently serves here and the direction in which it is evolving.

Urban Agriculture in Montreal: A Historical Perspective

Although there have been various movements of urban agriculture in Canada throughout the country's history, in the 1970s there was a fundamental change in direction. Prior to the 1970s, urban agriculture was primarily a response to increased demand during war periods and the Great Depression. In 1973, increased fuel costs caused by the OPEC energy crisis were reflected in food prices, which created awareness of the limitations of fossil fuel-based food production, causing the concept of food security to enter the urban Canadian consciousness. By this time, urban gardening was already being practiced in Montreal by Italian and Portuguese immigrants who maintained traditional kitchen

gardens on both private and unoccupied public land. In fact, it was the City of Montreal's attempts to regulate the immigrants' guerrilla gardening that initiated the preliminary systems of permit distribution and plot allocation which eventually transformed into the organization of community gardens and opened urban food production to a broader demographic. Soon after the first permits were distributed to community garden plots in Montreal, the project was taken out of the city's hands by the Montreal Botanical Gardens, and by 1985 was made official through a city review of the program which laid out a set of guidelines and marked the creation the Montreal Community Gardening Program.² Once the program had become official, the gardens (forty-one of which were established already by 1981, with numbers continuing to grow fast throughout the 1980s and 1990s) were supported economically by the city government and local organizations, who provided the gardens with physical resources such as tools and seeds as well as hired horticultural specialists who were available on a rotating basis to give advice to gardeners on organic growing techniques.³ These services have prevailed and the numerous community gardens that now exist across Montreal are still greatly supported by the city. The space provided does not meet the needs of the population for space to garden, however, resulting in wait-lists for garden plots being years long in some cases.⁴

Current Trends in Montreal's Urban Agriculture Movement

Community Gardens:

Montreal is well-recognized as home to Canada's and possibly North America's most successful city-level network of community gardens and is the only Canadian city to have hosted the annual American Community Gardening Association (ACGA) meeting (in 2006).⁵ In 2002 the Montreal Community Garden Program was reorganized, and now the eighteen boroughs in Montreal involved with urban agriculture are responsible for their local networks.⁶ Across the city, the program totaled ninety-eight gardens (8459 plots) in 2008, each containing between twenty-five and 255 individual plots,⁷ managed overall by an elected team of volunteers and overseen by the six horticultural specialists, rotating between the gardens, who are available to answer questions and give guidance to new gardeners (though by all accounts, more of the knowledge sharing happens between gardeners themselves).⁸ As of 2006, around 75% of the gardens were protected, either under special Community Garden zoning or as parkland,⁹ and the city also continues to uphold a policy of giving tax breaks to owners of vacant lots who are willing to lease the space to community members for the creation of new gardens on five-year leases.¹⁰ The fact that zoning officials were able to permanently remove the spaces from the development market indicates a decided willingness on the part of the city government to support such projects as part of their vision for Montreal's future as a green city.

Involving an estimated 13,000 participants,¹¹ the gardens primarily attract older citizens, with more than half of the Community Garden participants being over the age of forty-five, and less than 2% under the age of twenty-four.¹² Though the age diversity of the gardens is not representative of the city's population, the ethnic and wealth diversity seems more equally represented in the gardens; in 2001, eight gardens had a majority of allophone members (their first language being neither English nor French).¹³ In 2009, between 27% and 61% of the gardeners were from low-income families (below \$20,000 income annually), with greater representation in gardens in districts with higher poverty rates, indicating that the Community Garden Program is, in general, a socially-inclusive organization.¹⁴ A 2006 survey conducted by the City of Montreal indicated that the primary motivations for involvement in the community gardens project are equally recreation and food production.¹⁵

As of 2009, the Community Garden plots achieved a high intensity of production, averaging between 27 kg and 87 kg of food annually (adult consumption averages around 40kg annually).¹⁶ This production has a significant impact on the population's well-being both socially and economically, and has a high value in a city with the highest rates of poverty in all of Canada.¹⁷

Despite the city's interest in providing gardening space to its citizens, the community gardens in Montreal have an annual 25% oversubscription and a low annual dropout rate of 10%, a clear indication that the demand for space vastly outweighs the supply.¹⁸ Energy and food prices as well as demand for gardening space continue to rise, but the network has come to a standstill and with the delayed relocation of several gardens closed due to soil contamination¹⁹ it seems unlikely that the city will make the effort required to provide much more space for urban agriculture than currently exists.

