

# Growing the Food Movement in Nova Scotia

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## Responses

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## Introduction

Food: It's literally and figuratively on the tip of everyone's tongues these days. What was considered a fringe issue just a few years ago has now entered the mainstream as a serious topic of conversation and concern. This burst of mainstream interest in, and conversation about, food has a lot to do with the fact that food is not a single issue. Rather, food is a node where many pressing environmental, social and economic issues intersect. Buy local, buy organic, choose fair trade, support farmers, become a farmer, grow food in the city, stop the proliferation of GMOs and end corporate control of food systems – a growing number of people are taking these and many other actions, as we come to terms with how our food decisions impact communities, the planet and our health.

There is a growing movement to move the discourse beyond food security and toward food **sovereignty**, a term coined by La Via Campesina (<http://viacampesina.org>) an international peasant movement organisation. Food sovereignty asserts the basic human right to good, nutritious and culturally important food, and the right of local communities to choose the degree to which they participate in trade, placing social and environmental sustainability and production for local consumption above global economic interests. Food sovereignty has six pillars (<http://foodsecurecanada.org/en/six-pillars>): focus on food for people, value food providers, localize food systems, place control locally, build knowledge and skills, and work with nature. It is within this framework that we will examine the food movement in Nova Scotia and the role that education is playing within it.

Nova Scotia has a long history of diverse agriculture. We have a climate that lends itself to a wide variety of vegetable crops, orchards, pastures for beef, lamb and dairy, as well as beekeeping, maple syrup tapping and many other agricultural products. Because of our landscape, and perhaps also our culture, we have retained many of our family farms and do not have the giant corporate farms found elsewhere in the country. We have joked that sometimes we're so far behind, that we're now ahead.

That said, we face many challenges and obstacles to our food sovereignty, barriers common to regions all over the world: Our farmers struggle to make a living; we have little infrastructure support for local food processing; we continue to import most of the food we eat; the majority of the crops grown here are grown using energy-intensive, soil depleting and toxic conventional farming methods; and our citizens are largely unprepared for the possibility that, when cheap oil is no longer abundantly available, many more of us are going to have to take on the job of growing food. At the government level, we lack forward-thinking, and long-term, food security plans and policies, and at the grassroots level we lack much capacity in terms of practical food systems knowledge and skills. We cannot yet consider ourselves resilient to future food shocks that may come as a result of climate instability, economic crisis or energy shortages.

Many groups are working to grow the food movement in Nova Scotia, each with the goal of ensuring a more food secure future. These groups include those promoting local food, working to move the

agricultural sectors towards more sustainable practices, working to support farmer rights and fight corporate control, helping low income families become more food secure, bringing food production into the towns and cities, and raising awareness about these and many other issues.

## Case Studies

The case studies that follow represent just a portion of the food work that is being done in Nova Scotia. Rural and farming voices are unfortunately missing from this paper, so what we provide here is a view of the movement from the perspective of some of the work that is being done in Halifax.

Each author has written about the project that she is involved in from a personal perspective. In this way, several voices intersect to provide some insight into the culture of the food movement in Nova Scotia. The projects described include a community food activism organization, a food miles research project, an urban gardening project, an experiment in urban poultry raising, an experiment in urban beekeeping, and an on-campus group of food activists at Dalhousie University. Concerns about food self-reliance and food sovereignty permeate the discussions.

### *The Food Action Committee of the Ecology Action Centre*

The Ecology Action Centre (EAC) is a non-profit, member-based environmental organization. Founded in 1971, it provides a well-respected, strong voice for environmental issues in Nova Scotia. The Food Action Committee (FAC) is one of seven issue committees and was formed in late 2002. One of the most vibrant committees at the EAC, FAC has over 50 active volunteers who are engaged in a variety of projects. The projects of the FAC are largely volunteer-run, and include:

- The Food Miles project (described in more detail below)
- Urban Gardens (described in more detail below)
- Halifax Landshare - a project designed to link homeowners with garden space that they are keen to share with apartment-dwellers, and others without access to a patch of earth, who are keen to garden.
- The Eating by the Seasons Cookbook - a volume dedicated to recipes using local ingredients and organized by season.
- HelioTrust - a project dedicated to the preservation of farmland and farmer wisdom.
- Musicians for Farmers - regular fundraising events where musicians lend their talents for a night of entertainment in support of projects that benefit farmers.
- Public education on a variety of topics
- Involvement in a number of policy initiatives, including the People's Food Policy Project (<http://peoplesfoodpolicy.ca/>)

The FAC is a hub of food activism in Halifax, and all of the authors of this paper are members of this group.

### *Growing the LOCAL Food Movement: Food Miles Project and Food Connections Project*

The Food Miles Project is a joint initiative of the Food Action Committee and the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. This three-year project has focused on the social, economic and environmental

benefits of a more locally-based food system. Through the research component of this project, we have been tackling questions, such as: Where does our food come from? What are the benefits of local food? How can we get more local food into grocery stores, institutions, and restaurants? This research has informed the education and policy components of the project.

As interest in the local food movement has grown, so too have the numbers of requests for presentations and workshops on this issue. Throughout the three year span of the project, we have done over 70 presentations and workshops to a wide variety of groups, including school and university classes, health professions, farm organizations and community groups.

Throughout the presentations, we've made a conscious effort to draw participants into the experience. We all eat, and thus we all have a connection to food. There's the starting point. Whether it's an activity to brainstorm all of the steps that go into creating a can of tomatoes or making chilli and apple crisp with Katimavik participants, or showing students a map of where the components of their breakfast came from, there is a way to start the discussion with something familiar and bring the participants on the journey.

