

# Fostering Community and Supporting Employment through Urban Agriculture

On a cold, damp morning in early May, ten newly hired seasonal staff approach the still snow-covered field in anticipation of the upcoming growing season. This group of young urban indigenous people, new Canadians and settlers, of whom most have never planted a seed before, have been brought together to transform a 2½ acre grass field into a working farm with an orchard and apiary. While there is much enthusiasm, this will not be an easy process. There will be many gruelling workdays in the hot sun, mistakes made, successes to celebrate, new friendships formed and life lessons to be had. This is the beginning of the Seasonal Horticultural Outdoor Worker (SHOW) programme facilitated by Roots to Harvest in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. For 20 weeks, these ten young adults will be trained in urban agroecology, build commitment to their jobs and fellow workers and become more engaged in their community.

## The roots of it all

Roots to Harvest was established in 2007 as a non-profit organisation. It offers educational and employment opportunities for youth through agroecological agriculture and food systems. Roots to Harvest also provides opportunities to engage in Thunder Bay's food systems.

From school-based education and cooking courses to community garden animators, Roots to Harvest provokes people to become more than just consumers: to be growers, market gardeners, eaters and lifelong learners. By accepting this challenge, participants develop an ability to identify existing challenges and to advocate for more vibrant and healthy communities. With the understanding that food plays a crucial role in the health, ecological resilience and connectivity of communities, Roots to Harvest aims to create spaces for discovery and learning which can disrupt and empower individuals to become agents of change. Roots to Harvest is part of a larger network of community food organisations across Ontario and Canada that are working

*Matthew joined the SHOW programme in 2017 at age 22 when he had been living in his parents' basement, unemployed, discouraged and not sure of the next stage in his life. As an indigenous man in Thunder Bay he had faced discrimination in employment and personally. At the same time, he was full of both big ideas and a desire to learn. Working with the SHOW programme staff and addressing these concerns and hesitations head on, Matthew found connection not only in the soil and with the plants – carrots were his favourite – but also with his fellow workers and his dedication to work. By participating in programming and learning with, through and about food, Matthew found a community of people to share a common experience, where food is a tool to engage in the world in a meaningful way.*

*Matthew commented, "Before this job I didn't feel like I had any friends or support. I now have a family and people to turn to." The key to this feeling was the support at work he had not had before. Using urban agriculture as a connection to the land, water and other people, Roots to Harvest helps people to feel valued and confident, to make healthy life choices and to become advocates for more just and sustainable food systems now and for years to come.*

at both the programme and policy levels to create a more healthy, just and sustainable food system for all.

## SHOW in action

Thunder Bay is located in north-western Ontario and plays a key role in the region, not only as a regional hub for many of the remote indigenous and settler communities, but also as the largest urban centre within 700 km in each direction. Many of the city's youth face systemic barriers of poverty, unemployment and racism. Since 2016 the SHOW programme has successfully engaged over 30 marginalised youth in agroecology and food systems work experiences.

The SHOW programme hires youth between the ages of 18 and 30 for five months, to facilitate the growth of an urban farm while offering support to other growers across the Thunder Bay region. The SHOW staff spend four days a week on agroecological initiatives at the urban farm, and one day in an independent placement working with small businesses and other food-related organisations. Although growing food in a northern climate comes with many challenges, the Roots to Harvest urban farm produces many fruit crops (raspberries, apples, strawberries) as well as vegetable crops (carrots, kale, potatoes, onions and beets) that are sold at

<sup>1</sup> The term settler refers to people living in Canada who are not First Nations, Metis or Inuit.



Photos by Airin Stephens

weekly markets and in a community-supported agriculture weekly subscription. Crops are also sold to local restaurants.

*One individual worked with a local restaurant, learning to cook, and explained how this job has made an impact on his comfort level in the city: "I moved to Thunder Bay from my reserve<sup>1</sup> three years ago and I have had a hard time making friends. This work allowed me to make friends and to feel comfortable in other areas of town. Before this I never set foot on the other side of town, and now I ride the bus here every day." One person commented on how much they learned working with the urban farm: "I loved learning about food and I shared what I knew with my mom. She thought I was really smart ... I now have the skills to start and maintain my own garden. I definitely want one next summer."*

<sup>1</sup> In Canada, reserves are specified by the Indian Act as a "tract of land, the legal title that has been set apart by the government for the use and benefit of the band".

The SHOW programme aims to employ the whole person and create a supportive work environment, focused on dignity and respect, that allows participants to gain support in meeting their basic needs. To enhance long-term employability, participants also receive a range of training, such as first aid and safe food handling certifications as well as workshops in leadership, setting and meeting goals, financial literacy, workplace safety and communication. This training helps participants develop a stronger sense of self, understand financial security, improve physical and mental health and build greater community connections. They dig deep into their everyday challenges. For some, these challenges are systemic barriers that go well beyond what one individual or one organisation can do. The urban farm becomes a living example of how hard work and knowledge and skill acquisition are vital, but – with soil degradation, pest infestations and the impacts of climate change – perseverance can only go so far. As participants learn over time in the SHOW programme, effecting change requires not only deep personal work, but also broader collective action with a view to the longer term. Most recently the SHOW group participated in a community art building event with indigenous activist Christie Belcourt. Involvement in this activity enabled them to further learn about the connections between food, water, people and land, in a

creative way that engaged not only the mind but the heart as well.

*Upon reflection Matthew commented on how, with a newfound set of skills, he is ready to take the next step forward: "I realised new skills (shovelling, weeding, hoeing, communicating) and learned how to handle money. I'm more likely to set goals now, I have a better balance with social life and my work life and better motivation. My relationship with my family got better too. I feel more comfortable around people and I am dedicated to working with plants in the future." "My goal for the summer was to move out of my parent's house and I did it. It took a while but I actually did it."*

*Matthew took a full-time job with a local business after finishing the programme, and has been able to apply the many skills he learned while engaged in growing food.*

### The growth continues

This 2018 season is in full swing and we are only about halfway through, but the impact of this year's programme can be felt deeply. This year we welcomed our first Syrian refugee to the group and the learning has already been rich. While Roots to Harvest will not transform everything, it is an important starting place for its participants and the city of Thunder Bay. It is a model for other communities wishing to address the diverse needs of their community through creative, community-engaged space and meaningful employment.

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#### More information

<http://www.rootstoharvest.org>

Video on SHOW: <https://vimeo.com/258368387>