Collective Gardens:

While most of Montreal's urban agriculture fame is due to the city's community garden program, there is also a multitude of not-for-profit organizations that run an alternative network of urban agriculture projects. The collective garden movement has grown significantly in the second half of the 2000s as the connection has been forged between environmentalism and social justice concerns, and food security-focused organizations such as Action Communiterre have established themselves in Montreal. The political side of the movement is led largely by university organizations such as Food Systems Projects at McGill and Concordia, and the collective gardens associated with these institutions often provide more of a technical educational role than one of active community development.²⁰ On the other hand, the gardens opened by independent

Map of Collective & Community Gardens in Montreal

Gardens

- 1 villegay collective rooftop garden (patrice Prevost)
- 2 entre mamans garden
- 3 champ des possibles
- 4 cégep du vieux montréal terrace
- 5 Claire Marisette rooftop garden (CRAFAUD)
- 6 Jardins d'Armel, clandestins & l'arche des sciences @ UQAM
- 7 Jardin du roulant (santropol)
- 8 Concordia greenhouse
- 9 Griffintown garden (Pottawa + dakousie)
- 10 Phoenix garden (victory)
- 11 canteloupe garden (victory)
- 12 Racine de paix (victory)
- 13 Thyme garden (victory)
- 14 Rosemary garden (victory)
- 15 Real TEA + People's Potatoes (concordia)
- 16 Jardin EgalitéTerre (Provect)

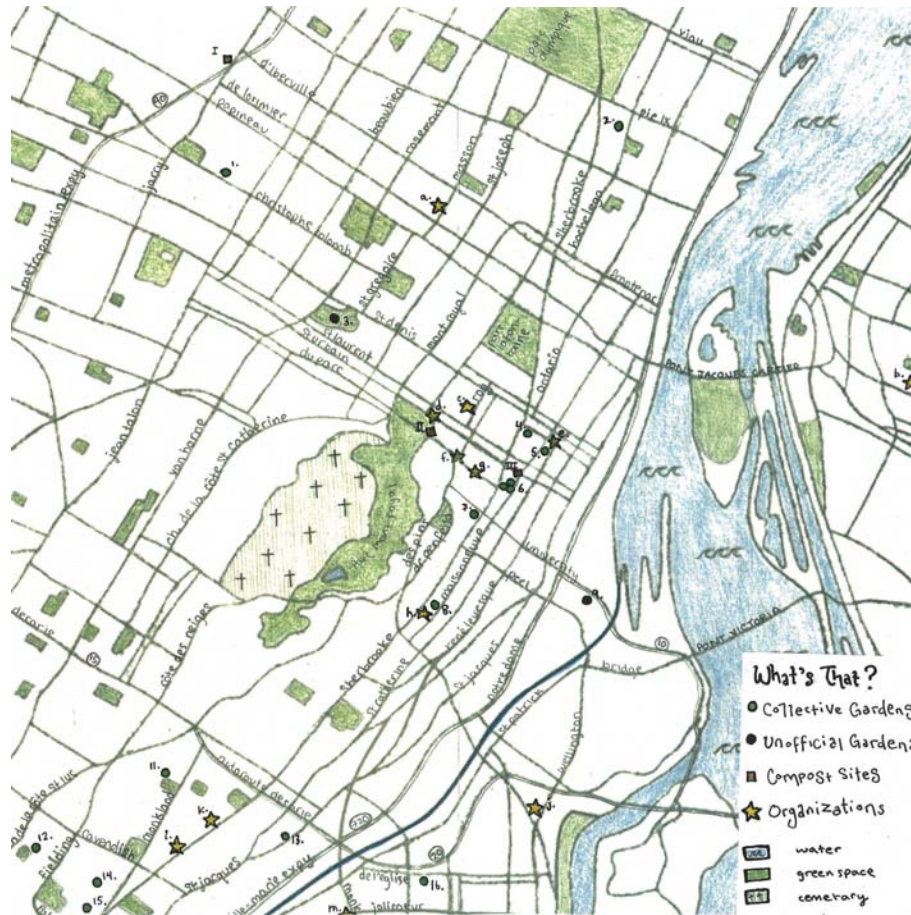
Compost

- I St-michel Environmental complex
- II centre de compostage Tourne-Sol
- III salle de lombriculture

Organizations

- a Equiterre
- b Regroupement de Jardins Collectifs du Québec
- c Santropol Roulant
- d éco-quartier Jeanne-Mance
- e CRAFAUD
- f Alternatives (rooftop garden project)
- g centre d'écologie urbaine
- h concordia greenhouse, vert-ville
- i éco-quartier NDA
- j aliments d'ici
- k coop la maison vert
- l action communautaire (victory gardens network)
- m Provert

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organizations operating in various Montreal neighbourhoods have a more specific focus on place-based community development and social relationships rather than politics. The demographic implicated in each of these two categories are somewhat dichotomized with the university-centred programs attracting younger, more middle-class participants, and the community organizations representing a more balanced, but still not entirely inclusive mixture of social classes (between 20% and 61% of gardeners receiving incomes below \$20,000 annually).²¹

