

Urban Agriculture in Toronto:
Planning, Policy and Practice
Challenges and solutions
By Ron Wilford

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INTRODUCTION

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, denizens of towns and cities are becoming more concerned with food security and urban agriculture has been recognized as a legitimate measure through which it may be achieved.¹ Toronto, Canada is recognized as a world leader in the realm of municipal food policy² and has recently embarked on steps to increase the uptake of urban agriculture initiatives by its residents, through efforts taken by the Toronto Environment Office (TEO) and the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC). These efforts, such as the promotion of backyard and container gardens, Grow T.O. Speakers' Series, development of soil quality guidelines, food mapping initiatives among others, should benefit early practitioners of urban agriculture and those new to the concept alike, as many Toronto residents seek to take control of their own food security.

However, one respected study has suggested that in spite of these positive developments, "the potential for urban agriculture is nowhere near being fully realized".³ This research report will identify the key challenges confronting urban agriculture in the realms of practice, policy and planning in the city of Toronto, as identified by key participants in each realm. Where possible, it will propose solutions to these challenges.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This research report will revolve around the generally accepted definition of urban agriculture as it pertains to the city of Toronto:

Urban agriculture as a system is concerned with urban culture, natural resource use, land-use planning, food production and security, education and leisure, social relationships and income generation. *Urban Agriculture might be thought of as a continuum from backyard gardens to community gardens to commercial production at small, medium and large scales*⁴(my emphasis R.W.)

Given the limitations on the scope of this research report, the latter sentence above shall provide the analytical framework.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research report was conducted in order to help understand the major challenges that exist in 2011 in order to scale up urban agriculture in Toronto and to help identify the links that exist between the three 'P's of urban agriculture: Planning, Policy and Practice. The primary data sources for this research report are personal, recorded interviews with key players in the realms of policy, planning and practice. The interviews were conducted over the space of the last two weeks in November, 2011 and were typically of approximately one hour in duration. All interviews were conducted by the author of the research report.

In the policy realm, the interviewee was Ms. Lauren Baker, Co-coordinator, Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC). Ms. Baker provided the urban agriculture policy background within the context of Toronto Public Health, the municipal department in which the TFPC resides.

In the planning realm, the interviewee was Ms. Jodi Callan, Senior Planner, Toronto Environmental Office (TEO). Ms. Callan has specific responsibility within the TEO for developing and implementing urban agriculture policy.

Two urban agriculture practitioners were interviewed for the purposes of this research report. Ms. Bonnie Scott was the Garden Co-ordinator for the PACT Grow To Learn community garden at Emery Collegiate Institute, a secondary school in the northwest of Toronto. PACT operated seven such community gardens in 2011 in high priority neighbourhoods with student volunteers and interns tending the gardens under the tutelage of co-ordinators such as Ms. Scott. Ms. Andrea Chan is the Internship Co-ordinator for the Young Urban Farmers Community Shared Agriculture (YUFCSA) programme, a backyard farming initiative situated in three Toronto neighbourhoods. Although representing specific and diverse urban agriculture programmes, these two practitioners provided valuable insight into the challenges confronting urban agriculture, literally at 'ground level'.

Secondary data included the June 2010 report produced for Metcalf Food Solutions: Scaling up Urban Agriculture in Toronto, by Nasr, MacRae and Kuhns. This document, while not official city policy, has proved to be a very useful tool for those city bureaucrats involved in the promotion of urban agriculture. It has come to be an unofficial work plan to which interested parties within (and without) the bureaucracy, refer.⁵ Significantly, no interviewees made reference to the

document through the course of the interviews until prompted. Other important sources were the websites of the PACT, Young Urban Farmers CSA, Toronto Environment Office, and Toronto Food Policy Council for background information regarding their respective urban agriculture programmes.

FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

One of the key findings as a result of the research conducted was the revelation that it is difficult to apply a linear process, from planning to policy to practice when exploring the scaling up of urban agriculture in Toronto. The research demonstrated that policymakers need to be led to making effective planning and policy decisions *after* practitioners have demonstrated the efficacy of a particular aspect of urban agriculture. This perspective was highlighted by Jodi Callan of the TEO:

When you're thinking about the context of planning in the city, [bureaucrats] need to see things in practice to see that they are working in order to be convinced that they should change something like a zoning designation or something within the official plan to accommodate that use.⁶

In the Toronto experience, planning, research and unbiased staff reporting are critical to the development of sound policy around urban agriculture:

Sound meaning that you are writing an unbiased report leaving city council to make the decision based on whatever priorities they have at the time.⁷

Notwithstanding the planning, policy and practical processes at work, there remain challenges to the successful uptake of urban agriculture in Toronto.

