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Backyard Bounty: Guelph's Urban Agriculture Project

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Abstract

Backyard Bounty is a unique community-based agricultural project that began in the spring of 2008 in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Our small business is partnering with community members to use their yard space and convert them into productive vegetable gardens. Landowners receive either some vegetables or a discount on the price of a share in return. The organically grown produce is sold to local consumers through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares, at farmers' markets and through many restaurants in Guelph. It is our hope to foster community, utilize urban space to increase sustainable food production, and provide the community with healthy, nutritious vegetables.

Key words: backyard bounty, urban agriculture, Guelph, organic food, community supported agriculture, sustainable food production

Robert Orland, the founder of Backyard Bounty, was inspired to create the project in response to the under-utilization of lawns. He recognized that lawns are detrimental to the environment as they are very resource dependant and lack significant ecological contribution. These marginal spaces are essentially monocultures acting as a desert for biodiversity within an urban environment, but they also have much unexplored potential.

The Ontario Government has banned most herbicides and pesticides in lawns, gardens and school yards since April 2009 and Guelph has been pesticide free since 2007. However, outside of the province, the shift to organic farming in urban areas has further ecological and health contributions. Where fertilizers and pesticides are used in lawns and gardens, toxic chemicals leach into our groundwater reserves, and pose health risks to those using those spaces and surrounding areas.

In contrast, gardens provide increased biodiversity, habitats for pollinating insects, provide a cooling effect in the summer months and don't require use of noisy, gas guzzling mowers and leaf blowers. While considering the concept of Backyard Bounty, Robert met Scott Williams, an experienced organic farmer, and discussed the possibility with him. They conducted a pilot project in 2008 to measure the feasibility of such a project and decided to create a business out of the idea. Two years later Backyard Bounty has developed into a business including 40 yards, with 58 CSA members, 10 restaurant clients, 4 markets, and 4 additional staff.

Converting Guelph's lawns to gardens to feed its community addresses other issues presented to our society by the global food system. The average distance travelled by supermarket foods is 2,500 miles, with carbon emissions from transport vehicles contributing to climate change and hastening the arrival of a tipping point of peak oil.

Commercial foods are typically mono-cropped. That is, only a single variety of corn, potatoes or other plants will be raised in enormous quantities. This creates a host of immediate environmental problems and threats to future crops. While a monoculture is convenient to large commercial food suppliers, and profitable for the major seed producers, this approach can be dangerous in several ways. For instance, if a blight, an insect infestation or weather conditions devastate a monoculture crop, most or all of the crop may be lost. This production system also relies on genetically modified crops, which have not been adequately tested for safety in human or animal consumption and which have been proven to cause organ problems in mice.

When diverse varieties of crops are grown, there is natural protection against insects, blights, adverse weather conditions and other problems. When an adverse condition appears, there will always be some varieties of a plant which do worse and others that do better in the face of a given challenge. With diversity in crop plantings, there is thus a natural protection against most threats to that kind of plant. If one variety does poorly in a given year, other varieties will survive.

In contrast to the status quo system of food production, Backyard Bounty's produce is grown within the City of Guelph itself with a few additional gardens just outside of the City borders. This localized production system means that our customers may easily know how their food is being grown and can see many of the gardens throughout town. Our business uses heirloom variety seeds, which guarantee that the seeds have not been genetically engineered but instead have been bred over generations to provide greater taste and nutrient content.

With yard space converted to gardens, there is less air and noise pollution from electric or gas mowers and leaf blowers. Gardens provide better habitat for animals and insects; and our organic practices ensure that the soil health is improved with use. Gardens help to reduce air pollution and provide residential 'cooling' during summer heat waves as vegetables are better at absorbing the sunlight and heat than grass. Our business helps to stimulate and support local businesses by reinvesting in community businesses and at this point has over 200 people in Guelph involved in some way!

Backyard Bounty has been received fantastically by the community of Guelph. We have more offers for lawns than we are able to use, unfortunately having to turn many down or have them wait until the following year. Homeowners are excited to donate their lawns to Backyard Bounty for many reasons. Often they find that they have extra space that they are not using, and are happy to have it used for something they feel is beneficial to the community and the environment. They also do not need to cut the grass when a large garden replaces much of their yard! Similarly, restaurants, families and individuals in Guelph are excited about Backyard Bounty's concept. We have many returning CSA members and customers at our markets.

