

MY FOOD

Back to the land

By improving soil quality, urban gardeners can gain more control over the nutrient content in their food.

BY AMANDA LESLIE

JAYME MELROSE credits her interest in gardening to an unlikely source. "It was my grumpy, hippy hermit stepfather," she says with a smile. "He was passionate about knowing where your food is coming from." Today, Melrose oversees Common Roots, an urban farm located in the heart of Halifax, NS. It's a community project, where anyone is welcome to wander and work.

In recent years, the interest in urban gardening has grown considerably. Melrose is particularly impressed by the number of young people who are starting to get involved. "The more understanding we have about our food, the better," she says.

Yet, it's probably safe to say that most of us don't take the time to think about what we eat and where it comes from. Nutrient density is a perfect example. How many of us know how the food we eat today compares to the food eaten by our grandparents? Several scientific studies suggest that the nutrient concentration has actually decreased over the past 50 to 100 years. In other words, the fruits and vegetables that we buy from the grocery store have less nutrition than they had a generation or two ago.

That's not to say that these fruits and vegetables aren't still beneficial, but Melrose believes we can gain more control over the

nutrient content in our food by growing some of it ourselves. "We will always need our rural farmers," she explains. "But in our little urban gardens we can also grow a few things and focus on optimal nutrition."

One of the main benefits of growing your own food is the control you have over the quality of the soil. Soil quality and nutrient density are inextricably linked. When the latter decreases, the soil is usually the root of the problem.

"If you get the soil right, all the other pieces will fall into place," says Peter LaPierre. A graduate of Dalhousie University, LaPierre is the owner of an edible landscaping company called Home Harvest. He's been an avid gardener for the past 40 years, with a keen interest in plants, insects, and soil science. "Soil is dynamic," he says. "It's an ecosystem of various physical, chemical, and biological processes that are intimately connected."

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Back to school

Launched in June of 2012 on the site of the old Queen Elizabeth High School in downtown Halifax, Common Roots has expanded considerably in the past few years, increasing their number of plots from 42 to 109 in 2013. In addition to the community garden, Common Roots includes a market garden and edible landscaping. Members of the community are encouraged to meet here to learn about growing and eating healthy food.

"It's one of the only places in the city where you can make physical change happen by addressing issues such as sustainability, livability, and social inclusion," says Jayme Melrose, the project coordinator at Common Roots. Anyone who is interested in learning more about the garden can visit between 3 and 6 p.m. for an introduction to the urban farm.

The main components of soil are minerals, organic material, water, and air. According to LaPierre, the organic material is the most important factor. He refers to it as the engine of the soil. "It brings soil alive by producing energy and nutrients that will become available to the plant."

He believes that soil quality must be built, first by feeding it the necessary ingredients and later by maintaining its quality over time. You develop a diverse biotic community in the soil by "top dressing" each year with new organic material, such as compost, aged manure and bio-charcoal, which is essential to vigorous plant growth.

Once the microbial processes have begun, it can take three years before the ecosystem really gets into balance. Home Harvest specializes in producing soil that has already reached this threshold. The company starts by setting up an on-site visit for a customer to determine the best place to locate a garden. Afterward, they use their nutrient rich soil to build the garden,


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later following through with clients on its development over the course of a year.

As for some additional advice on improving soil quality, Melrose recommends adding rock dust and kelp meal, which is available at local retailers including Halifax Seed, Valley Feed, and Organic Earth Market. (Check your own neighbourhood retailers or these products.)

"Think of it as buying multivitamins and feeding them to the soil," she says, noting that anyone can contact the department of agriculture for a \$25 soil test to monitor the progress of their garden. Melrose arranges for a test each spring and fall at Common Roots.

Garlic and leafy greens are easy plants for beginners to try growing. LaPierre suggests planting the garlic in the fall instead of the spring. "Cover it in mulch and the garlic will be the first thing up in the spring," he says. "It's always ready to harvest by August."

While the health benefits of growing your own food are undeniable, there is another component of gardening that might encourage you to try getting your hands dirty. "Human nature is very deeply connected to the soil," LaPierre explains. "Just looking at a garden can lower our heart rate and ease our minds." 

Urban farm salad

BY JAYME MELROSE



SERVES 2 | PREP 10 MINS

SALAD

INGREDIENTS

- » 1 fresh bunch of kale
- » 5 sprigs parsley, rinsed and chopped
- » 1 stem oregano, leaves taken off the stem
- » 3 stems mint, leaves taken off the stem and chopped
- » 1 stem thyme, leaves taken off stem
- » 9 nasturtiums,
- » 3 johnny-jump-ups
- » 20 borage flowers

TO PREPARE

Rinse one bunch of fresh kale. Chop in bite-sized pieces. Drizzle with flax oils and sprinkle with sea salt. Massage all together until all the kale turns bright green. Let sit for 20 minutes (at least).

DRESSING

Jayne's favorite dressing, adapted from the Hollyhock Salad Dressing from *The Hollyhock Cookbook* by Moreka Jolar and Linda Solomon.

DRESSING: INGREDIENTS

- » 1/3 cup flax oil
- » 1/3 cup lemon and/or apple cider vinegar
- » 1/3 cup tamari (soy sauce)
- » 2 Tbsp mustard powder
- » 2 cloves garlic
- » 1/3 cup nutritional yeast

TO PREPARE

Mix in the blender until homogenous.

Nutritional value (per serving):

Calories 100; Fat 1.3 g; Protein 5 g; Carbohydrates 18 g