



# Just Food Farm: Redefining value using urban agroecology on public land

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**Public land is one of the primary battlegrounds on which ideology will contest power in the 21st century. As city regions face continued pressures to expand, control and disposition of public land will increasingly become a focal point of governance. At the crossroads of financialisation, privatisation, and devolution, the stewardship of public land will pit the preservation of landscape, ecologically sensitive zones, and agricultural land, against the forces of urban expansion, development, and speculation.**

In communities with significant populations of low-income and marginalised families, the ability to access public land for food production can not only provide a much-needed supplemental source of household food, it could also incubate new skills in knowledge sharing and collaborative decision making. This is an opportunity for a new, urban, agroecology to initiate a dialogue between different types of knowledge, including traditional knowledge, indigenous knowledge, farmers' knowledge, migrant knowledge, and scientific knowledge. More than this, agroecology embraces a commitment to political and social change, to address the needs of the community.

For urban agroecologists, these needs centre on community food security, the enhancement of ecological diversity, and the scarcity of land for food production. Proximity to distinctively urban issues and scarcities elevates the social dimension and responsibilities of agroecology. Proximity to marginalised urban communities affords unique

opportunities to address these issues and scarcities collectively through dialogue and actions rooted in food justice and food sovereignty shaped by urban experiences and realities. The employment of urban agroecological principles on public land will therefore be an important tool for systems transformation. This article looks at this issue from Canada, where low income and new migrant populations seek food resources.

## The Context

The Just Food Farm is situated on 150 acres in the heart of Ottawa, and borders Green's Creek natural area, an ecologically-sensitive corridor providing habitat for wildlife and valuable green space for nearby residents. Just Food is in the third year of a 25-year lease with the National Capital Commission (NCC), a crown corporation that manages over 200 km<sup>2</sup> of land – much of it farmland – expropriated over 50 years ago to create a Greenbelt around the city. The farm was used for over 30 years as the NCC's nursery, and in the past two decades has developed a legacy of untended tree cover across half of the site.

In 2017 the Just Food Farm is hosting 12 new farmer trainees, 10 experienced farmers, and education and demonstration projects offering apiary, permaculture, foraging and food forest workshops, as well as environmental programs for youth. The farm is a long-term host of the agrarian Karen refugee community farm, and Operation Come Home's FarmWorks project, with community-supported agriculture baskets for 30 households. This year the Just Food Farm has opened a Syrian Refugee garden. The plant-a-row, donate-a-row program has all produce going to a local food cupboard. Autumn will also bring a new sugar-maple grove, as well as thousands of trees and plants in the new Community Food Forest.



While the Start-up Farm program focuses on small-scale urban agriculture production of organic vegetables, there is space for new projects which prioritise the harmonisation of agriculture within the existing landscape, using thoughtful, low-input, conservation-agricultural production systems that demonstrate scale-appropriate agroecological vegetable production practices. These include rainwater irrigation systems, living mulch, passive solar greenhouses, mixed-stock compost production, composite cross-population breeding, and much more.

At the same time, in order to truly foster urban agroecology, these projects aim to integrate food justice for the community. Participation in and co-development of community farm projects is invited, and spaces are provided for the community to learn, grow and flourish. This involves re-imagining the commons for the 21st century, in a major urban centre. Canada is a society that both inculcates and minimises the gulf between prosperity and hardship. Here the proper use of the commons must focus on the stewardship of collective resources for the benefit of those marginalised and disadvantaged by our collective pursuits.

By demanding of the farmers and practitioners scale-appropriate practices that enhance the soil and biodiversity of the site, while integrating food production seamlessly into existing natural spaces, urban agroecology challenges conventional agroeconomic rationales. Accepted agronomic practices strip the region of bush-lots, tree-lines and hedgerows. New social spaces on public land – created specifically to prioritise sharing and caring – challenge accepted wisdom that increasingly demands the primacy of economic value in public projects and spaces.

The market exchange rate of the food and services produced does not begin to capture the value produced on the Just Food Farm. There are many more benefits that are hard to quantify arising from a community demonstration and education farm on ecologically sensitive public land bordered by strip malls and a residential area with the highest concentration of Syrian refugees in the country. Social enterprise models challenge the prioritisation of market return or profit in food justice programming. However, the discourse of social enterprise does little to de-commodify public spaces and conversations. Urban agroecology can step into this breach, demanding 'common' public spaces that value nourishment of body, spirit and mind for all, equally, across the community.

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