

Can a locavore dream of public produce come true?

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In downtown Kamloops, B.C., on a narrow patch of land near the hospital thrift shop and a tanning salon, there's a vegetable garden. Its raised beds are planted with kale, peas and squash – a whole variety of produce, growing in the open, with no fences to keep out passersby.

Which is exactly the point. The garden is called the Public Produce Project and has an official open-picking policy: Anybody is invited to come in and harvest food for free. There are signs instructing people what to take, when and how.

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Chelsea Bailey, who runs the nearby restaurant The Ploughman's Lunch with her family, took advantage of it on her breaks last summer, as a refuge from her busy job. "I would go to the garden, pick a couple pieces of lettuce and sit on a bench and eat them," she says. "It was so freeing. You could just go outside and eat something."

There were always a lot of people coming, particularly children and university students, as well as the homeless. And the garden had a lasting influence on Ms. Bailey's own diet: "Since then, I have eaten more fresh foods, because I realized how lovely they are."

While governments in Canada have been distancing themselves from food production (as with the recent scrapping of the federal Canadian Wheat Board), the garden in Kamloops is part of a growing movement.

It advocates using public lands for food instead of flowers – creating spaces in cities for vegetable beds and fruit trees rather than lawns and dog walking. While the work may be done by volunteers, it requires the support of the state and the community at large. And despite critics who fear that food in common space will create messes or attract vermin and vagrants, it's spreading rapidly across the continent.

These initiatives come at a time of rising food awareness in the culture and a burgeoning need in the population. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, only about a quarter of us eats three

servings of fruit and vegetables a day. Obesity rates continue to climb and large swaths of cities are classified as “food deserts” – areas where there is little or no access to healthy, fresh foods.

“The state has a responsibility to make sure the community is fed adequately,” says Laura Kalina, co-chair of the Kamloops Food Policy Council, which started the garden with a group of residents. “There should be policy in place to make sure land is available to grow food.”

While the garden was launched on land donated by people in the community, the municipal government was quick to join in, opening two more this summer, including a raised bed at City Hall with strawberries and pumpkins for all to harvest.

Elaine Sedgman, who is with the local chapter of Master Gardeners, an organization that teaches gardening to the public, saw how quickly people took to the idea. “There were ladies across the street who worked at the hospital thrift store who would pick. There would be homeless people and business people who picked the produce. ... Whenever I went to work there, there wasn’t anything ripe because it was so well-picked.”

For decades, city-dwellers have worked together to grow food in community gardens, which are often found in parks on plots allotted by the city. However, these plots are typically kept secure from anyone who is not a member of the community group. With public produce gardens such as the one in Kamloops, urban agriculture in North America is being transformed from a private grassroots activity to a public project with a whiff of social welfare.

There are many permutations. In one midtown Toronto city park, volunteers care for a public orchard of apricot, apple, pear and cherry trees, and harvest the fruit to share. This spring in front of City Hall in Baltimore, cold-tolerant greens such as collards and chard were grown by Master Gardeners and sent to a local food bank. Volunteers have replaced flowers with veggies at the capital building in Madison, Wis., and donate the produce to a social-services agency.