The primary difference between collective and community gardens, other than the organizations that oversee them, is the way in which they are structurally organized. Collective gardens, rather than being comprised of many small plots cared for independently by individuals or families, are closer to the Victory Garden model (practiced during WWII) of a single larger plot cultivated collaboratively by a team of volunteers. Montreal has seen the development of numerous creative solutions for making use of unused urban space for gardening by means of container gardening, balcony cultivation, vertical gardens, and so on.²² Differences also lie in the reasons for their creation – while the community garden network was created and grew due to demand from apartment or other small residence-dwelling citizens who simply wanted something to replace the back yard space that they did not have, the collective gardens grew from a more politically-conscious motivation to promote public awareness around food security issues.²³ Reflecting the social consciousness basis on which many of the collective gardens were created, many of them have a specific mandate to produce food for community kitchens and food banks: for example, in the case of the Victory Garden Network (an Action CommuniTerre project in NDG consisting of five collective gardens and several backyard plots), one third of the food produced was donated to the NDG food depot and other community organizations.²⁴ Though the actual productivity of Montreal's collective gardens is lower than that of the community gardens per square metre (averaging 16kg per person for the season),²⁵ the social and educational aspects of collective gardening should be taken into consideration when judging the value of these operations: on a practical level, collective gardens tend to each have a facilitator who provides technical knowledge and guidance to the volunteers while encouraging self-directed learning and a sense of ownership over the project. On a social level, the collaborative working environment – having been created around food security and urban sustainability issues – provides a forum for discussion between community members, lateral knowledge sharing, and a space for community links to form. Taking into account the collective gardens' relationships with other local organizations, the number of individuals who are involved in some way with the gardens spans far past the estimated 2000 people who volunteer in the gardens directly, to a broader community of approximately 17,000 citizens who volunteer for or benefit from the services with which

Montreal's collective gardens are associated.²⁶ The 2010 Réseau de Jardins Collectifs du Québec (RJCQ, established in 1997 to consolidate the network of collective gardens)²⁷ had seventeen members who all together ran sixty-two collective gardens on and around the island of Montreal. These numbers do not include peripherally-affected organizations.

The Future of Urban Agriculture in Montreal

Considering the plateaued support for community gardens in Montreal and the ever-growing immigrant population (who comprise a large portion of the demand for the plots), it seems as though there is a movement away from the community garden network as the dominant incarnation of urban agriculture in Montreal. The desire of the urban population for interaction with the food system on which they rely is leading to ever-growing numbers of organizations linking knowledgeable gardeners with community organizations, housing projects, schools, etc., to incorporate the urban production of food into the lives of a diversity of Montrealers. Though the scale of the collective gardening movement is difficult to see due to the social rather than physical nature of what it produces, the collaboration inherent in collective gardening is important in facilitating the development of a social-aware, active, and mutually-supportive network of community members and organizations. There is a common problem with movements of this type which, like the organic food movement beginning in the 1980s, tend to be somewhat elitist, imposing upper-class values on disadvantaged populations who may be preoccupied with other social problems and not only access to fresh, healthy food.²⁸

In Montreal, however, it seems that the urban agriculture movement is unique in its social inclusivity, and as a result holds true potential as a means to diminish the impacts of economic and social disparity. Despite the fact that the city seems to prioritize the creation of community gardens less presently than it did even a decade ago, and is not pulling its weight in terms of answering citizens' demands for green space, this does not negate the positive role played by the gardens that do exist on urban spaces and communities. The fact that the community garden network has seemed to reach a plateau in Montreal is perhaps beneficial for the diversification of the urban agriculture movement as it encourages alternative urban gardening practices and the growth of the collective movement (which relies less on re-zoning urban lots, as is the case with many community gardens, and more often makes use of backyards and empty spaces belonging to organizations such as schools, community centres, etc). It is conceivable that with collaboration between the collective and community gardens in a neighbourhood, the two models could complement each other. Prioritization in terms of allocating community garden plots to citizens who demonstrate particular need for and capacity to manage their own plot (experienced gardeners, people who are under the average income level, large families,

etc.) would allow for the community plots to be put to their most effective use in terms of improving food security. The neighbourhood collective gardens would serve the need of the citizens who involve themselves in urban agriculture for purposes of recreation and social engagement, and would provide a forum for ecosystem development and community events to take place. The university-centred organizations and other establishments with alternative growing techniques or who host workshops and other learning activities could provide horticultural training and education about the social, environmental, and political concepts that are implicated in various ways with the urban agriculture movement. Urban gardeners could flow between the different types of gardens as their skill and knowledge levels, availability, and need for supplementary food changed over time. This exchange of members could serve to change the community and collective garden networks from isolated scenes to interrelated, rich, and diverse communities.

Endnotes:

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