

A vegetable garden started by a Community Health Centre in the midst of Hamilton's industrial surroundings is therapeutic for a large and diverse community of faithful growers.

North Hamilton's Community Garden "is the best thing that ever happened to me," vows Rita. "I just forget about everything that's bothering me as soon as I start working down there." Testimony like Rita's leaves little doubt of the value of this green space in the heart of the city.

North Hamilton Community Health Centre (NHCHC) serves a culturally and economically diverse population. Many live below the poverty line. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is a challenge for those who are isolated by age, ability, language barriers, and income. There is a lack of proximate food stores in the community. Fresh and culturally appropriate food is often expensive and difficult to find. Self esteem erodes with reliance on food banks. The community garden project addresses these issues.

Since its inception, the garden has been like a green oasis amidst its stark industrial surroundings in North Hamilton. The gardeners, including Rita, were involved in decision-making during each stage of its development. The prolific harvest of commonplace and unusual vegetables is not the sole reason for its nickname, "the Miracle Garden." It was the hope and enthusiasm of this community of growers that kept the project buoyant against all odds.

"At least one third of the gardeners harvest enough vegetables to feed four people"

The garden is a "miracle" in part, due to the many contributing partners. The City of Hamilton has donated the land for the garden, several businesses have donated seeds and seedlings, a local farm donates manure, and the Ministry of Health and the Hamilton Community Foundation have provided developmental funding.

To place a dollar value on these gardens, we might compare them with the cost of a share in a Community Shared Agriculture farm, where shareholders pay in advance for part of the season's organic harvest. To feed a family of four, the cost is about \$350 - \$400 for the season. At least one third of the gardeners harvest enough vegetables to feed four people. Another third grew enough for two, sharing their excess with friends and fellow gardeners. This dollar value is conservative, considering the prohibitive retail cost of organic vegetables (usually about 30% higher than conventionally grown produce), and their limited availability. There is an interesting mix of cultures at the garden. Half of the plots are cultivated by Asian families, mainly Vietnamese and Cambodian. "We eat everything," says Tech, as she demonstrates where to cut the tender stems of the squash plant to add to her soup. "Pepper leaves, tomato leaves, squash flowers: we don't waste anything." She's keen to try new food, too. "I planted beans," she smiles. "Last year I tried some from your garden. Now I grow them myself."

The need for survival lead to Tech's "rule" for eating everything. What few people

The Miracle Garden

know about Tech is that while living in Cambodia, three of her seven children died. Conditions such as the killing fields, starvation, and lack of medications, led to suffering and death for her family. Tech can now be seen at the garden most evenings, relaxing, playing with her children, and tending vegetables for any of her numerous friends who aren't able to come as often. Leakhena's need for survival taught her to watch what the birds, animals, and insects ate. If they ate certain vegetation, it was a cue for Leakhena and her family to try it. This led her to use okra (a plant she previously believed to be poisonous). She now uses it for medicinal purposes to bring down a fever, either in a tea, or as a poultice.

Given the diverse nature of the gardeners, communication has sometimes been a challenge - a challenge which has been met in several ways. A few of the Asian gardeners speak some English, and they provide translation to other gardeners. Additionally, several of the gardeners are students in a nearby English as a Second Language class. The garden coordinator often meets them at their class to remind them of important dates and tasks (e.g., garden clean-up days, signing of seasonal contracts, information regarding field trips, etc.).

"Everyday I'm learning something. Being able to pass on the things I've learned makes me feel good"

This diversity has also brought with it many learning opportunities. The introduction of unusual plants to the gardens has sparked curiosity in other gardeners. A symbiotic relationship has developed whereby Asian gardeners pull pigweed from other gardeners' plots, knowing that Canadians consider this an unwanted weed in their plots. Cambodians and Vietnamese cook this plant as an edible green. Trust has been built among the gardeners as they share how-tos and recipes for vegetables which are new to them. This sharing has also inspired some unique opportunities for language lessons in the garden! Most of the gardeners have returned each season -- a good indicator that this continues to be a positive experience (and fun!).

The gardeners are as varied in their level of experience, as they are in their cultural backgrounds. As one of the project volunteers, Rita is a great help for novice gardeners. Her enthusiasm infects everyone around her. "I really enjoy meeting other gardeners. Every day I learn something new and different. I'm teaching my granddaughters to garden, and my son, too. Being able to pass on the things I've learned makes me feel good."

Indeed, many of our gardeners have learned new skills -- particularly regarding organic gardening methods. They have learned new ways to control pests, use organic fertilizers, and have flourishing garden plots. Gardeners also participate in other activities throughout the season -- field trips to nearby farms, canning and preserving workshops, and a harvest dinner celebration. Rita sums up the idea of a community garden for all of us, "it's like taking medicine of a different kind."