Lorraine Johnson

Revisiting Victory: Gardens past, gardens future

'All over Toronto...[m]any a head is bowed over the weeds, many a back is bent over the hoe in backyards and on vacant lots these sunny evenings and weekends. Soon there will be homegrown vegetables on tables in many parts of town – and they will taste like the food of the gods.'[1]

It's June 1943, and one of those bent-over backs belongs to Mayor Fred Conboy. He's tending an onion patch behind his home at 1043 Bloor Street while speaking with a *Globe and Mail* reporter. The flowers in his border have been replaced with tomatoes and his lawn with potatoes. The mayor is encouraging his fellow Torontonians to join the growing brigade of home gardeners, to 'dig for victory' in the war effort by planting vegetables on every available bit of land.

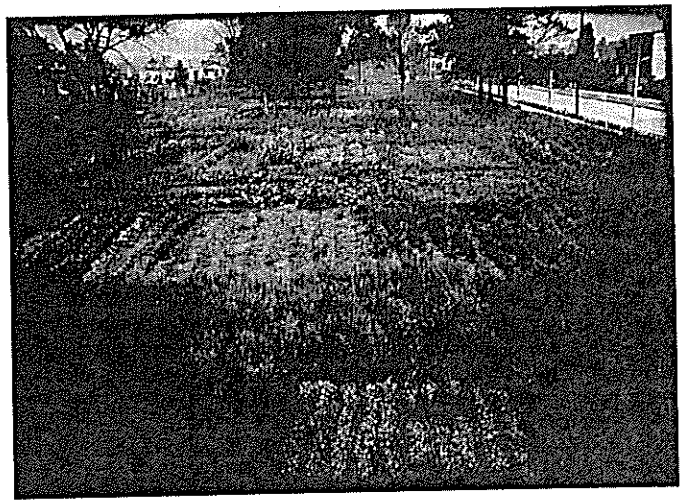
Torontonians responded to the call. The police and firemen at the Forest Hill Village station cut four patches out of their 465-square-metre lawn. As the *Globe* described it, they used 'any off time they [could] spare from upholding the law and keeping firefighting equipment in tip-top condition' to grow tomatoes, radishes, Scotch kale, carrots, cabbages and more.[2] The Ontario Hydro Horticultural Club's Victory Garden Committee cultivated 425 gardens in Toronto alone (750 throughout the province) on land donated by municipal commissions and private owners, and grew $26,000 worth of food in 1943 ($331,000 in 2009 dollars).[3] The Community Gardens Association of Toronto tended plots on major streets such as Bayview Avenue, Queen Street, Keele Street and Cosborne Avenue, cultivating $30,940 ($385,741 in 2009 dollars) worth of vegetables. The Pine Crescent Joy Club, an east-end activity club for youngsters, turned the lawn where once they played badminton, horseshoes and lawn bowling into a thirty-five-foot-long Victory Garden in the shape of a V.

Along with all this concerted community work, organized mainly by clubs and societies, thousands of regular folks planted their backyards with 'fruits for freedom.' A Dr. G. A. De Jardine, of 283 Wright Avenue, in the west end, interspersed his showy flower beds with tomatoes and berry plants: 'His garden is really something, and has been filmed in color by Chinese fruiterer Jo Jen of Roncesvalles Avenue, for display in various Toronto churches in aid of Chinese War Relief,' noted the author of a June 8 *Globe and Mail* article.[4] Seed companies did roaring business, too: one seller gave the following response to a reporter's enquiry: 'We're so busy selling seeds for Victory Gardens that we have no time even to discuss them.'[5]

All this food-focused labour bore results, and not just in Toronto. According to the federal Department of Agriculture, a total of 52 million kilograms of vegetables were grown in Canadian cities in 1943 – more than 200,000 wartime gardens produced an average of 225 kilograms each.[6] Five out of every ten urban households surveyed that year planned to have a Victory Garden. (In small towns, it was six out of ten.)[7]

