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## Urban Agriculture

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On Thursday, January 14, 2016, the LYAC councillors met to discuss urban agriculture in London, Ontario. Generally, the meeting focused on how we can limit our intake of processed foods, ethical issues relating to agriculture, government intervention in food production, urban agriculture practices like raising backyard chickens, and general issues surrounding the use of non-commercially produced foods.

### Who Should Read This?

- People who are interested in urban agriculture
- People who have a say in the regulations and bylaws surrounding urban agriculture
- Those who are looking to make a change in their health, as well as the health of the environment
- People who are looking for alternatives to supermarkets and other commercialized means of obtaining food sustenance

### Environmental Effects of Agriculture and Limiting Processed Foods

The conversation began with a discussion on the negative effects of standard agriculture – specifically the negative environmental effects resulting from industrial agricultural practices. What was interesting was when asked about the relationship between emissions and agriculture, most councillors related emissions to cars, not farming. The group seemed surprised at the fact that agriculture actually releases environmentally harmful emissions to the planet. With this in mind, the group came up with ideas on how citizens could at least try to limit the negative impacts of large-scale industrial agriculture. Vegetarianism and veganism were both

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suggested as viable options. Adopting vegetarian or vegan lifestyles would contribute to limiting these emissions. Despite the fact that these two diet-alternatives were attractive in terms of environmental and even personal health benefits, the group agreed that they are both difficult diets to maintain. This would perhaps be true for older individuals, and those who have grown up with processed meats and dairy products as staples in their diets. In addition, leading a strictly vegetarian or vegan diet may be more difficult for low-income individuals, as places like fast-food restaurants often provide customers with large portions of processed products for an affordable price. The lure of large portions of cheap meat and even dairy products would most likely make switching from this kind of diet to a strict no-meat, no-dairy diet very difficult. A solution to these issues would be for one to simply limit their intake of processed meats and dairy products. By limiting this intake one is still contributing to limiting emissions as they are decreasing the demand for foods like processed meat and dairy products that are most likely produced through industrialized agricultural practices that can be harmful to the environment.

#### **Ethical Issues With Industrialized Agriculture**

This part of the discussion began with a reminder that many of the foods we consume in North America are produced at the cost of destroying rural areas in foreign countries. The core ethical issue with this is that many countries that are involved with the production of our foods are impoverished. Many of the impoverished conditions in these countries can be chalked-up to the ways in which their lands are used. Lands are often used not only for farming, but also for growing the food necessary in raising, for example, livestock. Grazing (the natural way for animals such as cows to feed themselves) requires a lot of land. Therefore, land is not used for grazing, but for producing soybeans and corn which is then used for animal feed. Many of the councillors were shocked as they had never thought of agriculture in this way: that land is taken from impoverished nations just to grow food, to feed animals, to feed North Americans. Despite many companies claiming their practices of production are ethical, it is becoming increasingly difficult to assess these ethical claims. Many companies may release statements and facts themselves that contradict statistics from more reliable sources. Therefore, the councillors generally agreed that in order to purchase ethically produced foods, one should be aware of not only where the food is coming from, but from where the information about the food is coming from. This means

analyzing all sources, and all sides of the information instead of blindly purchasing foods from the supermarket.

This discussion drifted toward finding ways consumers can purchase more ethically produced foods, or at least foods with less “mysterious” production practices. A suggestion was for consumers to increase their purchase of locally grown foods. This would not only increase access to information about the food’s production, but even cut costs for consumers as long as the purchased food is in season and not organic. It was suggested that if more and more people decided to turn to farmers markets for their food sources, this would increase consumer demand for these markets, and thus stimulate more local farms. Other councillors suggested the introduction of not just more farmers markets, but community gardens in or to solve ethical agricultural issues. While a community garden would not eradicate all negative agriculture effects, it would allow for neighbours to “swap” food amongst each other, limit transportation costs and emissions, and maybe offer a fresher, more nutritious option.

In addition to implementing more local agriculture options, the councillors discussed ways in which the government could intervene in order to counteract negative issues with agriculture. The Paris Climate Agreement was mentioned as an example of government intervention in the realm of climate change, and reducing emissions. This example prompted the question: should there be consequences for governments who do not meet a certain ethical standpoint in their efforts to reduce emissions, especially pertaining to food production and consumption? Implementing trade taxes or union cuts was suggested as a way to push companies to “step it up” and meet a specific goal. Another example mentioned of government intervention in the food and agricultural industries was government subsidies on fruits and vegetables - should governments be subsidizing fruits and vegetables for consumers? Many of the councillors agreed that in theory, government subsidies for consumers to purchase cheaper fruits and vegetables would be a great, however in practice, subsidies would create more issues than solutions. For starters, the costs of subsidies. Subsidies would make foods cheaper to sell; however, this may increase prices and costs elsewhere. Governments would therefore have to decide what in terms of cost, is most important to citizens before implementing such a big change within the government.

