



Innovation Youth “From the Root to the City” Urban Agriculture and Food Security

Since 2011, Innovation Youth’s “From the Root to the City” has been growing food on the unceded territory of Tiohtià:ke (Montreal), teaching children and teenagers about gardens and gardening, feeding families in the Peter-McGill neighbourhood, and participating along with other organisations in greening the city. The mission of the project has evolved over the years from a focus on general employment skills for youth to include a robust, three-pronged approach.

Our Mission for the Ground

We are committed to healthy soil practices, to planting primarily indigenous food plants, to sourcing our seeds and seedlings from local seed breeders and seedling producers, and to practicing organic, regenerative agriculture.

Our Mission for Youth

We are committed to providing young people with job training in community work and agriculture work, setting them up to go on to careers in one or both of these fields.

Our Mission for the Community

We are committed to growing food the community wants to eat, in a way that aligns with community desires and grows community knowledge, in accessible sites that welcome all members of the community to work the soil.

We are pleased to hear that greenification is a priority in the reconversion of the Royal Victoria site. We would like to offer a robust recommendation for the democratization of greenification. Our recommendation for the former Royal Victoria hospital site:

Community Food Forest & Raised Bed Agriculture

We recommend that outdoor space at the former site be allocated for these two agricultural projects. In what follows, we outline the two proposals, which we have been developing for the past year. A community food forest in particular is one of Innovation Youth’s long-term dreams, and has received support from the City of Montreal. The largest un-answered question for a community food forest is location; the Royal Victoria site offers an answer to that question unparalleled by any other space in the downtown core. Raised bed agriculture is central to growing food in urban conditions throughout North America, as it allows for the greatest flexibility in terms of space usage. We recommend transforming one of the site’s parking lots into a raised bed urban farm, creating green and growing space that is accessible to all.

What is a Community Food Forest?

Community

- A community food forest is a space in which the community can grow together, and its members can develop their sense of belonging to and in the natural world.
- Thinking in terms of us and the relationships that make up that we (between us as humans, between us and our food, between us and our environment) allows us to work together toward a future when all of us can be nourished.
- A community food forest springs from the community: beginning with education and dis-

cussion sessions, the community grows together toward a plan for not just the types of plants to be planted, but also the infrastructure surrounding and inside the forest. Ensuring paths are wide enough and well-structured enough for strollers and wheelchairs matters, as does the language of the signage. Benches, bulletin boards, lighting, picnic tables, and other considerations spring from how the community envisions using the space. Together, we ask: what types of food will we grow? What activities will animate the space? What are the best solutions for accessibility for all?

- A community food forest is a lifelong project, so it rests on community investment.
- A community food forest is a site of learning and education, so it is animated by activities like knowledge-swaps, harvest parties, planting days, and cooking workshops. It is the site for childhood education in the form of summer day camps, library programming, and classroom visits, but it is also the site for adult education and sensitisation about the environment.

Food

- A community food forest is planted with edible plants or plants that have edible parts (leaves, stems, flowers, fruits, nuts, etc.). These plants are for the most part indigenous; others are plants that have naturalised to this region. Planting indigenous plants is important for the overall health and long-term sustainability of a community food forest; indigenous and naturalised plants require less maintenance in order to be healthy, and they have co-evolved to live in harmony with each other.
- In a community food forest, food becomes a location where all of us can find ourselves, a site for the exchange of ideas, dreams, cultures, and needs.
- Because food is central to our self-understandings, as well as to our cultural traditions, the desires and needs of the community are important to integrate into the plan. Perhaps the community is concerned about children with nut allergies; we might avoid planting nut trees to help parents feel more comfortable with their children learning to harvest for themselves. In this way, the choices of food to grow reflect the needs and desires of those who will be planting, harvesting, and eating.
- Importantly, the harvest of a community food forest is accomplished by the community, for the community. The forest contains panels that identify the different food choices, how to harvest them, how to gauge ripeness, and other important information, in multiple languages. Several times a year, harvesting sessions allow food to be brought to community organisations for distribution.

