

The Canadian Organic Grower

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EDITOR'S CORNER

Growing into a gardener

My first garden was about ten feet above ground. The balcony and windowsills of my second-floor apartment were filled with vegetables: tomato plants growing out of yogurt containers, a zucchini plant emerging from the neck of a gallon-sized pickle container with its roots visible through the translucent plastic; lettuce and broccoli growing in an old laundry tub.

I didn't know anyone with a garden but, for some reason, I had an incredibly strong craving to grow food. The desire had started a few years earlier but every summer I went out to the bush to do fieldwork of a different kind, wildlife biology, until the summer I worked in the city.

On my bike-ride home from work, I would stop at the local hardware store, pick up a bag of compost and strap it to my bookrack. Surreptitiously, I went into the ravine by my apartment and dug up topsoil from the forest floor. I remember thinking that it was the opposite of the scene in the movie *Rear Window*. Rather than burying material (body parts in that case), I was digging up humus. I added worm castings from the vermicomposter that sat below my kitchen table.

In containers gathered from

my neighbour's blue bins, I planted seeds bought from the hardware store. A year later, I discovered the joy of seed catalogues and, a few years after that, I learned about heirloom seeds.

I fought with my landlord who told me that gardening wasn't allowed in his building. It turned out that he didn't mind petunias and marigolds in window boxes, but had a problem with tomatoes and squash. After long heated debates, I finally understood (though didn't agree with) the basis of his concern. In my landlord's eyes, growing your own food was a sign of poverty. Growing ornamentals, on the other hand, demonstrated that you had the luxuries of both free time and enough money to buy food.

I learned many things that summer. For example, I had thought (quite foolishly) that it would be fun to not label my flats and be surprised by what emerged. Soon I realized that different crops need different growing conditions, something nearly impossible for me to provide, given that I couldn't distinguish a tomato seedling from a young broccoli plant.

Most importantly, I learned that I could grow my own food. I didn't have to rely entirely on the grocery store and the farmers' market. I felt, for the first time, a small but significant sense of self-sufficiency.

Over the months of caring for seedlings started under growlights in my closet, potting them up and tending them throughout the summer, I realized that I was a gardener. I was hooked. Garden-

Cover photo: The produce from the garden at the Riverbend Inn and Vineyard is picked just a stone's throw from the kitchen door, seen here behind Dave Perkins (on right) and Chef Chris Smythe. Wedding parties on the lawn overlook the garden where the dinner's vegetables had been picked only hours earlier. See story on page 16.

Photo credit: Katrina Simmons of 20/20 Studios.

ing brought me more joy than I could have imagined. It also gave me something much more profound: a sense of connection and a sense of purpose.

Now, years later, after gardening in many places, I've resettled to a new and wonderful piece of land. As I type, I look above the computer monitor and see the fall colours on the trees and, beyond that, whitecaps on the Bay of Fundy. My new garden is tilled and covered with a green manure of oats, topdressed with seaweed I have collected from a nearby beach. I have garlic planted here, and at my partner's farm, where I help him grow plants for his seed company.

As I watch the deer nibbling the oats, I remember the lack of pests in my first garden. I recall the thrill of harvesting my first tomatoes and appreciating the exuberant beauty of the first zucchini flower I had ever seen. The yields (per plant) were low but I didn't know that. Every morsel of food that came from the balcony was an amazing treat.

Attitudes are changing and there is now a greater understanding of the need to grow food within cities. Experienced urban gardeners can achieve incredibly high yields per square foot of garden space, even if it's on a balcony or rooftop. Many resources are available for urban growers. In some cities, local chapters of COG and other organizations offer workshops on rooftop, container and backyard gardening.

There is often talk of a rural-urban divide but that is only one of many ways to see the world. I feel a connection with the urban growers who, like me, want to grow food in a responsible way.

Rural growers can reach out to the urban gardeners. Many of us have experience, skills, seeds and even land we can share. In turn, we can learn a great deal about water conservation, intensive planting and container gardening from our urban counterparts.

When I go to cities, I often feel a bit of culture shock. However, I've learned that by visiting community gardens, I can escape the stress and chaos of the city. As I walk past gorgeous beds, each reflecting the tastes and characters of the individuals who planted them, I feel at home, at peace.

Where I live, drivers wave to each other as they pass on the road. I'm used to greeting and smiling at everyone I see on the street. When I go to large cities, people often seem disturbed, even threatened, when I do this, but not in community gardens. I've

wandered through these and not only have I talked with 'strangers' but they have given me vegetables, seeds and stories. As growers, we are connected.

The membership of Canadian Organic Growers includes backyard gardeners, rooftop gardeners, farmers and people with no gardens whatsoever. Some live out in the country, others downtown, but we all share a common vision. Healthy food and a healthy environment.

The title of this magazine is *The Canadian Organic Grower*. We don't make a distinction between urban or rural, small or large scale. This is your magazine. Let us hear your voice.

Please send letters, stories, criticism and comments to janet@cog.ca or 1205 Route 915, New Horton NB E4H 1W1.

Call for nominations

Canadian Organic Growers is looking for nominations for the 2009 Board of Directors. Directors are elected to a three-year term. Duties as a COG board member involve assisting on monthly teleconference calls, participating in working committees and attending the annual general meeting. Nominees must be active COG members. Nominees to be considered should submit a bio by February 1, 2009. Please send nominations to Daniel.Brisebois@gmail.com

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