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Urban agriculture: something more than a transient fad

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Countless balconies, backyards, rooftops, community gardens, vacant land in the heart of the metropolis... Montreal is full of opportunities for practitioners of urban agriculture, a phenomenon that every day is becoming increasingly popular. Moreover is estimated that already a million people in the island does practice urban agriculture. Walking through the streets of Québec's metropolis, it is not unusual to see a cultivated gardens in the sideways, cared thanks to one or more residents of the adjacent buildings. In an article published in 2012 [2], Eric Duchemin [3], a professor of environmental sciences at UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal), said that 38% of the inhabitants of Montreal, close to a million people, did practice urban agriculture. These numbers indicate that the phenomenon is no longer residual and has become a common activity among montrealers.

Historically, the island of Montreal hosted the most fertile lands across Canada, an agricultural heritage that the city lost rapidly due to industrialization and the subsequent mineralization of

its territory, which caused expulsion of agricultural activities to areas increasingly more remote from urban centers. However, the different wars and economic crises of the twentieth century prompted the authorities of countries like England, United States and Canada incited the inhabitants to cultivate their gardens through policies such as the Victory Gardens [4] of the First and Second World Wars. These gardens were urban crops to provide food for the population during war times. Nevertheless, they produced about 40% of the vegetables consumption in the United States during World War II. In addition, crops also had the role of increasing morale and hope of the citizens.

According to the ethnourbanist Sandrine Baudry [5], urban agriculture as we know it today in North America stems from the economic, social and political crisis that suffered various American Cities, particularly New York. It was in The Big City where appeared the Guerrilla Gardeners movement, an activist group protesting against the desertion of urban centers by their owners, who burned their properties to be compensated by insurers and thus failing to pay taxes to the city.

The movement, led by Liz Christy, artist and founder of the activist group, succeeded in letting the vegetation grow in these private abandoned spaces thanks to the *Seed Bombs*, consisting of throwable items, like balloons or Christmas balls, filled with a mixture of water, fertilizer and a selection of seeds. This first action of the Guerrilla preceded the appropriation, in 1973, of an abandoned plot in lower Manhattan to create the first Community Garden in the city, which quickly passed its protest feature to be adopted by low-income families to cultivate their own food. Today you can still visit it, and is now known as the Liz Christy Community Garden [6].

A very edible Montreal

Interestingly, in both New York and Montreal were arsons which led to the emergence of the first green shoots in the centers of cities. In the case of Montreal, were the fires in the center-south district of the metropolis during the 1974 firefighters strike, known as the *week-end rouge*, which led to the emergence of a local movement for the creation of a Community Garden that would ensure the food supply of the poorer neighbours. The garden, located at the intersection between Alexandre-DeSeve and Lafontaine streets, was the precursor of a municipal network of community gardens [7] that currently has 97 gardens and 25 acres of crops spread throughout the city, some with waiting lists more than 7 years.

However, despite the good reception of these policies, currently only 33% of food products consumed by Quebecers come from Quebec. And despite I don't have any statistic that confirms it, I think the numbers would be even more disappointing if we knew the percentage of products consumed by Montrealers who come from a radius of less than 100 kilometers.

Luckily, Montreal has enviable urban and social features that allow the proliferation of many initiatives that invite to imagine a greener and friendlier city. *La Métropole* has very culturally active neighbourhoods, in addition to an architecture that encourages its residents to interact, with low buildings with large balconies, generous backstreets and flat roofs; places all easily appropriable for urban agriculture with very little investment.

This conditions have allowed the emergence exciting initiatives such as Les Ruelles Vertes [8], Santropol Roulant [9], Les Pousses Urbaines [10], Action Comuniterre [11] and Alternatives [12], to name a few, which combine urban agriculture actions with social engagement. In addition, most universities and some secondary schools in the city have experimental gardens in their buildings rooftops. Furthermore, UQAM University will soon host the seventh summer school

on the subject, and has had great participation success in its previous editions.

Urban agriculture can take many different forms, and although most existing projects are non-profit conceived, Montreal has several commercial proposals. The most striking among them is undoubtedly Lufa Farms [14], which has installed one of the largest greenhouses in the world on the roof of an industrial building to grow fruits, vegetables and fine herbs using a hydroponic system. Lufa Farms is actually supplying more a thousand families in the city with their baskets of organic products.

Over the coming months, the harsh winter of Montreal will not allow the majority of urban agriculture fans to continue their activities, but certainly next year they return with renewed strength and more desire if possible to continue their adventure.

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