The second, perhaps less obvious issue with government subsidies the group discussed was was the possible increase in food-discrimination. Food-discrimination may occur as a result of citizens drawing conclusions

based on which foods the government chooses to - or not to - subsidize. These discrimination issues may center around the perception of food quality, value and nutrition. When thinking of government subsidized or supplied goods, the majority of people probably think of products that are basics - products that provide only their necessary function in order for the consumer to simply survive. If the government were to subsidize certain food products, the same associations of quality, value and nutrition may be applied to those products. Take for example, if the government chose to subsidize corn over broccoli. The subsidization of corn may promote the view that as a food product it's quality, value, and nutritional benefit is just basic in meeting a human's fundamental needs. This discrimination could work both ways as well, with conclusions drawn from products that were not chosen to be subsidized. If broccoli were not subsidized, then citizens may begin to believe that it's too good to give to the masses. In other words, corn, a basic, staple food of many North American homes, is okay to sell for cheap to the masses, but broccoli is much too good for that kind of distinction. In all, it was felt that subsidies could backfire after introduction by resulting in what was referred to as a "wider systemic problem" than a wider systematic solution.

### **Backyard Chickens**

The discussion on backyard chickens involved more "should we or shouldn't we" discussions than the previous topics. A lot of it centred around learning about the rules and regulations provided by local governments in order to control this method of urban agriculture. For example, we discussed the ways in which local governments limit this practice through a class system labelling different kinds of "pets". In addition, it was mentioned that backyard chickens would most likely be used for farming your own eggs, as butchering animals in a private dwelling is illegal. The topic of general interest in backyard chickens was also brought up. Many wondered about the costs of supporting a coop, and whether or not the money one would save on eggs for the year would actually even out. It was then suggested that perhaps governments could provide a loan to those who wished to start their own coops, similar to the ways that larger farms are allowed industrial grants. Thus, those who wished to begin their own coop would apply for these smaller loans in an attempt to help them out. The loan system seemed to be a viable option, as the business of backyard chickens would be very risky. In order for one to begin this endeavour, they would most likely have to assess whether or not they would be able to maintain a coop, as well as cover the costs; if you realize you can't, one cannot just throw away a live chicken.

### **Rules and Regulations**

The rules and regulations surrounding this practice changes depending on the municipality. Many areas in Quebec allow it, and in Vancouver, one is allowed up to twelve chickens. Toronto and London however, do not allow backyard chickens. Generally, people are against this practice for the following reasons:

- Noise
- Smell disturbances
- Public health concerns

Bylaws in cities that allow backyard chickens regulate the practices in order to maintain these concerns. For example, roosters are not allowed in a backyard coop in an attempt to counteract noise concerns. In addition, bylaw officers often visit chicken owners in order to ensure everything is okay, or that there are no more chickens than you claim. Basically, backyard chicken policies are more or less “don’t ask, don’t tell”; however, there was agreement that this practice should be regulated.

### **Issues With Using Non-Commercially Produced Foods**

The central issue surrounding urban agriculture, specifically, goods produced for sale in an urban setting, seemed to be whether or not this food can be “trusted”. The councillors joked that if they saw a little kid selling lemonade, they wouldn’t think twice about purchasing some. On the other hand, a strange-looking man selling corn at the edge of the road would appear a bit “sketchy”. Likewise, trust in urban agriculture also depended on where the food in question was being sold. For example, if the man selling corn at the edge of the road was located in a rural area, his product would appear more trustworthy than the same man selling his own “locally grown” corn in downtown Toronto. Despite this, it was mentioned that many cafés and restaurants in urban areas are increasingly producing their own produce to be used in meals. This practice was simultaneously praised and questioned. The councillors agreed that this a good idea, and that they would be willing to eat at a place that used its own house-grown greens or vegetables. Still, many wondered about the soil quality used in urban agriculture in comparison to the quality of soil used in rural agriculture.

### **Quality of Urban Agriculture Goods**

Most agreed that for one to test the quality of their soil in an urban setting, especially when growing just a few plants, would be intensifying their practice. One would probably have to be fairly passionate about the quality of their vegetables in order to do so. A few of the councillors who had experience on farms stated that they believed urban soil would most likely not pass soil tests. This discussion produced another issue: quality control of urban agriculture. These questions surrounding food grown by neighbours were contrasted to buying a chair with bugs at a garage sale. If you buy the chair from a neighbour, and it has bugs, is it not then your fault for trusting something at a garage sale? If you buy food from a neighbour and then get sick, is it not your fault for trusting food produced by someone who isn't educated on proper, typically commercialized, health practices relating to food? The general consensus from this issue was that perhaps with an increasing demand for more locally grown, urban-produced foods, regulations involving food grown in someone's private dwelling will be created.

