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THE PLOT THICKENS

The Kilborn Allotment Gardens satisfies the need to weed for hundreds of green thumbs

BY JEN LAHEY PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAGGIE KNAUS

OTTAWA HAS A REPUTATION FOR BEING A GREEN CITY. Visitors tend to rave about the clean streets, beautiful treed neighbourhoods, and lush parklands scattered liberally within the city's borders. But at a time when infill housing is the big buzzword among planners, many of the unofficial green spaces—empty lots and fields in the midst of our neighbourhoods—have rapidly been bought up and developed.

Residents who have lived here for three decades or more will remember a time when allotment gardens filled many of those fields and lots—small oases rented by gardeners who either lacked the space for their own private vegetable gardens or just wanted a bigger space to cultivate. The Kilborn Allotment Gardens, located between Pleasant Park Road and Kilborn Avenue, now marks the only allotment garden still run

by the City of Ottawa. It has been operating for more than 30 years, according to David Duffy, who managed the gardening project there for seven years.

Under the allotment-garden system, each individual gardener rents a specific plot and is then responsible for it, deciding what to plant, how often, and how to tend it. Each year the gardeners pay a small fee to rent their plot, and when renewal time comes along, all are offered first dibs on their plots from the previous year.

Although interest in allotment gardening waned about a decade ago, in recent years all 355 of the Kilborn plots have been rented. So who makes up this new generation of gardeners? New Canadians, older people, and apartment dwellers till the large majority of the plots, according to Duffy.

GROWING A BIT OF HOME

The tastes of home cannot be bought, so Silviu Dobre, who arrived in Canada a year and a half ago, grows produce that reminds him of his native Romania. After a Romanian gardening-fiend friend convinced him to unleash his virgin green thumb last year, Dobre says, he was pleasantly surprised to find that he enjoyed the new hobby immensely. He's especially fond of Romanian beans, which have a particularly tasty pod and are a main ingredient in his beloved tocanitza, a flavourful Romanian stew. His wife, he says, is a true specialist when it comes to the dish.



SHARING THE PLOT

Part of the community-gardening experience is just that: creating community among the greenery. On a group of three plots shared by three families, Charlie Brohman gardens alongside his neighbour, Heather Reynolds. Reynolds, who used to work in information technology, discovered that she had such flair for gardening that she has done a career 180 and is now completing a horticulture program in college. Her know-how makes her the brains of this garden operation (actual blueprints were drawn up when this year's garden was planned). "When you walk through these gardens, it's like being in Tuscany," Reynolds says.



VEGGIE PLAYGROUND

Fatiha Islam is keen on things green, says her mother, despite still being new to the pastime. (Give the kid a break, Mom, she only just started kindergarten and has shoe-tying, sharing, and other important studies to occupy her mind too.) While her grandmother hid in the plants when this photo was snapped, Fatiha is not shy. When she isn't helping out, she loves to play with the kids at neighbouring plots. Fatiha also enjoys sampling the fruits of the family's labour—hot chilies, squash, tomatoes, and beans.

TEA FOR...20?

Not everyone gardens for the good of their own kitchen. Some, like Will Gemmel, have even loftier goals in mind. Proud possessor of the only shade tree in the allotment gardens, Gemmel can be seen out in his garden several times each day, usually accompanied by his dog and wearing a pair of earphones as he putters. He donates all his produce to the Glebe Centre, a long-term-care facility. Several times a season he goes all out and throws a tea party for the residents, who come to help with the harvest and to enjoy an afternoon in Gemmel's piece of paradise.



VETERAN EFFICIENCY

Mabel and Tony Goldsmith are seasoned veterans of the Kilborn Allotment Gardens, with 15 years under their belts at this location. They work with a quiet efficiency that rookie gardeners can only aspire to, their expertise earned through years of toil. The Goldsmiths divvy up the day's tasks and get down to work. In their garden, they operate together yet separately, side by side, each knowing exactly what must get done.



MULTI-GENERATIONAL VEGGIES

The allotment gardens have the power to bring people together regardless of age, political stripe, or nationality. Alison Cooper shares this plot with several other families. Although they offer very different expertise (Jane Wood's know-how runs more to mud pies and hole-digging, while Cooper's tends toward the more standard planting, watering, and harvesting), both are keen to spend their summer days outside and in the gardens, where their neighbours all gather to while away the hazy afternoons together. **END**

