

1- État des lieux:

When I think of urban agriculture in Montreal, I immediately associate it with the vast network of community gardens established in the 1970s. City gardening or urban farming, call it what you may – it all boils down empowering citizens with the ability to get closer to the food production process and being able to feed themselves. While today's demand for garden plots far exceeds the available space (the neighborhood in which I live - Hochelaga-Maisonneuve has but 2 gardens – sharing a total of 262 plots, with a four-year waiting list) individuals, community organizations, and even commercial enterprises have been mobilizing to green rooftops, vacant lots, terraces, and balconies.

But urban agriculture is more than just community gardens. At its core, it is the crossover between concerns for the environment, our food supply, and urban development, forging strong communities, and spreading knowledge through education, activities and social interventions.

My partner Mathieu Caron and I make an effort to reduce our imprint on the environment by cycling all-year long, composting our organic waste, recycling, greening the alley, and growing our own vegetables. We complement our vegetable needs during the winter and spring seasons by supporting Lufa farms' initiative of rooftop city farming. We believe in their commitment to reducing energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions related to transporting food to urban centres through the non-refrigeration and packaging of their goods, as well as their 15-kilometre limit to drop-points. We had also been raising four chickens for almost a year until early April 2012. This small flock of birds were our champion egg-layers, and our pets.

2- Opinion sur la pertinence de l'agriculture urbaine à Montréal :

Montreal, like other metropolitan cities, has recognized that there are a number of creative ideas and solutions for maintaining a commitment to being a sustainable city. The initiatives have begun and there are clearly many who share the same vision: the greening of roofs – providing shade and reducing heat island effect, community gardens, bee keeping, backyard chickens, composting, and the greening of alleys and vacant lots to name but a few.

Urban agriculture can bring community members closer together and forge stronger social ties, it helps to green and clean up the neighbourhood, and brings the food production process closer to where it is consumed - teaching our children, while in the process, exactly where fruits and vegetables come from.

3- Préoccupations, problématiques et blocages :

Occupying the ground floor a duplex with a 1250 sq foot yard is as much as a gift as it is a playground and laboratory for experimentation. Since moving to our home, we re-appropriated the yard: planting trees, vines, perennials, and herbs. The compost bin is made from scrap materials (a discarded futon frame found in the neighbourhood), and separated into three compartments. One is

active, another passive, and a third for stockpiling of leaves, grass clippings and other soft stemmed yard debris. Because we compost, we throw out the equivalent of one grocery bag of garbage every other week. We firmly believe that citizens should be responsible for composting their own organic matter, because if done properly – it is highly efficient at a residential level.



In a bid to be self-sustaining and environmentally conscious, we work hard at growing our own food. Over the last 3 summers, we have harvested many cherry tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and snow peas - not to mention a variety of fresh herbs (chives, basil, thyme, sage, the list goes on...). We were also lucky enough to have between 2-3 fresh eggs a day from our small flock of chickens that we began raising last year. We were very much aware that raising chickens was illegal in our borough, but we also knew that we were not alone in our desire to consume chemical and pesticide-free fresh eggs on a daily basis (there really is no comparison to the quality of the eggs – even now that we have resorted to buying grain-fed, free range chicken eggs from our local health-food store). In Canada and the US, there are over 175 cities that allow residents to keep chickens. These include big cities such as Victoria, Vancouver, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Seattle. Could Montreal be next? I certainly hope so.

Normally it would take about a month for the compost to process our organic waste, but once we began to keep chickens, we found the perfect gardening partners – and our compost was often ready in less than two weeks. Chicken manure (nitrogen) would go into the active bin, and raised the temperature of the compost considerably, balancing the green matter (grass clippings, weeds, leaves, fruits and vegetables) with brown matter (wood shavings from the coop). On more than one occasion, we had to dumpster dive from the nearby fruit store to feed our compost! So in the end,

we processed the spoiled fruits and vegetables that would have eventually made their way to a city dump.



A small flock of hens, between four to five, can be easily cared for in a relatively small area. We kept four chickens in a 2.5ft x6ft x 2ft coop, with a 4ft x 8ft run for one year. The coop was insulated and equipped with an electrical outlet to keep a heat lamp on during the winter months. But there is another alternative to where you can keep your chickens. We inherited a silken hen from a family who were moving to a co-op and animals were prohibited in their new home. They placed their hen with us because up until that time - she was an indoor chicken.

