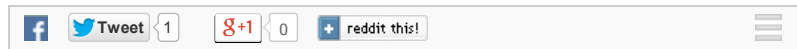


Neighbours war over urban orchard

Everden Rd. is a little street at the heart of the city's green movement.



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Susan Poizner and Sherry Firing want fruit trees in Ben Nobleman Park.

By: [Catherine Porter](#) Columnist, Published on Sat May 02 2009

Everden Rd. is a little street at the heart of the city's green movement.

The residents who live in the matchbox houses that dot its edges were in the trenches with Jane Jacobs, fending off the dreaded Spadina Expressway, which would have ripped through the Cedarvale ravine below.

When the Toronto Transit Commission planned to bury their park to build the Eglinton subway extension 15 years ago, they rose up again, and again were successful.

Now, the residents of Everden are battling what many think is the next great threat: An orchard.

"That park – that little park – is the little space kids have to play on," says Susan Green, looking out from her living room at Ben Nobleman Park, a green pillow dot at the end of the Allen Expressway. "If an orchard goes in there, it will turn into a farm and we'll lose all that."

People have set ideas about their parks. They want them just so. They fight for them.

In this case, the park in question is small, nondescript, dotted with dandelions and a handful of aging birch trees that will have to come down soon. The most memorable thing about it is the very thing it was created to fight against: the parade of cars rushing on and off the Allen Expressway, across the street.

All that traffic would make it perfect for the city's first orchard, thought Susan Poizner, a local documentary filmmaker and avid vegetable gardener. The trees would shelter the park from the noise. Their radiant blossoms in spring would brighten the area. And set so close to both the on-ramp to the highway and Eglinton West subway station, the orchard would be a perfect advertisement for urban agriculture.

"We'd make it an interactive place for children, who could pick an apple on their way home from school rather than eating a Mars bar," says Poizner, sitting under an evergreen on the edge of the park as city workers prune bushes nearby.

Together with Sherry Firing, Everden's most beloved gardener – who can't help but weed other people's yards – she drafted a plan to rim the park with 40 fruit trees. Apricots, serviceberries, hickories, plums, pears, cherries, even pawpaw – an indigenous fruit rarely eaten because its delicate skin doesn't travel well.

The payoffs were obvious: protective trees that soak up carbon dioxide and provide shade, organic food that could be delivered by foot, and community engagement. They envisioned a huge harvest table that could seat 20, blossom festivals and cider-pressing parties.

"We saw it as a way to unite the community," says Poizner.

They partnered with a non-profit group that picks fruit in neighbourhood backyards, met with city parks staff, and had their plans drawn up. Then they presented it to their neighbours at a community meeting.

The objections surprised them. Some neighbours launched a petition last week. They gathered 70 signatures in three days.

The objections are many: rotten fruit clogging their gutters; wild animals scurrying up from the ravines; a darker path through the park at night; the loss of green space. Most were mad they hadn't been consulted earlier.

"I'm not against trees. I like them. I think they should be in the ravine," says Frank Dyer, who lives right next to the park. A crabapple tree flowers in his backyard. "Why couldn't they start with just six?"

Community urban orchards abound in Britain, Boston and Philadelphia. Vancouverites have also planted a few. Ben Nobleman's would be Toronto's first.

Councillor Joe Mihevc calls it a "pilot project." He sees it as the first of many, as the local-food movement takes root and matures in Toronto. Soon, people won't just be eating local food trucked in from farms outside the city; they'll be producing it themselves, he says.

Toronto's strategy on how to foster that is being hashed out.

That means Everden's fight is an appetizer of what is to come.

In response to their neighbours' concerns, Poizner and Firing have pruned their proposal. They've yanked out 13 trees and left the park's central field untouched, so kids can still kick balls.

"We shouldn't have called it an orchard," says Firing, brushing dirt from her hands as she wanders down the park path toward Everden and her home. She has been composting her arugula and pea beds this morning. "We should have called it Ben Nobleman Perimeter Orchard."

Even then, the plan might have sparked fireworks. Neighbours, like Green, think 27 trees are still too many – especially when they could all go into the ravine down the street.

Parks always inspire passion.

"How many of us have not had one of our first kisses in a park?" says Mihevc.

He will spend the weekend negotiating a happy consensus, he says.

"At the end of the day, the park will be a modest first community orchard in the city of Toronto," he says. "That's something we can frankly be proud of."