

## Urban Agriculture: Is it a Fad or the Future?©

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What's the world's biggest crisis?

If you said "energy" you wouldn't necessarily be wrong. Our civilization is built on a supply of cheap and plentiful oil that is no longer cheap or plentiful.

Or, you could have chosen "global warming." Climate change may threaten the very ecosystem on which we rely, yet as political leaders fail to take significant action, our situation seems increasingly bleak.

But, ask the same question on a worldwide basis and a large number would answer differently. The more than 800 million people who are hungry and the 1.4 billion who are overweight and at risk of eating-related diseases, would more than likely have answered that our main problem is "food" (FAO, 2014; WHO, 2014). Even here in Canada, close to 850,000 people are assisted each month by food banks (FBC).

Urban agriculture has emerged in the public eye as a potential antidote to all three of these crises or, at least, a positive step in the campaign to overcome them and guide us onto a greener path. Media accounts feature glowing depictions of the earnest practitioners driving this trend along with their supporters crowding farmers' markets. But media popularity and trendiness are no guarantees for longevity or success. Does urban agriculture really have a major role to play?

In one sense, it already does. Growing crops and raising animals around human dwellings has continued throughout the 10,000-year history of agriculture. Food was integrated into cities from their origin about 5,000 years ago. Only with the rise of industrial agriculture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century have large numbers of us been cut off from the presence of growing food. The urban-rural divide in post-war North America, in particular, seemed to turn farming into a remote, little understood and much under-appreciated task. Although it should be mentioned that even while urban centers in North America grew, there were always working farmers in them who continued to grow crops out of the limelight. Urban farming may be trendy but it is hardly new.

Urban agriculture now represents a relatively small portion of the global food market — 15-20%, according to the Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food Security (RUAF). Although we may take some comfort in learning that there are 800 million urban farmers, and that these numbers are growing, it's still a daunting task to integrate local city food into a global food system that seems well-entrenched.

One way to answer the question of whether urban agriculture is relevant is to say that it must be — because the situation is so dire that any addition to our food supply is necessary. The notion that we may never be far away from famine seems all the more daunting with the disruptions in the weather patterns we've learned to rely on to grow crops for generations. A Spanish proverb says, "Civilization and anarchy are only seven meals apart". Climate change may increase these pressures by putting 49 million additional people at risk of hunger by 2020 and 132 million by 2050 (IFAD).

In 2008 when prices of staple foods rose beyond the ability of the poorest to pay, riots broke out in more than twenty countries. Soldiers in the Philippines were called out to guard rice paddies and in Egypt the army was put to work baking bread.

Curiously, this happened during a time of record grain harvests and massive stockpiles. Later, the role of Wall Street speculators was revealed in driving up the price of staples for profit. Certainly big food corporations reaped huge benefits. Even as the United Nations declared "The Year of the Global Food Crisis", the Wall Street Journal reported food giant Cargill's profits rising 86% while pesticide and seed seller Monsanto doubled its earnings (WSJ, 2008). If this all reads like a vague memory at best, it could be because 2008 later became better known as the year of the financial crisis when huge banks and

corporations seemed about to collapse under the weight of their own greed. Somehow political leaders swiftly agreed to solve that crisis.

Against the backdrop of what could be looming global breaking points, new urban farmers are joining the ranks of those determined to grow food in cities for personal use, community enrichment, or as livelihood.

Examples abound of people, many new to farming, who are bucking convention in building a new food system in which much of our produce is produced and consumed in the cities where we live. Those with an optimistic outlook may be encouraged to see this response. It suggests we as a people, even if removed a generation or two from the farm, still know how to grow food. Skills we may have thought were lost forever are being rediscovered and re-invented as more growers and consumers search for alternatives to a flawed industrial food system.

The good news may be that cities can save agriculture. Of course, this is usually put the other way around. Rural farms have fed urban areas for ten thousand years. Perhaps now it's time to repay the favor. Consider the influence cities now wield. The power of the urban consumer is multiplied by millions. The way we shop and eat — and, of course, grow — has a powerful effect all down the food chain. Producers and consumers are already getting together through self-generated strategies such as farmers' markets that bypass the corporate food system. If city folks can understand and embrace a network of farmers growing food that's good for people and for the planet, the tide will turn.

And when it does, city dwellers will start paying back a legacy of support to surrounding rural farms which will, after all, still be needed. Cities can grow a lot more food but not all of it. Nor will they need to if they're in a mutually supportive relationship with their adjacent countryside.

Rural communities in many parts of the world today are in difficult circumstances, abandoned by young people as the industrial model sucks the life out of the traditional family farm. Urban agriculture could help by inspiring innovations in rural farming, including ecologically-sound organic growing techniques. Cities might even supply the workers: traditional farmers are an aging demographic, so the rise of urban nonprofit groups, academic institutions, and individuals training to grow for the future are positive signs.

Why is urban agriculture a key feature of a better, cleaner, greener Earth?

Advantages include:

- Stronger local economies with more local jobs.
- Fresher and more nutritious food.
- Reduced use of fossil fuels.
- Creation of beautiful spaces.
- More citizens reconnecting with their food.
- More effective responses to climate change and emergencies.
- Healthier food that tastes better.

### **Literature Cited**

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