Patriotic duty in a time of national crisis explains part of the food-growing fervour. Appeals to help allies must have struck a deep chord – images of British gardeners growing food in craters left by bombs, or of the Tower of London's moat being used to grow cabbages, were surely potent motivation. And no doubt Victory Garden promoters at both government and civic levels were aware that success would spread more quickly if they tapped into the competitive gardening instinct to grow bigger, better, *more* than one's neighbour. At the 1943 Harvest Fair, held in the Hydro Commission's office building on University Avenue, and organized to showcase the Victory Garden produce grown by the nearly 800 members of Ontario Hydro's Horticultural Club, eager gardeners showcased potatoes weighing half a kilogram each and tomatoes the size of cabbages.[8]

But alongside these emotional appeals were the very practical realities of policy. The Torontonians of 1943 responded to the call to grow food, to become 'a city of community gardens,' not only because it was the right thing to do in a time of war, but because the City enacted policies that turned it into an



1 *The Globe and Mail*, June 8, 1943.

2 Ibid.

3 *The Globe and Mail*, March 13, 1944.

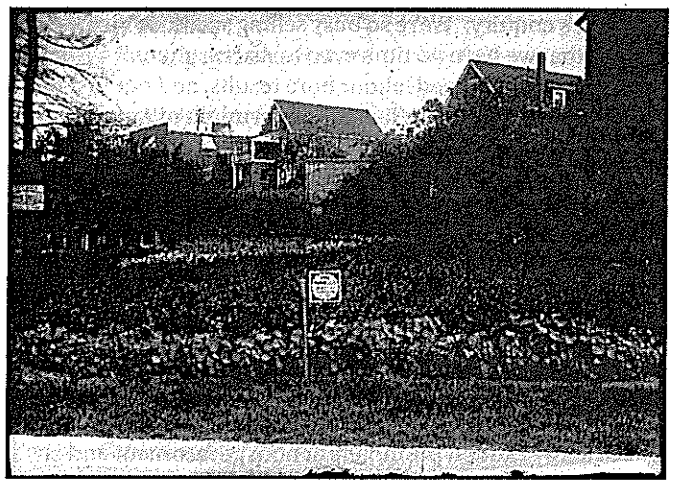
4 *The Globe and Mail*, June 8, 1943.

5 *The Globe and Mail*, May 1, 1943.

6 *The Globe and Mail*, April 29, 1944.

7 *The Toronto Daily Star*, May 8, 1943.

8 *The Globe and Mail*, September 6, 1943.



easily *possible* thing to do. For example, the City offered the use of municipally owned lots to individuals and groups for gardening purposes. Permits cost twenty-five cents (or $3.20 in 2009 dollars), a fee that even covered police protection for the gardens.[9]

Likewise, federal policies made the practice of food growing more urgent. In July 1943, for example, the Wartime Prices and Trade Board ordered canners and wholesalers to withhold stocks of canned fruits and vegetables from the retail market 'to assure supplies of canned fruits and vegetables for civilian and military requirements for the following winter.' According to the board's food coordinator, K. W. Taylor, 'In putting this plan into operation the board is merely doing on a national scale what thrifty housewives do in holding their home-canned products on the shelf or in the cellar while fresh products are in season.'[10]

Such policies were predicated on earlier practices that had eased the populace into committed and wholehearted food production. For example, in April 1934, with the city in the throes of the Great Depression, Toronto mayor William James Stewart turned the sod on a eighty-hectare plot of land on St. Clair Avenue just west of Keele, providing community garden space for approximately 5,000 unemployed families to raise food.[11] And prior to the harsh economic conditions of the 1930s, World War I also saw huge numbers of Torontonians growing food in creatively cultivated abandoned corners. In the early 1900s, for example, the Toronto Vacant Lots Cultivation Association was formed, and in May 1915 amalgamated

9 *The Toronto Daily Star*, May 8, 1943.

10 *The Hamilton Spectator*, July 26, 1943.

