
THE 2008 EDIBLE TORONTO FRONT-YARD URBAN GARDEN EXPERIMENT

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GAIL GORDON OLIVER



The seed had been germinating for years. While growing up in Montreal, my father had tomato plants growing in a small patch in our backyard every summer. Our next-door neighbour grew a few other varieties of vegetables, but this was the extent of my exposure to urban vegetable gardening.

As my interest in, and exposure to, sustainable, local farming and foodways flourished, so did my yearning to have a little vegetable patch of my own. Unfortunately, the property we purchased when we moved from Montreal to midtown Toronto twelve years ago has a great house, a fabulous two-sided front yard (it's a corner property), a beautiful back patio, and a teeny tiny backyard that is in full shade most of the day. So, not surprisingly, I put visions of an abundant kitchen garden out of my mind and satisfied myself with visits to, and occasional goodies from, my neighbour Pearl's edible backyard oasis.

And then it occurred to me that a portion of my front yard, with its western exposure, would be the ideal location for my 2008 Edible

Toronto Front-Yard Urban Garden Experiment. Why did I call it an experiment? For one, I wanted to see if I was capable of creating and taking care of a vegetable garden, and secondly, I was curious – and more than a little trepidatious – about how my neighbours would react. And then there was the matter of having three dogs who consider our front yard – along with every tree, bush, flower, and blade of grass on it – their very own, do-whatever-they-want-to-in playground. There would have to be barriers erected, so I decided to go the raised-bed route.

Since I had not an inkling about how to go about setting up what I wanted to be an organic garden, I gave Chris MacLuckie of The Greener Side a call. I'd met Chris when he was running a booth at the Canadian Organic Conference the previous February. He specializes in helping people like me set up and maintain their own edible gardens. Chris came for a consultation and gave me a quote for building two

Above: My husband, Steven, with Hugo, Lucy and Tessa



raised beds (made from spruce), filling them with 100 percent organic soil, worm castings and lots of other natural nutrients, and planting my crops (while educating and instructing me at the same time). I was on my way to becoming an edible gardener!

We got a bit of a late start, with planting taking place on June 12th. That morning, I visited Colette Murphy of Urban Harvest at her annual temporary retail location (she also sells her organic seeds, seedlings and plants at several Toronto farmers' markets), where I purchased all of my vegetable seeds and plants, many of them heirloom varieties. Colette is a wealth of information on edible gardening, and she was a great help in working with me to decide what to grow. By six o'clock that evening, I had two fully planted raised beds on my front yard. Later on, we planted herbs and potatoes in wine barrels.

As for my constantly muddy backyard, Chris covered the inner area with pea gravel and planted a little native woodland, using shade-tolerant plants, around the perimeter. The *pièces-de-résistance* in my now-

beautiful backyard is a series of shiitake logs erected horizontally on rebar. These oak logs, injected with shiitake mushroom spores by Bruno Pretto of Fun Guy Farm, are meant to be placed touching the ground in a vertical position in damp, shady areas. For Hugo, our male dog, however, vertically placed logs would have served as a license to pee; hence the sculptural look of our "raised" shiitake-log garden.

So, as we head into a new growing season, can I call my 2008 Edible Toronto Front-Yard Urban Garden Experiment a success? Absolutely! It was incredibly delightful for me, as well as for my husband Steven and our daughters Amanda and Jillian, to walk out the front door every morning to check on the growth of the plants and vegetables and, later on in the season, pick the vegetables for that day's meals.

Top right: Chris MacLuckie planting the beds on June 12th
Bottom right: The same bed on July 29th



July 29th



August 21st: home-grown ingredients for a spicy eggplant stew

Chris was a great help throughout the summer and fall and, although he'll be doing a bit of maintenance on the garden this year, I'm feeling much more confident about my gardening abilities. My neighbours have had only great things to say about my vegetable beds, and they seemed to enjoy viewing the daily progress as much as I did.

My garden has also seemed to serve as an inspiration for others to follow suit, in both back and front yards. Yes, my horizontally placed shiitake logs did provide me with some very delicious mushrooms. And there's nothing quite like the flavour of freshly picked vegetables (most of which grew very well last year) straight from the garden.

What about the dogs? The raised wooden beds were enough to deter them from running through my vegetables... until later in the fall, that is, when they discovered a family of baby rabbits nesting amongst the remaining chard and kale that hadn't yet been harvested. No need to fret – little bunnies run faster than dogs.

Enjoy your romp through my front-yard edible garden. And consider planting one of your own!

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