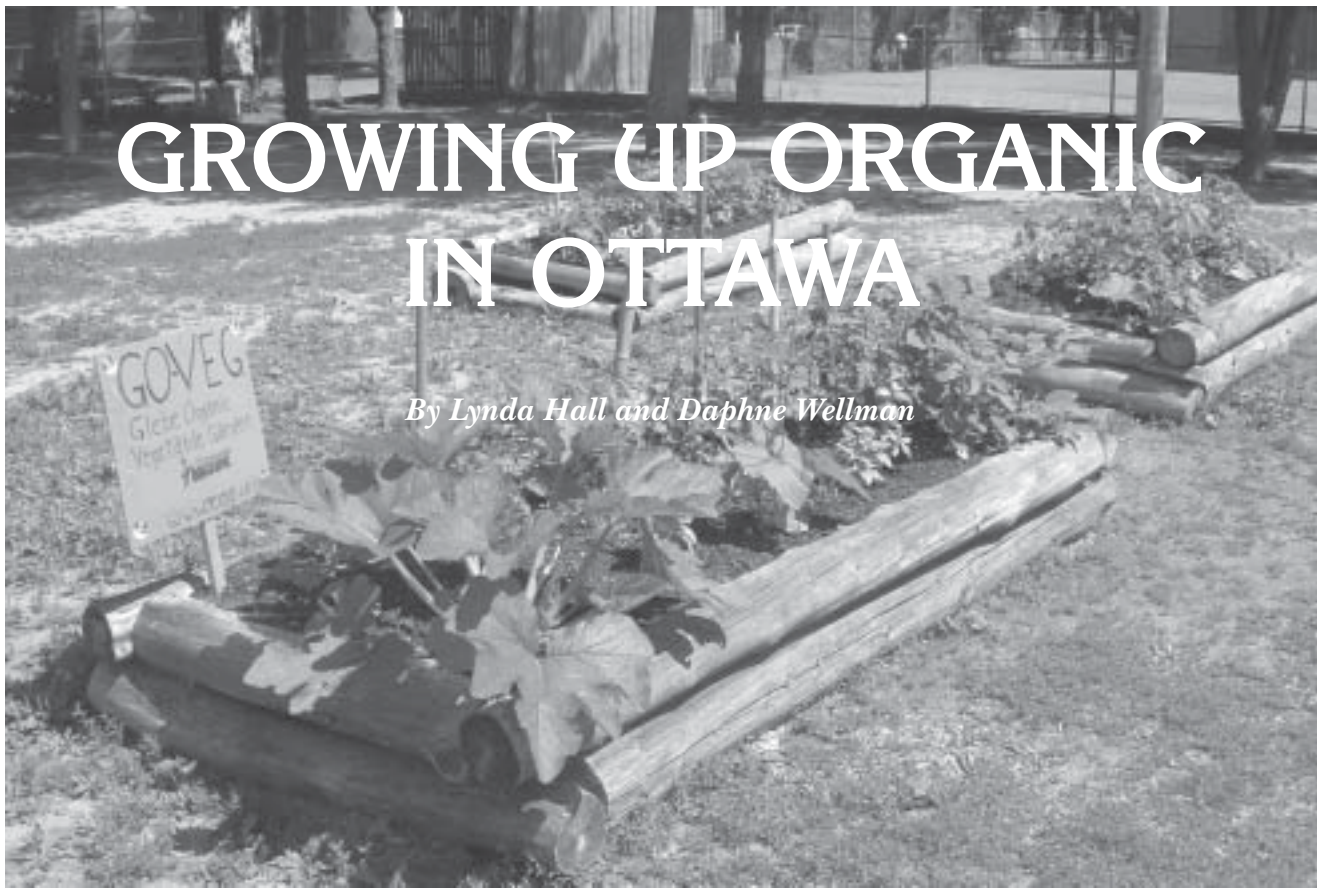


GROWING UP ORGANIC IN OTTAWA

By Lynda Hall and Daphne Wellman



It all begins with a seed. In June, the Growing Up Organic (GUO)* Ottawa team pick-axed the compacted dirt in the playing field at Mutchmor Public School, and built three raised vegetable beds. Kids, caregivers, camp counsellors, parents and passers-by all joined in, driving dowels through cedar logs to form frames, filling them with compost and planting seeds and seedlings.

