

# THE EDIBLE LANDSCAPE

## AN URBAN FARMING RENAISSANCE?

*By Ron Berezan*

**I come from a long line of urban farmers. Ever since my Ukrainian and Polish ancestors made the great journey from their small villages in the Old Country and settled on the fringes of Saskatoon and Edmonton, growing food has always been second nature in my family.**

As soon as the first meagre house was up, the apple and plum trees were planted, the raspberry thickets were established and the vegetable gardens were laid out. Childhood games of hide-and-seek were played well into the night at my Baba's half-acre lot in north Edmonton and were punctuated by forages through the strawberry patch or "shelling wars" among the rows of peas. Family feasts were fuelled by the freshly picked or preserved fruits, vegetables and herbs growing within eyesight of the dining room table.

Food and the urban yard were synonymous.

Forty years later, in my ambles through some newer Edmonton neighbourhoods, I can't help lamenting, (to paraphrase that old 60s song) "Where have all the food gardens gone, long time passing?" Could it be that, in just a generation or two, we have lost the accumulated food gardening wisdom of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years? Has the 'big box' food empire with its ever-present, cheap and convenient food from around the world made home-based food gardening obsolete? Are we impatient urbanites just too busy to practice the slow, uncertain discipline of cultivating food gardens? Or perhaps we have been seduced by the latest gardening fads

that tell us that outdoor rooms, waterfalls, and lavish hardscapes are the new ideal and that food gardening is passé.

Fortunately, looking a little deeper, I see much evidence to the contrary. I am increasingly encountering a new breed of urban micro-farmers planting their vision and passion into city yards and public spaces.

Unlike my foremothers and fathers who gardened primarily out of economic necessity, today's urban food growers are motivated by a

different set of concerns. They hunger for a direct connection to their food and to the soil and life cycles



*A multi-tiered portion of the author's home edible landscape.*

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that produce it. They want the taste, quality and variety that only locally produced food can provide. They are looking for ways to live more sustainably



*Lettuce and herbs provide an attractive edging along a stone pathway.*

and are comfortable discussing topics like food security and GMOs. They are organizing community gardens at an astonishing rate (over 60 now in Edmonton) and are holding Seedy Saturdays to swap and preserve heirloom seeds. Despite their busy lives, they want to make sure that their children can experience the joys of a freshly picked strawberry or tomato.

These are no doubt many of the same urbanites who increasingly buy organic, who frequent our local blossoming farmers' markets, and who are intrigued by the "hundred-mile diet" ideal (indeed, some of them are toying with the hundred-metre diet!). In my opinion, there is a deep resonance between the organic movement, the buy local movement, and those who are choosing to grow some of their own food. Could it be that the conditions are ripe for a renaissance of urban food growing?

While dietary fads come and go, there is one preventative health

## Ron Berezan's edible landscape in Edmonton

**Lot size:** 7200 square feet (669 m<sup>2</sup>) including a duplex and double garage

**Production:** Most produce is harvested and eaten fresh from early April to mid-November by the two families that share the yard (and the labour!). The excess is dried, canned, frozen or given away. Some income is generated from the sale of specialty plants and seedlings and from occasional gardening workshops and tours of the yard.

### Edible species:

**Fruit** – apples (Wealthy, Westland, Norkent), pears (Golden Spice, Federovsk), plums (Brookgold, Brookred), cherries (Evans, Crimson Passion, Juliette, Nanking), hardy kiwis (Isaiah), grapes (Valiant)

**Berries** – Saskatoons (Pembina, Smoky, Thiessen), highbush cranberries, honeyberries (*Lonicera caerulea* var. *edulis*), chokecherries (*Prunus virginiana*), sea buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides*), currants (red, black, golden, josta), strawberries, raspberries, blackberry canes

**Nuts** – beaked hazelnuts (*Corylus cornuta*)

**Perennial vegetables** – rhubarb, asparagus, garden sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*), sweet Cicely (*Myrrhis odorata*), bloody dock (*Rumex sanguineus*), good King Henry (*Chenopodium bonus-henricus*), Welsh onions (*Allium fistulosum*), fiddlehead ferns (*Matteuccia struthiopteris* var. *pennsylvanica*), salad burnet (*Poterum sanguisorba*)

