
URBAN FARMING IN TORONTO

AS ENVISAGED BY MICHAEL ABLEMAN

It's Much More Than Backyard Vegetable Gardening

BY JUDITH FINLAYSON

Travelling around downtown Toronto with Michael Ableman – writer, photographer and farmer extraordinaire – is a transformational experience. As we walk, he reminds me that Fairview Gardens, the 12-acre plot surrounded by tract housing and strip malls that he farmed for twenty-five years in southern California, came to generate almost \$1 million in annual revenues while under his direction, and supported more than thirty employees. It doesn't take long to be swept away by the possibilities. Instead of a sterile concrete jungle punctuated by the odd tomato plant, I'm envisioning a lush

pastoral of front-yard gardens, rooftop decks, and previously vacant lots where produce is intensively cultivated as a vital segment of our regional food system. By the time we arrive at 90 Croatia Street, a former high school that is now the home of FoodShare Toronto, I'm feeling positively pumped by the agrarian potential of our urban environment.

Under the guidance of executive director Debbie Field, FoodShare has been addressing a variety of local-food issues for almost a quarter of a century. Among the organization's many achievements is the 6,000 square foot patient-staffed organic garden at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) on Queen Street West. Although plans



Michael Ableman with his youngest son, Benjamin

for 90 Croatia are still in the early stages, viewing the building's extensive roof and vast schoolyard whetted farmer Ableman's appetite for tending the soil and feeding people with city-grown produce. As I write, there are over sixty underutilized schools scattered throughout the city, and the prospect of retrofitting at least some for agricultural purposes is an enchanting idea.

Ableman, who now farms on British Columbia's Salt Spring Island, was in town to speak at From the Ground Up, the Gardiner Museum's second annual Nurturing the Art of Sustainability event. This year, the theme of the Robert

Rose lecture was the Urban Farm, a subject Ableman knows well, since he's the founder and former director of the Center for Urban Agriculture at Fairview Gardens, now a significant U.S. centre for agricultural education and farmland preservation. In his book, *On Good Land: The Autobiography of an Urban Farm*, Ableman writes movingly of the two-and-a-half decades he spent working that farm, and of his battle to maintain it as farmland, which eventually resulted in securing its future as a nonprofit corporation. And, since Ableman loves being a farmer and contemporary alienation from the soil is one of his major concerns,

outreach to school children is, not surprisingly, an important component of the centre's mandate.

"Farming is hard physical work," comments Ableman, who points out that only a tiny fraction (about 1 percent) of our population is actually involved in growing the food we eat. In his opinion, this lack of participation is a serious disconnect. "We can't change the food system unless more people want to work in it and that won't happen until we demonstrate that people can make a decent living as farmers – whether they work in an urban or rural environment."

Ableman believes we need to see urban farming, like its rural counterpart, as an economic enterprise and, while he is very supportive of the community garden movement, he points out that its small yields do not seriously address issues related to food security. "Dependence on food imported from elsewhere is very precarious, particularly given our energy situation," he notes. "There will always be a place for farms in the broader region but more and more we'll need to develop farming in the urban and peri-urban edges of large population centres. Because most people now live in cities, there are significant populations of our society that are vulnerable to food security – and it's not only people living below the poverty line."

Clearly, there will not be an enormous push to develop urban agriculture as an economic sector until a crisis develops. Havana, Cuba is a

case in point. Today, it's the world's poster city for a thriving system of fertile urban gardens developed on vacant lands and farmed by neighbourhood residents. But this fecundity was a response to the threat of imminent famine.

Like most of the Western world, Cuba followed the intensive agricultural model, heavily dependent on chemical inputs, not to mention fuel, to transport food from farms to urban dwellers. In 1989, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the supply of oil, fertilizer and pesticides abruptly stopped, plunging the country into a food security crisis. Not surprisingly, Havana, its largest city, was particularly hard hit.

The government's response was to start thinking creatively about agriculture and, as a result, Cuba has become a world leader in the production of organically grown food. Since the scarcity of fuel made transporting food from rural regions impossible, the country began to develop a system of urban gardens. Recognizing that city dwellers weren't likely to know anything about farming, they also provided resources to help them learn about growing food.

These efforts have made a significant contribution to food sustainability and security. By 2002, according to Cuba's Ministry of Agriculture, Havana had 35,000 acres of urban gardens producing 3.4 million tons of food. About 90 percent of the city's fresh produce, all of which is organically grown, is produced within its boundaries. In

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2003, more than two hundred thousand Cubans worked in the urban agricultural sector.

These results – which demonstrate economic scale, public participation in agriculture, and the shift away from an industrial society toward one with an agrarian bent – warm the cockles of Ableman’s heart. When he considers the possibilities for urban farming in the GTA, with its vast geographical spread and huge population base, he thinks it would be an excellent place to explore urban agriculture in a serious way. “We need more farms and people to farm them,” he says. “But, like Cuba, that change won’t happen until it has to. By pointing the way to the future, urban farming will play a role in that shift.”


Since part of our current problem is, as Ableman noted, a dearth of people to farm, skills development may be one step in that direction. Given the current world situation, Debbie Field sees the movement towards urban farming as almost inevitable because, like the Cuban experience, high fuel costs will demand more localized solutions to food production. Over the long term, she thinks this momentum may help to address the need for more farmers. “Our centralized food system is breaking down and, as we move toward a more manageable model, what we teach our children in school is one of the things we’ll be re-thinking. Not only do classes such as home economics and gardening have real

value, they will also help us develop people with food skills who can connect the dots between what we eat and where it comes from.”

In other words, instead of complaining about food quality, with the support of our education system, future generations of urban dwellers may be skilled enough to pick up a shovel and fix the problem. As Ableman suggests, reclaiming their agrarian roots would provide more satisfaction than any latent fantasies of working the land. By developing more farmers, the system would foster food security and sustainability – a remarkably fertile thought. □


For more information about Michael Ableman’s work, visit www.fieldsofplenty.com

Judith Finlayson is a journalist and author with a lifelong love of food and cooking. She is the author of ten cookbooks, including *The Complete Whole Grains Cookbook*, published in 2008. She is currently developing a book on slow cooker comfort food.



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