We may not have consulted all of our neighbours before welcoming our domestic fowl, but neither do other pet-owners of dogs, cats, or exotic birds. Our chickens were limited to our backyard whereas cats roam the neighbourhood and do their business wherever they please, and many dog-owners throughout the city do not even bother to pick up their best-mate's excrements.

Keeping chickens has introduced us to four other neighbours who, over the course of the last year (while car-pooling to pick up feed, or having 5 à 7s to talk chicken shop) and have become good friends. I am certain that there are many more that we have not yet encountered.

At the beginning of April 2012, we received a notice of violation from a Ville de Montréal inspector. Following the notice from the city, we had to move our chickens. We remain committed to working towards changing current by-laws, and have participated on the debate to keeping urban backyard chickens on CBC radio's Daybreak (<http://www.cbc.ca/daybreakmontreal/2012/05/underground-chicken-coop.html>), as well as being featured on CBC Montreal's TV news at 6.

4- Recommendations, suggestions et commentaires :

We seek an amendment to by-law 3344 which prohibits the keeping of fowl and game, via a modification to the Mercier-Hochelaga-Maisonneuve borough by-law concerning dog and animal control ([COD PMR RRVM-C-10](#)). Following the example of Rosemont – La Petite Patrie's modification to the aforementioned by-law, we would like to go one step further: we seek the approval of a pilot program to allow pet chickens at 25 homes in our borough. We believe that a two-year program will be sufficient time to prove to borough representatives that keeping urban chickens is an excellent way to promote permaculture and a self-sufficient way of living.

Drawing from Urban Hens Ottawa's proposed by-law amendment to the City of Ottawa's BY-LAW # 2003-77 (<http://urbanhensottawa.wordpress.com/uho-proposal/>), the following points illustrate how hens can be re-introduced into urban areas:

- 1. Maximum of 5 hens per property*
- 2. Roosters prohibited*
- 3. Home slaughter prohibited*
- 4. Feed must be stored securely*
- 5. Manure must be composted in enclosed bin*
- 6. Chicken run must be kept clean*
- 7. Other animal control bylaws (for noise, odour, animal cruelty, animals-at-large) will apply*
- 8. Sale of eggs or manure prohibited*

These points are further developed in Just Food's "A Food Action Plan for Ottawa", a 14-point plan submitted to the city of Ottawa in March 2012 (<http://www.justfood.ca/foodforall/weblinks/hens-in-urban-areas/>).

Health safety concerns are often immediately associated with chickens, but raising a small flock of urban hens does not compare to the issues of 'factory' level chicken breeding. Keeping four to five hens is manageable if one has a yard, designated an appropriate amount of space for the flock, and built a well-designed coop. Taking care of chickens is relatively simple. It's like having any other pet. They need food, shelter, proper sanitation and exercise. Like emptying your cat's litter - cleaning the coop of chicken manure is a daily routine and changing the cedar chips once a week is normal practice.

Because of noise, roosters cannot be kept in an urban backyard coop (contrary to popular belief, you don't need a rooster in order to get eggs). Compared to the barking of many of our neighbour's dogs that can be disruptive until the late hours of the night, chickens only really make noise when you are near them (or when there's a cat exploring in the yard) because they are social creatures. On the odd occasion, you will have a hen that will assume the role of a rooster, but it is by no means any noisier than a barking dog, lawnmower, or saw. It's equally important to mention that keeping chickens does not imply breeding chickens or raising them for livestock farming. It is merely a manner of completing a self-maintained agricultural system or permaculture.

Compost. Compost. Compost. I've already mentioned it before, but I will say it again. You can't really have chickens without composting and having a compost bin. Their manure helps to balance it, and when it's processed, you are left with Grade-A fertilizer. We had so much last summer, we were giving it away to many avid gardeners and friends. Our chickens kept busy all-day long having dirt baths, turning soil in their run, and by bug hunting. They helped to significantly reduce the insect population in our yard because flies, earwigs, beetles, centipedes, silverfish, and worms were their delicacies.

Our chickens were ultimately amazing conversation starters for those who walk or play in our alley. It shocked us when we realized that most children don't really understand where their food comes from, and we took great pleasure in explaining what vegetables we had growing in our garden. Urban agriculture and its many facets of gardening, composting, and raising chickens brings people closer to the food production process. It is my hope that the city of Montreal and respective boroughs will permit and support its residents in keeping chickens within the urban environment in a healthy and safe manner.