11 *The Evening Telegram*, April 23, 1934.

with a similar program, Vacant Lot Gardens, run by the Rotary Club of Toronto. By 1918, they had more than 2,000 gardens under cultivation and member-growers had realized $75,000 in profits (more than $980,000 in 2009 dollars).[12]

The Ontario Department of Agriculture was particularly active in promoting food production at that time, framing it in wartime language. Their full-page ad in the April 1918 edition of *The Canadian Horticulturist,* for example, urged 'a backyard garden for every home,' and asked, 'Have you enlisted in the greater production battalion?' One of the department's circulars, published in March 1918, had a similarly military message: 'Every backyard is fighting ground for the empire.' And, in one of the most explicit connections between battleground and growing ground, the Ward's Island Association turned a four-acre plot on the Ward's Estate into a Red Cross Garden, growing produce and selling it to island residents and handing the profits over to the Red Cross treasury. The *Toronto Star Weekly* noted that the garden was tended by fourteen-year-old George Boyce, whose father had been killed in action.[13]

The Department of Agriculture bolstered its patriotic appeal to Ontarians with a moral argument for resisting idleness. In a number of publications from the time of World War I, they variously promoted food gardening as good for those 'who suffer from tired minds and overworked nerves,' as a way to teach children 'industry and method' and as useful for directing energies 'into a healthy and normal channel.'

During both world wars, and in times of economic hardship such as the Depression, it seemed that everywhere in Toronto people came together, urged by governments and civic leaders to produce food for the common good. So how are we doing now, during *this* time of war and economic hardship? Are we coming together to produce food for the benefit of all?

The holstered guard who insisted on frisking me as I walked into a public meeting organized by Councillor Joe Mihevc to discuss a proposal for a community orchard in a midtown park should have alerted me to the fact that the evening was going to be less than convivial. As the guard rooted through my purse, holding up my metal water bottle with suspicion, I got steamed. And the emotional temperature *inside* the April 28, 2009, meeting was even steamier.

We were gathered to discuss a proposal, put forth by local resident Susan Poizner and sponsored by Growing for Green and Not Far from the Tree, to plant twenty-seven fruit trees in

12 George Baldwin, *Canadian Home Journal*, September 1919, p. 23.

13 John Duke, *The Star Weekly*, September 22, 1917, p. 11.

Ben Nobleman Park, just across from Eglinton West subway station. Poizner had organized a group of volunteers to carry out the project and, over the previous months, they'd offered ten workshops, held a community meeting to discuss their plan with locals and enlisted the volunteer labour of a landscape architectural designer to draw up a professional plan. On this warm, late April evening, as cherry buds were just starting to burst into blossom all over Toronto, Poizner and the team gathered to hear the community's response.

'Someone with a beautiful fantasy convinced a city councillor of this beautiful fantasy,' said one resident, with anger seeping through his irony. 'Our children's clothes will be stained with cherry juice,' said another. 'Coyotes and foxes will be drawn to the orchard and run into traffic!' 'We'll have roadkill!' 'Rats and mosquitoes will infest our neighbourhood.' 'Our taxes will be hiked to pay for water to keep the fruit trees alive.' 'Has a cost-benefit analysis been done?'

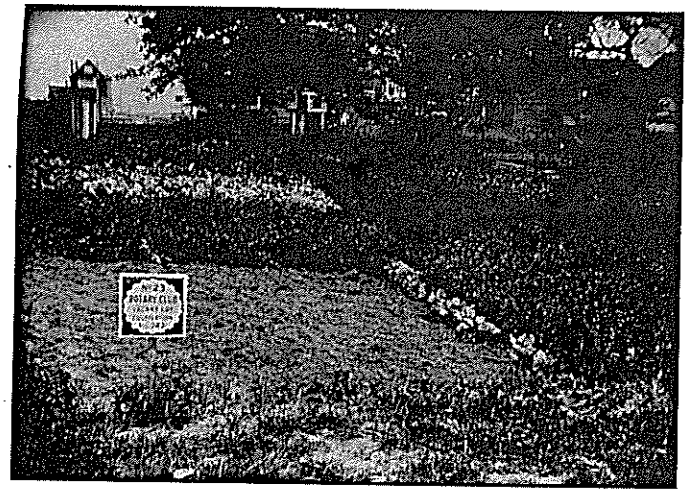
In the face of this opposition, Poizner's group called various experts up to the front of the room to address the residents' concerns. A health researcher talked about the safety of eating fruit from city trees. A playground designer talked about the need for children to engage with nature wherever they live. A horticultural supervisor from Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation department talked about the maintenance work the City would do to look after the trees. A representative from Not Far from the Tree talked about the dozens of people willing to pick the orchard's fruit, keep the ground free of rotten plums and distribute excess produce to a food bank.