### **Personal Stories**

The following stories by those who participated in the discussion involved experiences and connections with rural and urban agriculture practices, and backyard chickens specifically.

The first story was told by a group participant who had experience sharing locally grown food with neighbours in a rural setting. When discussing urban agriculture, specifically the discussions involving giving home-grown food to neighbours, one of the discussion participants proved that she was quite knowledgeable on this practice. Growing up in a rural community, she explained that many of her neighbours participated in a kind of "honour system". This system involved for example, leaving corn or other produce on the side of the road with a can for collecting cash. Buyers generally leave a fair amount of payment in exchange for the food. The discussion participant went on to explain that you could generally purchase this roadside food for a fairly reasonable price. Many in the group were almost in awe at how in today's society, a food honour-system like this could exist, and for a reasonable price.

The next story was similar to the first as it involved the consumption of personally, or more locally grown foods as opposed to those bought in supermarkets. In comparison however, this story however, focused more so on how locally grown foods and urban agriculture can be incorporated within our everyday lives.

One councillor mentioned how her high school in London had added a greenhouse which supplied the cafeteria food. She appeared to think very highly of this idea. Her enthusiasm toward the idea that this practice could be implemented in other schools around London which sparked discussion amongst the group over whether or not all London high schools should, (or more so), could incorporate the same greenhouse program. These greenhouses would work to effectively cut emissions, costs, and allow for the schools to provide their own nutritious produce for their students.

The last story was told by the councillor leading the discussion on backyard chickens. It was told in a response to a question about whether or not running one's own coop was difficult, especially when living in a non-rural, or urban setting. The councillor discussed her experience with a couple she had met who raises backyard chickens. One of the partners was a full-time worker, whereas the other partner stayed home and looked after the chickens. By responding to the initial question with this story, the councillor was able to emphasize what a commitment backyard chickens are. She suggested that households involving all full-time workers would probably find that maintaining a coop would become increasingly unmanageable.

### **Big Questions**

1. Is it fair that many of the countries that supply us with the agriculture to support our food industry are general starving?
2. Are we able to be objective in the fight for fairer food sources?
3. Should there be consequences for nations that fail to limit their negative environmental impact on the planet?
4. Would more people in urban areas be willing to purchase food sources from neighbours and others grown in local homes? Is this food trustworthy?
5. Do food quality regulations need to be stronger because you are ingesting it directly?

### **Recorder's Notes**

This conversation was very interesting to me and I was happy that I was able to sit-in on it. The food industry is something that I find extremely frightening. Those who supply grocery stores with food play such a huge role in our lives, however consumers rarely asked questions about where

this food is coming from, or whether or not there are alternatives. I believe that in a place such as London, Ontario, a city that is quite literally surrounded by farmland, citizens should be looking for alternatives to simply just purchasing foods from the grocery store.

With that said, this topic appeared relatively easy to discuss, with the exception of the ethical issues relating to urban agriculture. Many of the councillors appeared to be stuck between the ethical issues with only obtaining food sources from grocery stores and the ease and convenience of purchasing food from these places. For example, despite the fact that growing one's own vegetables or even raising their own chickens would cut down on using valuable resources of another country, as well as cutting down the detrimental environmental effects of having our food produced in another place, it is just so much easier and much more convenient to go to a grocery store and pick something up rather than going through the process of planting, tending and harvesting produce, or raising chickens.

I would have liked this conversation to focus more on different methods of urban agriculture, as well as its benefits than just growing one's own gardens. Obviously, with a topic like this that is so immense and central to our lives, it is difficult to not just scratch the surface in a two-hour discussion. With that said, I do believe the conversation could have delved deeper into alternative methods, especially with the backyard chicken discussion. I'm just glad that there are young people today who are willing to think critically about where one of the most important aspects of a human's life is coming from.

#### **What We Still Need to Learn**

1. Despite all the literature and statistics produced by governments, do you feel as though you are fully informed on climate change and how as a society we can counteract its effects? Is there a need for more research?
2. Are the regulations in place for locally produced food? Specifically food produced and sold by locals, not necessarily in a market.
3. Would older individuals more established in their ways involving what they eat and where they obtain this food from think differently about the negative effects of commercially produced food?

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