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Edible tree tour: Community orchards are providing food for residents and shelters across the city

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If you've ever wanted to experience how a squirrel or raccoon eats, minus the pizza crusts and plum sauce packets, the edible tree tour is a great opportunity.

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On 10 a.m. on Aug. 25, at Ben Nobleman Park (across from Eglinton West subway station), a group of tree nerds will be your guides through the hidden urban menu of Forest Hill. The free event (with a suggested \$5 donation) showcases the food you may not have noticed growing from our trees.

"We focus on what humans can consume and enjoy and start to fall in love with our urban forests again in a whole new way," says Amanda Gomm (manager of LEAF), one of the guides.

A few weeks ago, on a sticky afternoon, Gomm and co-guides Susan Poizner, founder of the park's community orchard, and Laura Reinsborough, founder of Not Far From The Tree, gave me a pre-tour, starting in the park near the still-young trees they've planted.

Three years ago Ben Nobleman Park was in disuse. "There were never any people here," says Poizner. "The playground was old and rotting."

She decided to plant some pear, cherry and plum trees, inspired by [Pine Street Community Gardens](#) in Vancouver. "I started to envision a situation where folks in our community could get together, plant some trees, take care of them and share the harvest." At a public meeting, however, there was the usual community opposition.

"They were afraid of mess, fallen fruit attracting bees that would bite their children, homeless people coming here to eat the fruit."

Now though, the few members who were opposed to the idea have become active participants in the orchard.

From the park, we wind our way north, along Everden Road, the ladies pointing out service berries, black locust, magnolia, mulberries — that have already begun to stain the sidewalk a fading purple — linden berries, ginko leaves and crabapples. It was staggering, all the little things, edible, palatable or medicinal growing around us.

One residential yard was bursting with peaches.

Reinsborough's organization, Not Far From The Tree, collects excess fruit from homes like this.

"We pick food and share it," Reinsborough says. "Homeowners have trees in their yards and when they can't harvest it, they call us. A third of the harvest is offered to the homeowner. A third is offered to the volunteers so everyone gets to go home with a bucket of cherries or a bag full of pears. The final third we donate to food banks and shelters. We partner with 30 different agencies across the city."

In 2011 they harvested just over 6,000 pounds. The year prior (with better weather) it was almost 20,000 pounds.

The tour will visit at least one of these ready-to-eat fruit caches. But along the way, the group (the event usually draws over 100 people) will learn about all the little things hanging from trees.



Staghorn sumac can be mixed with sugar and vanilla to make a tart, lemonade-like drink.

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“There is this whole other idea of what’s edible that’s better understood through a conservation and urban forestry lens,” says Reinsborough. “We tend to think of what’s most palatable, what’s easiest to work with and cultivate. But there’s so much more plant matter out there that is edible than we think.”

Entering the northern tip of [Cedarvale Park](#), which stretches down to Bathurst and St. Clair, Poizner leads me to a patch of staghorn sumac, from which I make a cocktail for the next night’s dinner (see this week’s Fed column with arborist Todd Irvine).

Poizner takes a bite of a crabapple, smiling even though it’s too astringent to eat. “I love the idea of nibbling your way through the neighbourhood. That’s the way it should be”

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