Even so, by the end of the meeting, when Councillor Mihevc asked if any of those opposed to the community orchard had been swayed by what they'd heard (and, in particular, by the pro-orchard team's willingness to reduce the number of fruit trees from the original forty to a compromise of twenty-seven), no hands went up. 'Everything has an element of controversy,' mused Mihevc. 'The question I need to answer at the end of the day is: Is this in the broad community interest?'

Four days later, Mihevc produced his answer. Ben Nobleman Park would get its community orchard, but not without a political sleight of hand engineered to appease: the city would plant fourteen fruit trees and nine flowering and shade trees. 'You may be asking what the difference is between fruit ... and flowering and shade trees,' Mihevc's announcement read. Well, just the name apparently. In the compromise plan for

the park, the pawpaw trees and serviceberries – tasty fruit trees both – were repurposed as non-food-related flowering and shade trees. The orchard would still be an orchard, but some of the fruit trees had to be demoted through a change in label. As Mihevc's announcement put it, 'They do have small fruits which usually are eaten by the birds before any human gets them.' The message? Those opposed to the community orchard would have nothing to fear, because this garden project would bear fruit and grow food ... for the birds. In this one small battle, the fruits of victory tasted rather bitter.

What drove the community's fear and anger in response to the orchard? And why did the proposal to grow food in a public park meet with such reluctance? Sitting in that high-tension meeting, I had the distinct impression that two



cultures were colliding: it was as if convention were on a collision course with possibility – established ways versus new thinking. Convention dictates that a park playground is made up of swings and teeter-totters; possibility suggests that kids can have just as much fun in a grove of fruit trees, finding imaginative ways to play and, yes, maybe getting cherry-stained in the process. Convention dictates that food growing is a private, not public, act, something to be tucked away in backyards; possibility suggests that placing food production in the centre of our community's public places is nourishing – symbolically and literally.

A vocal minority of stain-fearing, community-fruit-phobic folks in midtown aside, more and more Torontonians are embracing the food-production potential of our city, much like citizens did during the world wars and the Depression. They're tucking tomato plants into ornamental gardens, kale and corn on boulevards. (Wander the streets of Toronto and you're guaranteed to see more food plants in front yards than at any other time in the past two decades; it's still not the norm, but it's a trend that's growing.) They're sneaking hens into backyard coops, sharing eggs with neighbours to keep complaints – and visits from bylaw officers – at bay. (Witness the current efforts by the City's Environment Office to investigate the possibility of changing the bylaw that disallows poultry in Toronto yards; urban chicken-keeping is now on the political radar.) They're lining up for plots in community gardens and even starting their own if necessary. (Toronto now has more community gardens than ever before.) They're organizing organic workshops at libraries and community halls. They're planting food gardens at neighbourhood schools. They're toting squash seeds to guerrilla plantings on abandoned lots. They're gleaning fruit from street trees and growing pawpaws in parks.

In short, more and more people are participating in a public ethic of production that, much like the gardening activity that was commonplace during the world wars and the Depression, has its roots in a response to need. The difference between then and now, though, is the definition of need. In the past, the need being met by wartime gardens was relatively straightforward – access to food was under threat and Victory Gardens were an immediately possible way to supplement the shaky supply. There's little doubt that now, too, many, many people have limited access to fresh, healthy food due to a whole host of economic and social conditions, but the hunger being met head-on by today's community food projects encompasses food access and, also, more. The orchard in Ben Nobleman Park, for example, is about more than fruit. It's about reimagining our city – and our place as citizens within it – as productive and generative.

Here's to growing our city one cabbage, chicken and cherry at a time. Each is a victory in a garden – and a Victory Garden in the much larger battle for a productive, possible place.

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