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# BACK TO THE GARDEN

BY MICHAEL MARRAPESE

I grew up on the East Coast. Almost every kid had friends, aunts, uncles, or grandparents who lived on a farm. I remember playing in the corncribs, climbing trees in the orchards, picking baby corn, harvesting tomatoes in the summer, and binning potatoes in the fall. The smell of green peppers on a hot day and the taste of freshly pulled young carrots are still vivid memories forty years later.

But a lot has changed. The children from family farms have moved into towns, and cities have sprawled to consume farmland. About eighty per cent of Canada's population now lives concentrated in urban areas, on what was once productive farmland. In rural parts of the Fraser Valley, large acreages are being held by numbered companies—often for speculative purposes.

There are some fairly obvious reasons why contemporary industrial food production doesn't involve many children. There's the burgeoning use of agricultural chemicals, increasingly large, heavy equipment, and the remote nature of many farming operations. But depriving children of the connection to soil, the experience

of growing food, and the wonder of the harvest disconnects them from one of the most vital aspects of our civilization.

In many school-aged children there is little knowledge of the basic skills of agriculture, and little appreciation of farming. Also lost are the cultural traditions of food, sharing, and celebration. It has become difficult to grasp the importance of making informed choices about food; we struggle to understand the relationships between food and health, self and environment. These issues become abstractions if children do not have a direct connection to farming and agricultural activities.

In 2005, Merri Schwartz created **Growing Chefs!**, a program which places guest chefs in school classrooms to teach children about growing food, and about food's connections to culture and community. Schwartz, a professional chef herself, felt that in restaurant kitchens there was enormous passion for and commitment to quality local food—a vital resource for communities. "I wanted to take all the knowledge—about growing food, food quality, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture—that seemed to be trapped within the walls

of restaurants, and get it into the community,” she explains. “I think that in contemporary society, chefs are the stewards of this culture.”

“We are providing the experience of growing food, giving kids a better idea of what farms are, what it means to grow vegetables ... it builds a healthier relationship with food that they wouldn’t get just talking about it,” says Helen Stortini, the program’s current Executive Director. “Right now there is a growing awareness of the connection between the food we eat, health, the economy, and the environment. But beyond the intellectual component, eating is crucial to our survival. We are also very attracted to the visceral aspects of flavour and aesthetics. With kids this is very instinctive. This is a great door to open—people respond so directly to food.”

Walking through the average supermarket in North America, it would be natural to believe that most food (and perhaps the most kid-desirable food) comes in coloured boxes and bags. “This is a culture that doesn’t really value agriculture at all. The predominant thing that people are buying in the grocery store is prepared, pre-packaged food. It is not a culture that is into growing food,” says Heather Johnstone, who runs a project called **Fed Up** in North Vancouver. The project focuses on gardening and nutrition, but it provides an opportunity to discuss a lot of issues with the students. “We’re talking about what kinds of food they can grow and what kinds of food are local. It’s a very simple program but a very important topic—we start the conversation about sustainable agriculture and growing food locally.”

In Richmond, Ian Lai teaches a gardening program at **Terra Nova Schoolyard Society**, which works with children in four schools. In his program he also emphasizes the preparation and sharing of food. “We’re losing that cultural diversity of food that we used to have, but if kids can grow things themselves they can really connect to the culture and history of food. In some classes we talk about food security and accessibility and the appropriateness of different cultural aspects of food,” he says.

Heather Johnstone also sees the cultural value in gardening programs. “Once you start getting very basic skills of growing food into the schools, that opens the door for kids to access other infor-

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mation. When you have no connection to agriculture it’s really hard to get that knowledge—you are removed again by distance and time. Once you start to explore these ideas it opens the door to bring the culture back in.”

From a practical position, we need to consider where the next generation of farmers will come from. Our largely urban population has little contact with farmers and farms. How will future generations make good decisions about food and agricultural policy? As a chef and educator, Ian Lai believes that the gardening programs have a broader reach than just growing food. “Whether we know it or not, agriculture is the hub. The web that extends from that hub ties into everything we do.” In his classes he ties food production to the bigger picture. “What I’m trying to do with the high school kids is get them to understand that agriculture can be a viable career. We just need one student out of each class to get it, and that will perpetuate the next generation of growers.”

Getting students involved in these issues is essential. Two years ago some of his students went before city council to ask for more green space in their community. “They realized that as citizens—even at a Grade 6 level—they could make changes and create a momentum that others could follow. This is not just a ‘growing something’ program—it’s a ‘growing tomorrow’s citizens’ program, where they see the relevance of how we nurture food and the earth.”

Growing Chefs! [www.growingchefs.ca](http://www.growingchefs.ca)

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Terra Nova Schoolyard Society, [www.kidsinthegarden.org](http://www.kidsinthegarden.org)

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