The following key challenges to urban agriculture in Toronto in 2011 were identified as a result of the research completed for this report:

1. Regulatory barriers

All interviewees identified various regulatory barriers (municipal, provincial, federal) that work against the broader uptake of urban agriculture. The main barrier identified was the restriction that exists on the sale of produce from backyard gardens.⁸ Toronto citizens may only host yard sales two times per year, although they may sell their produce at farmers' markets, provided the market is amenable. This is seen to make human scale urban agriculture impractical and unprofitable for the backyard citizen producer. It would make little sense to grow produce surplus to individual needs (unless for charitable purposes) since there would be few opportunities to recoup the time and costs invested. Another regulatory barrier mentioned is the current prohibition on the sale (for private profit) of produce grown on public lands, effectively excluding community and allotment gardens from any small scale urban agriculture business model.

Potential Solution: Review of city policies and by-laws to relax restrictions on small-scale produce sales from private and public lands.

2. Bureaucratic barriers

Lauren Baker spoke about the need to increase awareness of the importance of urban agriculture among the city bureaucracy and divisions not directly involved with its promotion or implementation

If someone wants to do that activity [urban agriculture] there should be people who are 'yes' people. This is one of the challenges of the city.⁹

The provincial regulation under the Health Protection and Promotion Act states:

the majority of the persons operating the stalls...are producers of farm products who are primarily selling or offering for sale their own products...“farm products” means products that are grown, raised or produced on a farm and intended for use as food.¹⁰

Some urban farmers have been prevented from selling their produce at farmers' markets because they are not considered to be 'farmers' according to the above definition. Their presence at the market could prove problematic for market organizers under the above regulation if they are not counted as 'farmers' and can contribute to the requirement that 51 per cent (the majority) are producers.

Potential Solution: Public health inspectors would be directed to interpret the regulation to include urban farmers under their understanding of who qualifies as a farmer.

3. Relationship Bridging

A lack of relationship bridging could be seen to be a challenge to the broader uptake of urban agriculture in Toronto. Practitioners who do not have access to key enabling staff within city departments may become frustrated with the

process and their enthusiasm for urban agriculture could wane. Both Callan and Baker independently identified the need to effectively bridge relationships between practitioners and the appropriate city departments.

We need the relationships and the bridges between the communities of practice who want to do this work [urban agriculture] and the institutional decision makers who can enable this work...where we do our work the best in Toronto is when we have the City and community coming together around objectives that are really clear.¹¹

Indeed, Callan regards that responsibility as part of her role within the TEO:

My job is to work on behalf of community organizations, neighbourhood associations and individuals who are coming forward to scale up urban agriculture...what I do is to pave a path to operating divisions who have the manpower, the financial backing and the programme areas to incubate those projects.¹²

Potential Solution: Increased visible promotion of city staff engaged in enabling urban agriculture to the practitioner community at large through outreach and direct contact.

4. Access to Land

Access to land was seen as a significant barrier to urban agriculture by the interviewees but for different reasons. As a practitioner, Andrea Chan suggested that in order to increase the scale of the YUFCSA, there would need to be a corresponding increase in the number of backyards (or land-sharers) to accommodate an increase in CSA shareholders.¹³ This may prove an even greater barrier to YUFCSA in 2012 as land-sharers are being asked to make a direct financial contribution to the CSA in addition to the use of their land and water in exchange for produce.¹⁴ According to Baker, the undeveloped land within the confines of the city of Toronto is in the hands a

small number of private developers. Gaining access to this land is vital to the development of a downtown urban farm to allow for small and mid-scale urban agriculture initiatives.¹⁵

Potential Solutions: City staff to facilitate introductions between property holders and interested, organized and experienced urban agriculture practitioners to explore opportunity for development of a downtown urban farm. YUFCSA to reconsider soliciting financial support from new land-share participants.