Forest

- A community food forest is based on the model of a forest ecosystem: trees, shrubs, plants, and mosses live in harmony and interdependence. When the forest reaches maturity, it needs very little human intervention to sustain itself.
- The forest ecosystem is a model for the human beings involved in a community food forest, too: it patterns how we live in harmony and interdependence, each of us in our place, with our talents and contributions celebrated by the whole community.
- We begin development by planting young trees and shrubs, as well as perennial food plants. In the following years, as the trees and shrubs grow to maturity, perennial food plants, ground-cover, and mosses establish themselves. After five to ten years, the maintenance tasks for the forest be-

come less about the health of the plants and more about their accessibility; trees get pruned regularly in order to allow paths to remain open, perennial plants get divided and re-planted in order to make harvesting easier. Annual food plants can also be planted, as the community decides.

- Community food forests incorporate whole ecosystems, which means that eventually, we can envision beehives for honey bees and housing space for native bees, compost systems, and integration of safe habitats for urban wildlife like songbirds.

What is Raised Bed Agriculture?

- Community food forests belong beside other community agricultural spaces. We envision a communal garden - not a community garden, which lies behind a fence and is accessible only to those lucky enough to be given permission to use a small plot - in which all members of the community are invited to participate in planting, maintaining, and harvesting.
- A core team will be responsible for managing the raised bed site as a whole, but, following the open-harvest model used by Innovation Youth's From the Root to the City program, the whole site will be accessible to all members of the community. Volunteering days will be publicised, but signage will also direct community members in performing small tasks independently, as they enter into the space.
- Using a model of raised beds developed in New York City's abandoned parking lots, which prevents chemical leaching into the soil of raised beds and allows for transformation of black space into green space without the exorbitant cost of replacing asphalt with dirt, this large site offers quickly-realizable access to garden space.
- Raised beds will be placed at a variety of heights, allowing accessibility to people of varying ages and mobility conditions. Beds closer to the ground accommodate small children, and those raised higher up are easy to access for people in wheelchairs, and for those who have difficulty bending low to the ground. Paths between beds are wide enough for wheelchairs, strollers, and other mobility devices to pass easily. Benches throughout the site allow community members to rest while walking or working, or simply to enjoy the beauty of the garden.
- With the sun conditions on this part of the Royal Victoria grounds, a wide variety of annual food plants will thrive in these garden beds: both plants indigenous to the region, which will be planted using traditional agricultural techniques, and plants that are significant to the food cultures that make up the neighbourhood. The garden space thus becomes a site of cultural exchange and a celebration of difference, a place where food brings people together.
- Because of its wide variety of plants and the ease of access, the site is ideal for educational activities. People of all ages can learn together about agriculture, about the environment more generally, and about the foods of their neighbourhood. In an urban setting where people are alienated from the sources of their food, having the opportunity not just to grow but to see what is growing and to learn together is central to developing a healthier population.
- As with other Innovation Youth projects, this site is open-harvest, with information easily available explaining how and when to harvest, and identifying plants. At regular intervals, the project management team harvests food to bring to local distribution initiatives. Local enterprises like

the CCMP's community-run cafe are able to purchase vegetables, herbs, and fruits at low cost, with the money being reinvested into the garden.

What are the benefits of this kind of project?

Education

- A community food forest + raised bed urban farm together provide spaces for community education on the topics of food, the environment, agriculture, and other topics. Learning in green spaces rather than indoors is essential to equipping the whole community to be more engaged with the natural world, particularly as kinesthetic learning and visual demonstration are concerned.
- More than simply the physical space for learning, however, these spaces provide the impetus for learning, sparking curiosity and interest where none may have previously existed.
- The community food forest model, by virtue of being community-led, offers unique opportunities for knowledge-sharing and horizontal education, where neighbours learn from each other and grow into deeper relationship. Animation of the space comes from within the community, and thus meets the community's needs and desires.
- Students in urban planning and agriculture will be able to find hands-on learning and work opportunities through this project's proximity to the university cores of Montreal.

Alternative food systems

- A community food forest + raised bed urban farm provide opportunities to learn and grow together with Indigenous knowledge keepers from around the world.
- Forest ecosystems were the models for the earliest agricultural traditions in human history, and they are still the models that underlie traditional agricultural systems around the world. The opportunity afforded by a community food forest to introduce these systems to settlers in Montreal is important: the commitment to reconciliation entails a commitment to celebrating and learning from local Indigenous modes of being in the world, to allowing those modes of being to come to the forefront of how the community acts.
- But there are also traditional agricultural systems and practices that come to Montreal with new arrivals to Canada, and these sites will by their design explicitly invite those systems and practices to be enacted and celebrated.
- The opportunities to learn and grow together, from our many cultural traditions surrounding food and agriculture, are part of the creation of a food system that more closely reflects the needs and desires of the community.

