

Reprint Island Tides

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Black Gold—Special Feature

What's Gardening Got to Do with It? - Derek Masselink

Derek Masselink who now farms on North Pender Island previously gardened at the UBC Farm, what follows is a heart-warming talk about food-growing for a family. Derek has just been appointed to the North Pender Advisory Planning Commission. He gave a talk on local food to the Pender Farmers Institute on March 6.

We used to live on the UBC Farm, which we often bragged with some irony is the last remaining farm in the city. The quest for higher education brought us to that place, situated at the western edge of the city of Vancouver a mere 100 metres from Georgia Strait. UBC Farm is a hidden agrarian jewel surrounded by the protective second growth forests of Pacific Spirit Park, which in turn is surrounded by the suburban neighbourhoods of Point Grey and Dunbar.

When we first came to the farm our very first act—before we had even moved one box—was to get permission to put in a vegetable garden. At that time we had gone one full growing season without and we ached to get back to the practice of cultivation and the enjoyment of local produce. Permission granted we started with a conservative plot measuring 20' x 30'. Sod was turned. Manure, gathered from behind the livestock barns, was worked in and seeds were planted. It was the end of May. But even with a late start and an usually cold spring, by mid-summer we were enjoying the vegetables of our labour. Our early success encouraged us to expand the garden the following year so that we had three times the area. Each year, inspired by the previous year's successes we expanded the garden. It eventually covered a quarter of an acre.

In our garden we grew all manner of temperate edible flowers, vegetables and finally fruit-bearing trees and shrubs. After 3-1/2 years we sat down and made a list of what we grew and it approached 90 different types of crops and 150 varieties.

We grew approximately 40% of what we consumed. And while this is substantial by North American standards it could be significantly improved if we had been able to grow more carbohydrates (potatoes)—and were able to efficiently thresh the 200 lbs of grain we did grow. Each year we challenge

ourselves to produce more at home—more in quantity, quality and variety—directly out of our garden, in the hopes of achieving a more self-sufficient state.

Why, you might ask, did we take on this Herculean task when there is good, abundant, varied, inexpensive food available at the local grocer? Why the heck would we choose to engage in an activity that is so time consuming? Good question. This is something that we repeatedly ask ourselves especially when engaged in menial tasks like hand-turning a large sections of the garden, hand-harvesting spelt, shelling dried beans or processing 200 lbs. of ripe tomatoes—tasks which seem to arise just when our lives are at their most hectic.

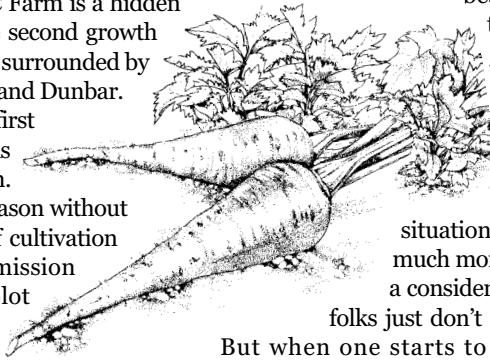
As you all well know garden tasks are constant. They do not wait for you to have available time. When these tasks involve food, the situation—at least for me—seems to be that much more pressing. Food gardening requires a considerable amount of time, time that most folks just don't seem to have enough of these days.

But when one starts to consider the benefits that food gardening provides, the expenditure seems to become less important. Time spent engaged in caring for one's own needs in a time when society generally passes off the responsibility on others is time, I believe, well spent.

The Politics of Gardening

The knowledge of the growing inadequacy of our current food system is so worrisome. The following facts indicate that all is not well with our food system:

- On average, food travels 2,000 km before it reaches our plates and in the process has passed through at least 6 different hands;
- Globally the number of overfed (800 million - 1.1 billion) now equals the number of underfed;
- Corporations either directly or indirectly now control 80% of the food that is grown on arable land around the world—of which the 10 largest hold a majority of this control, and thus



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Island Tides, Box 55, Pender Island, BC, Canada. Phone: 250-629-3660. Fax: 250-629-3838.
Email: islandtides@islandtides.com. Website: <http://www.islandtides.com>

control much of the food we eat on a daily basis, with annual retail sales of \$2 trillion;

- The average North American city only has approximately 3 days of food on hand at any one time to support its population in times of crises;

- Less than 3% of the Canadian population is now engaged in the task of growing food and they are growing older—the average age of our farmers is 55; and

- 15% of our population is described as food insecure.

In addition to using petro-chemical to make fertilizer, we quite clearly rely on an efficient and unperturbed system of transport, largely powered by cheap fossil fuel to deliver our daily bread. It is only this availability of cheap fossil fuel coupled with a stable international socio-political environment that supports our seemingly secure, efficient society.

People are becoming more and more aware of these facts and gaining an understanding of the degree of global conflict required to secure a stable supply of fossil fuel. Couple this with the fact that there is a finite amount of oil in the world and the precariousness of our present food system is obvious.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States galvanized many of us involved in the growing discussion of food, sustainable agriculture, food security and community-based food systems. Reaffirming the need to promote and support the development of food production, procurement and provision systems that are more ecologically and socially sustainable—systems that serve the local community, address and meet local needs, that aren't reliant on polluting, climate-changing fossil fuel, that don't degrade nature, and that improve our health and well-being.

Birth of A Gardener

Prior to becoming an avid food gardener, when I shopped I did so with a clear conscience. As long as I bought whole wheat bread and brown rice and packed my groceries away in cloth bags I remained happy and carefree, safe in the knowledge that I was doing my part for my health and the environment.

This state of bliss was short-lived, succumbing to the seemingly endless onslaught of facts and figures documenting

the damaging effects of our meat on health and the environment followed by umpteen warnings about climate change, effects of pesticide residues and now more recently, genetically modified organisms. I was gradually becoming aware that my shopping decisions were not only killing me but they were being implicated in the death of rural and subsistence communities around the world.

Guilt is not a feeling that I like to cultivate and being the hands-on type I needed to find something effective I could do that might counter my effects on the planet. I needed to engage in an activity that could alleviate environmental guilt, was good for my health and the environment and most importantly was enjoyable. My wife and I eventually decided to take up food gardening, a pastime that promised reduced guilt, good feelings, full stomachs and a reduced impact on the environment. This decision has changed our lives. What started as a tiny balcony garden 10 years ago has blossomed into a personal, and now professional, passion for growing food close to home.

As many of you know growing even a small amount of your own food can be extremely liberating and educational. The idea that you can produce some of what you eat is immensely empowering. When you have a garden, you no longer have to drive to the grocery store to buy carrots and beans because they grow just outside your backdoor. The simple act of gardening introduces you to what good, fresh food tastes and looks like. You come to know what can be grown and when it can be eaten. You may be surprised by the joy the harvest brings when it is shared with family and friends. Over time you may even begin to learn the art of 'putting food by'—the skills of food storage and preservation. These are important moments because unwittingly you have created the beginnings of a small ecological food system, one that is localized, doesn't depend on large inputs of energy or nutrients, and supports and responds to the needs of your family and friends. Your garden has become a personal food system—an essential first step in the development of a larger community-based food system.

Derek Masselink's inspiring thoughts about gardening continue in our March 25, 2004 edition.