**Annual vegetables** – 30 types integrated throughout the yard including 12 heirloom varieties of tomatoes

**Culinary herbs** – lemongrass, lemon verbena, borage, oregano, thyme, marjoram, dill, fennel, cilantro, summer savory, fenugreek, basil (4 types), curled and Italian parsley, sage, Texas sage, hyssop, chervil, chives, garlic chives, lovage, rosemary

**Plants for tea** – spearmint, peppermint, chocolate mint, giant hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*), lemon balm, betony (*Stachys officinalis*), bee balm (*Monarda fistulosa*), English lavender

**Edible groundcovers** – mother of thyme (*Thymus pulgoides*), wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*), Roman chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*)

**Mushrooms** – Shiitake (*Lentinula edodes*) in logs; pearl oysters (*Pleurotus ostreatus*) and King Stropharia (*Stropharia rugos-annulata*) in mulched shrub beds in a woodland garden





message that stands the test of time: diets that are high in fruits and vegetables lead to better overall health; reduced cancer rates; a lower risk of heart disease; better resistance to infection; and stronger mental functioning in old age.

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**Urban yards can make up in vertical space what they lack in horizontal space by taking on a multi-layered approach.**

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When we choose to grow some of our own fruits, vegetables and herbs, we also have access to select heirloom varieties whose nutritional profiles are often superior to those on the store shelves which have been selected and bred for qualities such as shelf life and uniformity. Considering that the nutritional profile of most produce declines progressively

from the moment of harvest, locally grown food is the preference of a growing number of health conscious Canadians.

Growing our own food also resonates well with the deeply felt concerns about environmental sustainability now in the mainstream population. According to the Earth Policy Institute, an ecological economy think tank ([www.earth-policy.org](http://www.earth-policy.org)), worldwide food production and distribution is the single largest producer of greenhouse gas emissions. This should be no surprise considering the enormous fossil fuel budget integral to the conventional industrial food chain in the form of fertilizers, pesticides, the operation of machinery, refrigeration, transportation and processing. Growing some of our own food by organic methods and supporting local farmers contributes significantly to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

It is my deep hope that urban food gardening is in fact enjoying



*The author's backyard tuba fountain with tomatoes and cucumbers.*

a significant renaissance in Canada. If so, we would be joining a trend—in much of the rest of the world, urban agriculture grows at an exciting rate. The United Nations Development Program indicates that an astonishing thirty percent of food consumed by urbanites around the world is now grown within the urban areas themselves. This is particularly true for many cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Hanoi, Vietnam, for example, produces eighty percent of its produce and half of its meat within its greater urban area. Proponents of food security have long advocated that localizing and widely distributing the knowledge and means of growing food is a key element in ensuring the viability of our food supply.<sup>1</sup>

With such benefits, why would anyone not grow some of their own food? Why, for that matter, do so few of our public spaces



*Iona forages for wild strawberries beneath the Saskatoon hedge.*

incorporate edible species? The key may be in how we conceive of the manner in which edible species can be integrated into urban spaces.

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**The possibilities for growing food in small urban spaces continue to amaze me.**

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In designing an edible landscape, my first suggestion is to “think outside the box”—literally. When we think of food gardens, many of us may automatically picture that square or rectangular plot in the far corner of the backyard with straight rows of annual vegetables. This design may make sense for a large-scale mechanized farm, but it is not necessarily the most productive, attractive, or resource- and labour-efficient option for growing food in an urban environment.

An edible landscaping approach looks for ways to incorporate edible species throughout the landscape in a manner that is aesthetically pleasing, functionally effective and that takes advantage of the different growing conditions and microclimates throughout a yard according to the needs and preferences of plant species themselves. There are several principles that can be particularly helpful in moving towards an edible landscape approach.

Like ornamental plants, edible species are both perennial and annual, and they come in all shapes, sizes, colours and textures.

