

# Growing gardens, creating community

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Last August, Zachery Moncion and Calvin Royal were among youths recognized for their involvement in the north-end community garden, one of two sites now operated by the Halifax Peninsula Urban Gardens Society. (Tim Krochak / Staff)

Across the province, community gardens are sprouting up in cities, edible gardens are growing in school yards and people are exploring new ways to start growing their own food.

This year, the Goodness Grows community garden sowed its first seeds in Dartmouth. In Sackville, Roy White started "HOPE" (Helping Other People Eat), a volunteer garden at the Springfield Lake Recreation Centre that donates crops to Feed Nova Scotia. In Lunenburg, Groundworks intergenerational community garden is building relationships between the young and old.

Over the summer, students are tending their organic plots at Dr. Arthur Hines Elementary School in Summerville, at the Nova Scotia Agricultural College in Truro, at the Community Farm at Acadia University in Wolfville, and at the See More Green garden collective at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

The more established community gardens in our capital continue to flourish. The Urban Farm Museum Society in Spryfield, which started in 1996, offers a variety of programs, including Seedy Saturdays, Come Grow With Us, and their Annual Harvest Fair on Sept. 13. The Halifax Peninsula Urban Gardens Society (formerly the North End Community Garden) that began in 1998 now has two sites with 40 plots.

Research has shown that there are many benefits of a community garden. Studies cited in academic journals found that community gardens provided essential nutrition, improved people's health, assisted children in their learning, protected green space, increased property values, and strengthened social cohesion.

Faced with serious social and ecological challenges such as rising food prices, loss of rural agricultural land, and climate change, it is critical that more Nova Scotians start producing their own food. However, many people do not have access to land or do not have gardening skills.

Thankfully, initiatives like Landshare are taking root to overcome these obstacles. The Halifax Landshare project links landowners who are unable to garden (because of a lack of time, physical disability, etc.) with aspiring gardeners who do not have access to land, via the web ([www.sharingbackyards.com](http://www.sharingbackyards.com)). Across the province, Helping Nature Heal, Windhorse Farm and Nova Scotia Permaculture offer innovative, organic gardening workshops to the public. In 2008, Jean Snow and Bob Kropla started Dartmouth's first Small Plot Intensive (SPIN) farm, Lake City Farms, to grow food for their Community Supported Agriculture program, illustrating just how productive our city lands can be.

The Nova Scotia Environmental Network and the Halifax Garden Network have compiled resources and created email lists, maps and calendars of events to encourage citizens to plant community and school gardens ([www.HalifaxGardenNetwork](http://www.HalifaxGardenNetwork)). The Sustainability Education in Nova Scotia for Everyone Working Group would like to see more students digging schoolyard gardens this fall. We are also advocating for a community garden at the new Mainland Common North site in Halifax West.

The Urban Garden Project at the Ecology Action Centre supports local garden projects and urban farms by offering gardening and cooking workshops, providing resources, hosting tours and events, and advocating for stronger support from government (visit [www.ecologyaction.ca/content/halifax-landshare](http://www.ecologyaction.ca/content/halifax-landshare)).

In Nova Scotia, there is a growing citizen demand for land and support from our municipal councils and provincial government to further develop urban agriculture and community gardening. Quebec, British Columbia and Alberta have strong municipal and provincial policies and financial support for community garden initiatives. Montreal, Edmonton and Toronto have large Community Garden Networks facilitated by their respective city councils. In 2006, the City of Vancouver launched its 2010 Garden Challenge to get more people planting, and now has 2,500 community garden plots well-integrated into its municipal food security policy.

In the 2005 policy document entitled Healthy Eating Nova Scotia, prepared for the Office of Health Promotion, the recommendation was made to "advocate for municipal and provincial policies that permit the use of land for community gardens." More needs to be done to get them off the ground. Halifax Regional

Municipality staff are beginning to formulate a process for the public to apply for access to city land to create new community gardens. It is our hope that HRM will also provide start-up grants and appoint a staff co-ordinator for community gardens.

In 2010, HRM will host the national conference and award ceremony of Communities in Bloom (CIB), an organization dedicated to the promotion of green urban spaces. Next year, is also the United Nations' international year of biodiversity. Community gardens can help us meet the CIB criteria of environmental awareness, can increase biodiversity, and can build stronger communities.

Renowned Australian permaculturist Geoff Lawton once claimed, "All the world's problems can be solved in a garden." We agree and believe that community gardens can greatly benefit Nova Scotians.

We invite the public to our Community Gardening Roundtable today, 7-9 p.m. at the Ecology Action Centre, 2705 Fern Lane in Halifax; and to our Community Gardening Summit: Gardens, Schools & Governments, with HRM Councillor Jennifer Watts, on Sept. 2, 7-9 p.m. at the Women's Council House, 989 Young Ave., Halifax. For more information, visit [www.nsen.ca](http://www.nsen.ca) or call 902-454-6846.

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