A jungle of growth resulted from the hot summer sun, the rainwater collected from the roof of the adjacent tennis clubhouse, and the caring hands of community volunteers. Acorn squash roamed up and out of the beds. Tomatillos ballooned on long stems. Deep green basil threw out its rich scent. Delicate purple blooms of eggplant bore long slim impossibly exotic fruit.

The kids were amazed.

To see such quick and lush results from their work was a daily wonder to the children. Each morning during outdoor play time at the school's daycare, one young girl would run over to check on her bean plant, watching how it erupted through the soil and shot skywards—and eventually formed pastel flowers, then crescent moons of delicious green.

* COG's Growing Up Organic project is bringing organic food to daycares across the country. See *TCOG Summer/07* for more details.

But it wasn't just the kids who took notice. Sitting in the shade of his porch, an octogenarian watched the garden taking shape. He quietly assessed the process, matching his own years of growing to what he saw across the street. "Too much compost," he spat out at me one day. "Those tomatoes are never going to ripen in time." And of course, time proved him right.

Growing food speaks to a continual process of learning—the ultimate activity for life-long learning. It engages physically, spiritually and mentally, as the life process unfolds from hopeful seed, through heady floral reproduction, fruit-bearing, consumption and decay. It provides unlimited potential for linking to school curricula, and can spark a creative connection for children who would otherwise sit dormant in a traditional classroom setting.

This first garden is an investment. It is a learning tool, a community resource, a visual document of what the GUO project is all about. By bringing the experience of food production into the city, it reclaims a piece of ground lost to large agri-business and industrial farming techniques. It allows us to reconnect to the source of our food, providing a context in which to ask questions about how the food we buy is grown.



Wadim Bittner provides the food to cover a dozen childcare centres.

We are exploring the possibility of establishing more schoolyard gardens throughout the city. Community engagement in the development of this first garden far exceeded our expectations and we have been approached by several people wishing to replicate this model elsewhere in the city.

School gardens have not been our only focus. Throughout the growing season, we also worked to build relationships between local farmers and childcare facilities.

An agreement made last winter with Valentino's Family CSA, which would have seen carrots grown specifically for the Andrew Fleck Daycare, fell through because of a poor crop. The partnership did however, provide an opportunity for several families to tour the farm and assist in weeding.

In August, another local farmer, Wadim Bittner, stepped forward to provide food for childcare centres. Within a couple of weeks, over a dozen childcare centres, ranging

from daycares to private preschools, were purchasing some of their food from him.

On delivery days, Wadim would load his vehicle with as much produce as he was willing to sell, drive into the city, pick up the GUO coordinator, and begin his market stops at 7:30 am. Cooks were able to step out of their kitchens and buy directly from the farmer, with the advantage of seeing and assessing the volume of each product. At almost every stop, additional purchases were made for personal consumption by staff and parents dropping off their kids.

As a sales model, Wadim was extremely happy with the outcome. By keeping to a small geographical

area, we minimized the amount of driving time and gas spent distributing within the city. There were no additional costs such as market stall fees, parking fees or mark-downs to accommodate retail or middleman costs. It was an efficient use of the farmer's time; all routes were completed within four hours of reaching the city.

The facilitation by the GUO Ottawa team was absolutely crucial for this model's success. By referencing the school garden project, a highly visible and appealing first step, we were able to quickly establish our credibility, and move on to promoting the farm produce. Our presence alongside Wadim legitimized his produce by bringing it into the context of a larger project and organization. We were also able to record each sale, and give guidance to the farmer on pricing and invoicing institutions.

The cooks are already discussing with Wadim Bittner about how they can expand their purchases next season.

Over the winter, we will be organizing meetings between local farmers and daycare cooks to help build strong relationships between the two groups.

If you are a farmer or an institution catering to children and would like to get involved in the GUO project in the Ottawa area, contact Coordinator Lynda Hall at guo-ottawa@cog.ca or call 613-244-4000.

Would you like to support the Growing Up Organic project? If so, please consider buying the GUO calendar. This first-ever COG calendar highlights some of the achievements of the GUO project. Through a collection of beautiful photographs, you'll get to meet some of the GUO participants and learn about their important work. This is a great gift for the holidays, order your copy today! See order form on page 34.