Most of us no doubt will want to include many of the common annual vegetables into our yards. However, there are a host of perennial food crops from fruits to nuts, to berries, to greens, to herbs and edible flowers that generally require less labour than annual crops, and offer beauty and productivity year after year. A wide diversity of annual and perennial food species will help to ensure a more prolonged harvest, provide a wider spectrum of taste and nutrients, and be more resistant to pests, weather conditions and other stresses.

Urban yards can make up in vertical space what they lack in horizontal space by taking on a multi-layered approach. Like the forest gardens planted around



*Lemongrass in the herb garden.*

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**A small mixed fruit hedge or ‘fedge,’ can integrate a number of berry-producing species to provide the desired visual barrier or border.**

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Amazonian villages for centuries (and more recently pioneered in northern climates), we can have tremendously productive and visually interesting constructed landscapes that echo natural forest systems. Per square foot of space, such multi-layered, integrated gardens provide far more food, wildlife habitat and aesthetic

interest than an annual vegetable garden on a similar amount of space, and they require much less in terms of labour and resources.<sup>2</sup>

There are many ways that edible species can be called upon to serve multiple functions and hence have multiple benefits in the landscape. Rather than a strictly ornamental hedge in a front or back yard, a small mixed fruit hedge or ‘fedge,’ can integrate a number of berry-producing species to provide the desired visual barrier or border, while also offering excellent habitat for birds and other creatures. Fruit trees trained in an espalier can replace or enhance an existing fence line. An appropriately placed apple or pear tree can provide shade in summer, and, in time, play value for children or grandchildren. Herb and tea gardens can serve as





*The high-bush cranberry offers excellent habitat for birds and other creatures.*

delightful focal points near a deck or patio where they can also be readily accessed from the kitchen.

Rather than placing all my annual vegetables in one large plot, I distribute them throughout my yard in smaller intensively-planted, curved beds, often mixed in with perennial vegetables or flowers. Carrots provide an attractive edging along a stone pathway in a slightly more sandy soil. Tomatoes and peppers prosper from the extra heat and rooftop rainwater along the south side of the house and garage. Lettuce, chard and other greens are great for the more cool shady areas, perhaps as an understory beneath fruits or berries, and can be planted in successive crops to ensure both an extended harvest and an ongoing groundcover.

The possibilities for growing food in small urban spaces continue to amaze me. One year ago, we introduced mushroom spores into a damp, shady mulched shrub bed on the edge of our property and promptly forgot about them. To our delight, we were gifted this past May and June with a marvelous harvest of pearl oyster mushrooms (*Pleurotus ostreatus*)

with virtually no work, other than the picking. Like the vast fungal mycelia creeping beneath the surface, the movement of urban micro-farmers surges on!

*Ron Berezan has been gardening organically in Alberta for over 25 years. He has been trained in the bio-intensive organic growing method and in permaculture design. Ron is a master gardener, a member of the Society for Organic Urban Land Care and writes for Going Organic Alberta's newsletter. He operates The Urban Farmer, an organic gardening, edible landscaping and permaculture design business in Edmonton. Visit his website at [www.theurbanfarmer.ca](http://www.theurbanfarmer.ca).*

### Endnotes:

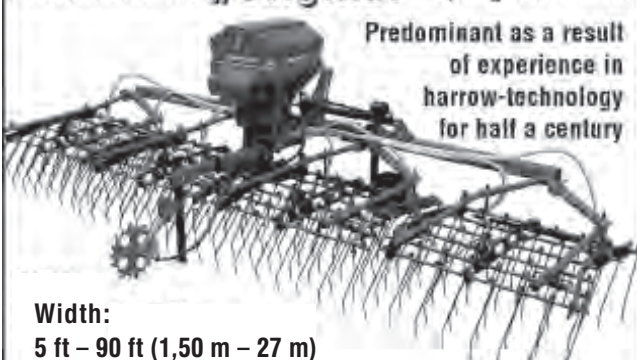
1. See [www.cityfarmer.org](http://www.cityfarmer.org) for a good Canadian resource on the urban agriculture movement.
2. See [www.spiralseed.co.uk/forestgarden](http://www.spiralseed.co.uk/forestgarden) for a great example and explanation of forest gardens.

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