Edible Backyards:
Residential land use for food production in Toronto
Summary – September 2007

Introduction

In seeking to build and support healthy communities, food security is one of the fundamental cornerstones of health and well-being that must be addressed. What we eat, where we get our food and who we share it with are central questions that structure human life. Through its dietary value and spiritual, social and cultural meanings, food sustains people and communities unlike any other commodity. To be food secure is to have not only economic but also physical and social access to healthy food. Community food security, therefore, can be defined as a situation in which all community members are able to access a safe, nutritious and culturally acceptable diet, achieved sustainably and in a way which maximizes community self-reliance.

One successful approach to supporting community food security in all its multiple dimensions is the establishment of community gardens. However, community gardens are only one possible form of urban food production that can address food security concerns. A similar opportunity lies in every sunny back garden and patio that could be used to produce food. Very little is currently known about the contribution of such house-lot food growing practices to food security in Toronto. Urban house lots are small, but nonetheless are often larger than the average community garden plot. Informal home food growing, by providing an opportunity to access unique and diverse varieties of affordable and nutritious produce, has the potential to provide an important support for individual, household, and community food security.

This research was designed to address this gap by developing an exploratory assessment of the contribution home food gardening makes to community food security in Toronto. Through a series of interviews, a portrait of home food gardeners in the context of their homes and communities was developed. The research examined where and how food is grown in Toronto home gardens, and what place the food grown occupies within the lives of the gardeners who grow, eat, and share it with others. Given this qualitative understanding of the diversity of food production practices in the city, it was then possible to explore how home food gardens can contribute to Toronto community food security.

The Study

The study consisted of 23 in-depth interviews conducted with food gardeners in two contrasting Toronto neighbourhoods, North Riverdale and Weston-Mt. Dennis. The neighbourhoods were chosen to access a wide diversity of respondents at a similar residential density. Interview participants were recruited through a random screening process, in which 125 residents of the two neighbourhoods were asked a few brief questions about their gardening practices. This also allowed for a rough assessment of the prevalence of home food gardening in the two neighbourhoods.

The gardens and their place within the interview respondents' lives were assessed through a variety of methods. Each garden was mapped and photographed, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each respondent, and the respondents were asked to complete a pilot survey. Field notes were also completed by the researcher after each interview in order to reflect on and analyse the data collected throughout the

research process. The interview transcriptions along with the researcher's field notes were analysed utilizing a grounded theory approach. From this analysis, a typology of food gardeners was developed, and this qualitative understanding of residential food production was then assessed from a community food security perspective. An evaluation of the survey piloted in the context of the interviews was also conducted and specific suggestions made in order to facilitate its future deployment at a larger scale.

What We Found

125 residents of the two Toronto neighbourhoods of North Riverdale (n = 64) and Weston-Mt Dennis (n = 61) responded to the initial screening survey. Of those surveyed, just over half (54%) grew food, defined as vegetables, fruits, nuts, or herbs. Of these, almost three quarters grew herbs, nearly two thirds grew vegetables, and just over a quarter grew fruits. In both neighbourhoods, food was largely grown in backyard locations. Only 3 of the 125 respondents grew food in their front yards, and only 2 respondents reported growing food in a community garden.

Of the 125 residents screened, 23 participated in the in-depth portion of the research, including 12 respondents from Riverdale and 11 from Weston-Mt. Dennis. A number of the gardeners interviewed grew substantial quantities of food, but most did not do this out of financial necessity. Instead they had a number of different reasons to grow food. There were five basic types of gardener encountered in the interview process. The types were distinguished principally by their motivation for food growing, which shaped both their gardens and the role the gardens played in the gardeners' lives. The five types identified were:

1. Cook's gardens

The most common type of food garden among the respondents interviewed, cultivated in order to assure access to a variety of pesticide-free, fresh and flavourful produce.

2. Teaching gardens

Generally small scale and diverse food gardens cultivated by parents in order to encourage children to interact with and respect the natural world and to make eating fresh produce exciting and enjoyable for children.

3. Environmental gardens

Food gardens cultivated to reduce the household's environmental footprint by growing locally, using organic methods, and conserving water. These gardens were generally fairly substantial in size in order to provide as much as possible for the household's needs.

4. Hobby gardens

These were gardens in which food was cultivated as a hobby, for the pleasure and satisfaction of caring for the plants. Generally these gardens were substantial in size and included a wide variety of crops.

5. Aesthetic gardens

These gardens included a small amount of food, cultivated as much for the beauty of the food plants as the harvest they might produce.

While each type of garden was distinct from the others, all impacted food security in a number of ways. The most significant impact of home food gardening on food security found was in its ability to enhance the accessibility and nutritional value of the diets of the gardeners interviewed. However, the environmental sustainability and safety of diets

was also increased through home food growing, and these were found to be important reasons why a number of the gardeners interviewed chose to maintain a garden.