"Snacks" & healthy eating

- If we take seriously medical recommendations on the subject of healthy eating, it is clear that in urban spaces healthy food is much less accessible than unhealthy food. It is easier to find a bag of chips or candy than it is to find fruits and vegetables! Especially for those who, due to income level, geographic location, or other considerations are not able to actively pursue healthy eating, the easily-accessible foods that will grow in the community food forest and raised bed garden are crucial interventions.

- Giving the community the capacity to “snack” on fresh fruits and vegetables, including plants that they may not otherwise have the opportunity to taste (e.g., many indigenous berries), is crucial to building a healthier community. The open-harvest model, paired with community decision-making on planting, leads directly into the accessibility of this kind of “snacking.”
- The accessibility of healthy food in the downtown area is limited, especially by price point. As a Good Food Organisation accredited by Community Food Centres Canada, Innovation Youth is committed to making healthy food affordable and proximal to downtown households. These sites on the grounds of the former Royal Victoria Hospital would allow partners like Meals for Milton Park, Innovation Assistance, McGill’s Midnight Kitchen, and the Concordia Food Coalition to distribute low-cost produce grown in, by, and for the downtown community.

Ecosystem renewal

- Urban agriculture initiatives are often centred on what is most profitable to grow, rather than what will best serve the community. Under the auspices of a partnership between a constellation of non-profit and community organisations, the community food forest + raised bed agriculture will hew closely to the needs and desires of the whole community. This community necessarily includes non-humans. Native pollinators especially are undergoing a crisis in urban spaces, and the provision of indigenous plants with which they co-evolved will help to stabilise their populations. Growing without pesticides or herbicides will also allow the healthier insect life that feeds native birds and other wildlife.
- Humans and non-humans living together in harmony is an important goal for the world as a whole, if we are to combat a changing climate. A community food forest + raised bed agriculture would, through its educational aspects, foster encounter between humans and non-humans and allow for the building of a more sustainable urban ecosystem.
- Urban agriculture, and green spaces in general, has demonstrable effects on the heat island phenomenon plaguing urban spaces. Allocating a large amount of space at the site to green space of any kind will help to cool the city, but the specific agricultural projects recommended here will do more than that: this green space will invite people in to learn about and share in the positive environmental impacts of urban growing. It will inspire further greening projects throughout the city’s many neighbourhoods, as it is itself inspired by the work of urban growers already at work in Montreal.

Where could this be located?

- Raised bed agriculture would take place in one of the large parking lots, for reasons outlined above. This kind of location would have the added benefit of marrying agricultural ecosystems to the mountain’s ecosystems.
- The community food forest would require a specific physical spot in and around the green area.
- The whole Royal Victoria site, by virtue of its location, provides important sun access, which is otherwise difficult in a city with so many high rises going up all the time.
- In general, we recommend parts of the site accessible to all ages and to a variety of mobility

needs; spaces that are only accessible via stairs, for instance, would not meet this recommendation.

Who could be involved in this initiative?

- Innovation Youth has the expertise to lead the project as well as the trust within the network downtown. We can mobilize well toward community involvement, which is crucial to pursuing the public good with this site. We would approach McGill agriculture and food security clubs; collaborate with CCMP's green roof, as they are working towards the democratisation of agriculture; continue our partnership with the CSAT & Indigenous knowledge-keepers; and would invite daycares, kindergartens, schools, etc. to use the space as an educational tool.
- If this recommendation is pursued, we would establish formal agreements with other educational, agricultural, and food actors in the downtown core.
- We thank you for the opportunity to share our vision for the site, and would be pleased to continue to offer our knowledge and experience in the reconversion of the site. May it remain for the public good!

Sincerely yours,

From the Root to the City



Je donne volontiers mon appui à ce projet en tant qu'agente de liaison de la Table de Quartier Peter-McGill, spécialisée dans les défis de la sécurité alimentaire du centre-ville. Il s'inscrit parfaitement dans le plan de sécurité alimentaire que le comité, formé à cet effet, a préparé pour les 5 prochaines années et contribuerait largement à soutenir les objectifs globaux envisagés pour l'ensemble de l'arrondissement.

Emma Campbell

Agente de liaison

Table de quartier Peter-McGill