The Progression of a Garden

The pictures below have been taken at the garden we have on Metcalf St. It shows the general progression of the development of a garden in the spaces we use to grow our vegetables.

Figure 1. We took a look and decided in 2009 that this yard on Metcalf Street would be great for a large garden. It gets lots of sun and has lots of space with few tree roots.



Figure 2. Scott roto-tills the yards at least two times. Once to kill the grass and break up the soil, the second time to make the soil more fine and ready for planting. Often it must be done a third time!



Figure 3. Compost is added to the soil to increase the fertility of the soil. Here a volunteer is helping at Metcalf with spreading the compost. Others are forming beds.



4. Seeds are planted in the beds. A wide variety was planted here at Metcalf this spring including mesclun mix, beets, kale, endive, and Swiss chard. When one bed is finished harvesting, it is tilled and replanted again. Last year this garden grew varieties of tomatoes.



5. Trish, Tom and Scott are able to harvest mesclun several times from the same beds before needing to replant it.

Backyard Bounty Organizers

Robert has been in the land and water conservation field his entire career. He worked with a conservation authority in the Greater Toronto Area before taking a position with the Nature Conservancy of Canada, which brought him to Guelph. He is now the President of two other Guelph based businesses: Orland Conservation, an entity devoted to permanent land conservation and sustainability; and Better Planet Investments.

Scott, our Head Farmer, manages all of the farming aspects including planning what plants to grow in which locations – based on garden settings, sizes, amount of shade and how much attention each plant needs. He has worked in farming for about nine years in Ontario, British Columbia and in Australia and has worked as a baker for several years as well.

I, Julianna van Adrichem, take care of matters behind the scenes as the Project Coordinator, providing presentations to various businesses, organizing markets, and creating and distributing information among other things. I worked for Whole Circle Farm in Acton, Ontario and Irvine Creek Organics CSA in Bellwood, Ontario before joining Backyard Bounty. I developed my skills in coordination by working for a few years for the City of Guelph and the University of Guelph.

Trisha Muldoon and Thomas Armitage, our Assistant Farmers, have garnered lots of experience in organic agriculture and hope to continue to work in related fields in the future. They help Scott in the gardens with everything from seeding, transplanting and propagating to harvesting and tying up tomato plants.

The biggest support one can give to Backyard Bounty is purchasing our produce at our various markets to ensure that we will continue successfully into the future. We are currently selling our produce at four separate markets within Guelph. Information for these markets is listed below. As for volunteering, we always welcome additional help! In fact, not only do volunteers learn from the best, but they receive free vegetables and an organic t-shirt after helping for 10 hours. There are also many exciting opportunities to assist with the development of the markets listed below. Please contact me if you are interested (see below). If you would like to donate your yard to Backyard Bounty, contact me for an application form and we would love to visit your yard and discuss the possibility of using it next year.

MARKETS

Guelph Farmers' Market

2-4 Gordon St.
Saturdays from 7am to noon
Permanent table across from the cheese vendor by the door closest to the train tracks along Gordon.

Borealis Market – Returning Spring 2011

1388 Gordon St.
Saturdays 12:30pm to 4pm.
Also selling: Borealis Grille

Waterloo Ave Neighbourhood Market

Wellington Chiropractic Centre
12 Waterloo – across from Farmers' Market
Tuesdays 4:30pm to 6:30pm
Also selling: Polestar Hearth Bakery Green Table Foods, and Irvine Creek Organics

Norwich Neighbourhood Market

126 Norwich St. E. – Islamic Society of G.
Tuesdays from 3pm to 7pm
Also selling: Alex and Dan Catering, Polestar Hearth, and Irvine Creek Organics

If you are interested in learning more about our business, please check out the Backyard Bounty website listed below. Please contact us if you would like to receive our regular bi-weekly newsletter. Our newsletter includes gardening information, featured vegetables, volunteer opportunities, Backyard Bounty news, additional information of interest, and even some jokes!

Fresh, naturally grown produce from Guelph's backyards! When individuals support Backyard Bounty through investing in a share, buying our produce at the market, or donating their yards, they are supporting a local, sustainable food system for Guelph and a working model for other cities to adopt. One of the most un-tapped resources in our city is our own backyards and we aim to make these yards into productive spaces for a sustainable future.

Local Just Got Closer!

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