Home food gardening had an impact on diet by providing convenient access to fresh and flavourful vegetables and fruits. The gardeners interviewed ate more fresh foods, particularly tender vegetables such as greens and tomatoes, than they might have otherwise. The process of everyday engagement with the food garden also changed the gardeners' approach to food, such that the respondents were more likely to seek out fresh produce in season. In addition, home growing enabled the interview respondents to provide pesticide-free or organic produce for their families, which many would not have purchased otherwise. All of the gardeners interviewed emphasized that they do not use pesticides on the food they grow. Having control and personal knowledge of the circumstances in which their food was grown was important to many of the gardeners.

All of the gardeners interviewed had a family history of gardening, and many grew foods in their gardens which had meaning for them in terms of their identity as individuals and their personal and community history. For the most part, however, the foods that they grew were not ones which were unavailable elsewhere. Access to foods specific to the gardener's heritage was not a primary motivation for any of the gardeners, though other studies have highlighted this as a motivation for food growing.

Also, while many of the gardeners shared gifts of small amounts of food with friends and family, this was again not a primary motivation for food growing for the majority of gardeners. This may be partly due to the small amount of food many gardeners grew and also to the changing demographics of both neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, many gardeners felt a strong aversion to wasting food, and so would go out of their way to be sure everything was used even if it was only a small amount. Among gardeners who felt a strong ethical or personal motivation to garden, such as the environmental and hobby type gardeners, sharing of food with neighbours and friends was more common. Few gardeners shared food formally through organizations or programs. Most did not know such programs existed and those who did were uncertain how and where to participate. A number of the gardeners stated that they would consider growing more food if they were able to share it with those in need.

Seeking to provide their food in a more environmentally sustainable manner was a significant motivation for some gardeners. These gardeners tended to follow practices such as composting and using a water barrel to collect rainwater for the garden. The remainder of the gardeners interviewed also generally made an effort garden sustainably. However, only about half of the gardeners composted and many used water from the municipal system to water their gardens fairly frequently.

Beyond community food security, the gardeners interviewed emphasized the impact that nurturing food plants had on their overall health and well being. Gardening in general, and caring for food plants specifically, contributed to both the gardeners' physical and mental health. Simply being outside, breathing fresh air, and working physically were felt to be positive in many of the gardeners' lives. Another aspect many gardeners emphasized was the satisfaction and sense of personal agency they felt in successfully nurturing their plants to harvest. Most universally, the gardeners interviewed saw their gardens as a place apart which they found to be an important source of relaxation and a way to let go of stress from their daily lives.

In terms of barriers and facilitators to home food growing, security of tenure, absence of shade, and gardening skills were all clearly important factors in enabling home food growing. Other issues, particularly concerns about the safety of backyard food gardening, may also be important. However, this was difficult to determine without contributions from non-food growers.

Home food gardening is not accessible to everyone. Only 65 percent of Toronto households have a lawn or garden. However, this includes far more potential land for food production than is likely to be accessible to community gardeners in the near future. Residential food gardens are an important and often overlooked component of urban food systems. Home food gardeners would benefit from support. Ecological gardening resources, in particular, would enable gardeners to create far lower impact gardens through simple measures such as the use of mulch, compost, and rain gauges. In addition, there is a lack of understanding and clarity about safety issues attached to growing foods in home gardens. Better communication of this information, particularly in terms of resources for testing and simple remedial actions which can be taken, may allow more gardeners to grow food more safely.

However, community gardens are also essential to ensure that all households are able to have a garden if they so choose, in order to bolster their food security and their overall health. More resources need to be allocated to providing community garden space and learning opportunities to all gardeners. In this way, the sustainability and accessibility of food gardening in the city might be increased.

Conclusion

Residential food gardening has the potential to shift both perceptions and practices in our relationship with food and the urban environment. Food gardening is immediate and personal, forcing us to deal not only with what and how much we eat but also where it comes from and what it means to us. In its ability to address not only issues of nutrition and access but also sustainability, health and well-being, home food growing is a powerful way to confront issues of urban food security. It is hoped that this study will benefit both academic research and community development by providing a better understanding of the relationship between urban home food growing and food security. With this knowledge programs and policies to support house-lot food producers can be developed and improved. More research is needed to build on the exploratory understanding developed through this study of residential food production in the city and its contribution to community food security. With the pilot survey assessed here it is hoped that further research can determine the prevalence of residential food growing in the city and explore issues raised by this study in more depth.

Robin Kortright, Master of Arts 2007, Department of Geography, University of Toronto
Tel: 416-835-2832, Email: robin.kortright@utoronto.ca.
Sarah Wakefield, Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, University of Toronto
Tel: 416-978-3653, Email: sarah.wakefield@utoronto.ca.

This research was conducted with the support of the Centre for Urban Health Initiatives (CUHI) at the University of Toronto. For more information please see: http://www.cuhi.utoronto.ca/.