

Concrete Orchard

Ottawa's new urban foraging business feeds the needy.



ON A GRASSY PATCH outside Russell Heights Community Housing in Ottawa, more than a dozen kids and adults are taking turns wielding shovels and wheelbarrows. They're volunteers from the community, Vincent Massey Public School and MD Physicians Services, and they've come out on this brisk, sunny, late-fall afternoon to plant 21 Asian pear, heartnut and serviceberry trees. The task requires effort, but there's a payoff that goes beyond the local apple cider and grape jam set out for tasting. The young trees, replacements for others decimated by emerald ash borers, will produce fruit and nuts for the community to share.

Individuals donated the new trees to Ottawa Community Housing via Hidden Harvest Ottawa, an initiative that promotes planting and harvesting of food-bearing trees in the city. Hidden Harvest collects and distributes fruit and nuts from urban trees. It also sells food-bearing trees that people can plant in their yards or donate to community groups.

The endeavour is a recipe for promoting local food, enhancing the beauty and utility of the environment and building community.

Co-founders Katrina Siks and Jason Garlough launched Hidden Harvest Ottawa in 2012. Siks, an environmental educator and wilderness instructor at Outward Bound Canada, and Garlough, who worked at a software company and volunteers with groups such as Ottawa's Just Food, met during a course about urban wild edibles. During a 2011 visit to a friend's cottage, built on a now-overgrown orchard, the two discovered apples and turned them into several jugs of juice. "We wondered what other trees were hiding around the city," says Siks.

Siks was aware of the disconnect between people and their food sources. Garlough, who sat on the city's Forests and Greenspace Advisory Committee, knew the city sometimes cut down publicly owned trees when people complained about fruit falling on the ground. "All this food was going to waste," he says.

Seeing an opportunity, Garlough and Siks met with city forestry staff, the Ottawa Food Bank and numerous groups working on food issues. Their initial goal for 2012 was to identify 365 trees for harvesting. Shortly after doing so, the city gave them access to a database containing details and locations for 37,000-plus city trees (less than a quarter of Ottawa's inventory), 4,000 of which were food-bearing. "That sort of blew our first goal out of the water," says Garlough.

Spurred by the enthusiasm of people they spoke with, Siks and Garlough consulted other tree-food organizations like Not Far From The Tree in Toronto. "We definitely took inspiration from other groups around Canada that have already gotten things going," says Siks. Early on, they knew they wanted Hidden Harvest Ottawa to be a business.

"We're a social enterprise; that's one thing that sets us apart right now from other fruit-gleaning projects around the country," explains Siks. "We took a look at how things were going for them so far, and like many non-profits, they're struggling for funding. We really wanted to find a sustainable model for Ottawa, so we're looking at generating enough income to cover our costs and pay at least one person to maintain the operations."

That means Hidden Harvest Ottawa will sell fruit and nut trees, purchased wholesale from local nurseries, to raise revenue. They're starting with heartnut, Asian pear and serviceberry, which Siks and Garlough

LEFT: Angela Plant and other Hidden Harvest Ottawa volunteers collected more than 60 lbs of apples from one tree in a single day!

say grow well organically and suit the local climate and soil conditions.

In the meantime, funding from the Ontario Self-Employment Benefit program supported the pair while they set up the business, incorporated in June 2012. They received helpful advice from the Collaborative for Innovative Social Enterprise Development, and secured workspace at Hub Ottawa, where they've connected with other creative entrepreneurs. With the help of a \$1,000 grant from Awesome Ottawa, they bought harvesting equipment in time to collect 2012's bounty.

"We harvested grapes, apples, crabapples and black walnuts," says Siks, "but there are so many more examples of delicious food we can try." They're hoping to include pears, mulberries, serviceberries, ginkgo nuts, Turkish hazelnuts and other trees in this year's harvest.

Hidden Harvest's website allows locals to sign up to pick fruit or register food-bearing trees. Neighbourhood leaders host harvests and take care of the produce, which is divided four ways among homeowners, volunteer harvesters, Hidden Harvest Ottawa and food agencies.

Last year, that produce supplemented food baskets that the Centretown Emergency Food Centre provided its clientele, which grew by 20 per cent in 2012. "They were just a godsend – they would show up in the middle of the week with all this food," says Centretown's coordinator Kerry Kaiser. "Having fresh

produce is everything for our clients."

The same concord grape vines that fed Centretown's clients also produced enough fruit for Hidden Harvest Ottawa to hold a jam-making workshop. Participants helped pick the fruit and paid a modest fee to learn how to make jam and preserve grape leaves. A dozen adults of all ages turned out for the evening to learn food-processing skills, listen to music and laugh together.

"It's amazing, seeing people's passions for this idea," says Siks. Because Hidden Harvest couldn't accommodate everyone who wanted to participate last year, they'll run more harvest events and add more trees to their online map in 2013. They also aim to expand their Plan(t) for Tomorrow program, which allows people to donate trees to community groups through Hidden Harvest Ottawa's website. Thanks to a social innovation grant from the Ontario Centres of Excellence and in partnership with the Ottawa Food Bank and Cisco Systems, they're also launching a program called Ottawa Trees to Tables that will streamline food agencies' access to produce from city-owned trees.

"Local and sustainable food is a really hot topic right now, and I think trees are next," comments Siks. "You do need to take care of your tree, but once it's established, it's its own resource. It's living, it's breathing, it's healing our environment and then offering food freely." **ED**

Denise Deby is a writer and consultant specializing in environmental, social and community issues. denisedeby.com

A Taste of Canada's Food-Tree Groups

St. John's Fruit Tree Project was created in 2011 to connect fruit tree owners with volunteer pickers, community kitchens and food banks in St. John's, Newfoundland. rootcellarsrock.ca/2011/08/st-johns-fruit-tree-project

Mississauga Fruit Tree is a volunteer-run, non-profit organization based in Malton, Ontario, which has linked harvesters with backyard tree owners and offered tree care and food preparation programs since 2009. mississaugafruittree.org

Fruit Share is a volunteer-led organization formed in 2010 to link fruit owners, volunteers and community groups to collect and share fruit from trees in Winnipeg and elsewhere in Manitoba. fruitshare.ca

Operation Fruit Rescue Edmonton is a non-profit established in 2009 that organizes volunteers to harvest, process and preserve apples, raspberries and other fruit. It also offers food-preserving events and produces fruit-based products. operationfruitrescue.org

Harvest Rescue, operating since 1998 in Nelson, BC, and a project of the Nelson Food Cupboard and the Nelson Cares Society's Earth Matters program, gathers excess food from farmers, gardeners and fruit tree owners and makes it available to social service agencies. harvestrescue.org

The LifeCycles Fruit Tree Project, launched in Victoria in 1999 by non-profit LifeCycles, harvests fruit from privately owned trees, dividing the harvest among homeowners, volunteers, food banks and other community organizations, and processing some of the products for sale. lifecyclesproject.ca/initiatives/fruit_tree