5. City Farmers vs. Rural Farmers

In spite of the fact that farmers, be they rural, peri-urban or urban, may be working towards the same goal (i.e. the production and sale of healthy food to the urban market) a climate of mutual suspicion has developed coincident to the rise in popularity of urban agriculture in Toronto. Baker and Chan referred to tensions that can develop between urban farmers and rural farmers when both are engaged in selling their produce to urban consumers, particularly at farmers' markets. Baker suggested that current language in city policy may contribute to the tension, since it stipulates that urban vendors may not undercut rural vendors at farmers' markets.¹⁶ Chan advised that YUFCSA is not welcome at all farmers' markets as some rural farmers feel threatened by YUF's urban CSA model.¹⁷

Potential Solutions: Review of language in current city policy to lessen potential tensions between rural and urban farmers. Outreach by market

and city staff to ensure harmony and encouragement of co-operative practices (where possible) between urban and rural farmers. This could take the form of crop co-ordination where rural farmers would produce the crops not appropriate to urban scale farming.

6. Education

The longer term success of Toronto's urban agriculture efforts may rely on present and future generations of school children. Those children who are exposed to urban agriculture through programmes such as PACT's Learn To Grow initiative will have a solid understanding of what it takes to produce healthy food. Bonnie Scott spoke about the importance of exposing the student participants in the programme to the complete growth cycle of the .food grown in the garden:

We had them start from seed and see every stage of growth of a plant to harvesting to eating it. That was important to me to get them to take the food home to their families and eat it.¹⁸

The programme also had ancillary benefits, such as providing schoolchildren a place where they felt safe. Sadly not all schools have community gardens nor programmes such as Learn To Grow.

Education around urban agriculture isn't just for school aged children though. The YUFCSA developed its internship programme specifically to address the desire of young adults to learn how to farm, but in an urban environment:

So many young people were interested in learning the skills but didn't necessarily want to move to a rural area. We thought we can teach them farming skills on a small scale in the same backyards that we are using for the CSA.¹⁹

The City is playing its part in educating its citizens too. The TEO promotes backyard organic food production through resources available on its website and it is advancing the conversation surrounding urban agriculture through its Grow T.O. Speakers' Series; four sessions involving local and international experts held in the autumn of 2011 that will be available for online viewing in 2012.

Both practitioners of urban agriculture were passionate in their appeal for inclusion of urban agriculture in the curricula of the city's schools. According to Bonnie Scott:

I think that one of the most important factors is getting [organic growing] into the provincial curriculum. That way all schools have to have a unit on growing organic foods... If its part of the curriculum, its would force teachers to think more about the topic and consequentially schoolyard gardens might fit in better at school.²⁰

Andrea Chan echoed this sentiment: "Why not build urban agriculture into the curriculum? Why not have every child in school learning about food?"²¹ There are specific challenges regarding modification of the provincial curriculum that are outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless it is worth noting that two practitioners active in urban agriculture, who have never met, share this belief.

Potential solution: Lobbying of the Toronto District School Board by urban agriculturalists, food banks, community groups as well as the TEO and TFPC to use any discretionary powers to include urban agriculture in the Toronto curriculum.

7. Funding

In 2011, perhaps the most daunting challenge that confronts the goal of increasing the uptake of urban agriculture in Toronto is that of funding. The practitioners reported that without adequate funding their programmes are in jeopardy of cancellation. Both PACT and YUFCSA rely on grants in order maintain their programmes. Even though YUFCSA is a revenue generating operation, without volunteer managers such as Andrea Chan, their operations are not sustainable:

We are all volunteers...it is the passion that fuels us but that will eventually lead to burn-out because we need fair wages. Is there a future for us? Not unless we become financially sustainable. It is the irony of ironies—we are doing the most sustainable things in terms of food and it is the most unsustainable thing in terms of money.²²

Even city-managed urban agriculture initiatives are under cost cutting pressures engendered by the current fiscal climate.²³ Unless the true costs of conventionally-produced food are internalized, the gap in financial sustainability of urban agriculture will prove to be a difficult challenge to overcome.

CONCLUSION

This report has identified seven key challenges to scaling up urban agriculture in Toronto in 2011: regulatory barriers, bureaucratic barriers, relationship bridging, access to land, city farmers vs. rural farmers, education and funding. It has also proposed potential solutions to most of these challenges. By no means are these challenges and potential solutions meant to be exclusive. Rather, given that urban agriculture should be regarded as a *continuum*, so too should the challenges and solutions presented above. As the challenges highlighted above are overcome, new challenges will present themselves and will require the best efforts of those involved in the realms of the planning, the policy and the practice of urban agriculture to meet and surmount them.

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