The Food Miles Project is coming to an end, and a new project, the **Food Connections Project**, was launched this spring. The Food Connections Project grew out of the Food Miles project. Throughout our work, we saw growing awareness and excitement about the importance of local foods. However, at the same time, many people felt that they did not have the necessary skills to make full use of the diversity of foods produced in Nova Scotia. Registration for our January 2009 cooking class pilot was full within 24 hours and we have received numerous requests for preserving workshops. It is important that this excitement surrounding local food be translated into action – we want to reconnect people with local food and farming

Out of this, the Food Connections Project was developed. The goal of the Food Connections Project is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions due to food transportation by promoting local foods and building skills to increase the consumption of local food, thus decreasing food imports. Additionally, this project seeks to encourage intergenerational learning, by connecting seniors throughout the province who have strong cooking and preserving skills, and who would be excellent mentors, with younger people looking to acquire these skills.

Specifically, the Food Connections project aims:

- To increase food preparation and preservation skills through a series of capacity building workshops;
- To connect food educators with farmers and local food markets;
- To support emerging and alternative local food distribution systems; and
- To evaluate the impact of this project on the purchasing behaviour and eating habits of project participants.

### *The Urban Garden Project: putting food in our cities and community in our food*

While working for the Urban Garden project (UGP) in Halifax over the past three years I have learned a lot about establishing new projects, building capacity and working collaboratively. It has taken this long to get my bearings in the local and national food movement, as well as to learn how best to work together and increase our ability to grow and access food in the city. This learning has occurred through trial and error, advice given to me by colleagues and those that came before me, and by actively seeking out models and ideas that others are already working with and dreaming about.

Last gardening season, I had the opportunity to spend more time talking with those involved in food and garden projects here in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), as well as to travel to New York, Philadelphia, Toronto and Montreal to meet people working on a wide range of urban food and garden

projects. The combination of working closely with my local community and traveling to see what is happening elsewhere has both inspired me with new models and ideas, and reinforced foundational principles about how to build strong projects in local communities.

There is currently quite a bit of interest in urban gardening among HRM city staff and officials, public institutions, and the general public. This increased interest means that there is a wider range of people getting involved in the urban gardening community, all of whom have varying skills, directions and desired outcomes. It is important to work together, to find out what common ground we share, and to pass along knowledge and resources. Doing so will help us to make our projects accessible and sustainable in the long run.

There are many points of common ground in the Halifax gardening community, and many people are already working in collaboration with those around them. One growing networking tool is the Halifax Garden Network, which now hosts a website offering:

- Mapping of community and collective gardens throughout HRM
- Community Garden list and contacts
- Resource guides for a wide range of gardening topics

In addition, the UGP works on connecting projects, and resources, both informally through introductions and distribution of contact information, and formally through community consultations, which bring together the wide range of stakeholders in the urban gardening community, to facilitate debriefing sessions on our past work and make plans for future endeavours.

I think the UGP can use the project's role as a networker and connector to facilitate the creation of garden projects by a much wider range of residents, community leaders, professionals and politicians. We need to form stronger relationships between our planners, designers, architects, city councillors, health care professionals, developers, students, senior citizens, newcomers and anyone else who has skills and experience to offer to our growing urban agriculture community here in HRM.

A big focus of the UGP is to support interested community groups in starting their own gardening programs through start up consultations, help with securing funding and gardening workshops. This support and programming will continue to play a major part in the UGP in the 2010 season.

As more gardens are built in HRM, and as our skills and interests grow, so too does the need and desire for larger, long term infrastructure and support for urban food production. Last year saw the beginnings of discussions around what kind of infrastructure HRM needs and how it can be designed, built and managed. As particular sites are assessed for redevelopment, such as the Mainland Commons in Clayton Park, or the Bloomfield Centre in the North End of Halifax, conversations have arisen regarding community greenhouses, kitchens and community food centres.

Last season was the first time that the UGP worked closely with city staff and councillors to consider what relationship the city can and should have to urban agriculture in HRM. Facilitating discussions between our local government and community residents and advocating for better supports and policies for urban agriculture in HRM will continue to be an important role for the UGP in 2010.

It is my hope that the interest the city is taking in urban gardening is only a start, and that we can further collaborate to develop land-use policies and by-laws that support and promote food and agricultural production in the city in the long term. Now is the time for collaboration, big ideas and planning according to our specific resources and needs.

*Gathering Eggs and Ruffling Feathers: Raising Awareness About Urban Poultry*

In the winter of 2007, I had been volunteering with the Food Action Committee for about a year. I had joined the committee on a whim when I happened upon a planning meeting for an upcoming Harvest Festival. I had worked on various organic farms, grew a garden at home, and shopped for local and organic food when possible, but I had always thought of my relationship to food as a personal choice, and not as an activist action. After joining the committee, I became more involved in community gardens and outreach activities. I bought a house in Halifax during that year, and although my city backyard was small, I became a landowner. With my new title, I saw an opportunity to produce some food for my family, and felt a responsibility to steward the land.

Keeping a few laying hens has been an integral part of my dream garden ever since living amongst backyard flocks in Washington state. Chickens eat kitchen scraps and bugs, lay delicious eggs to eat and share, and provide manure for the garden (Blecha, 2009). I started talking to my neighbours about the possibility of keeping chickens. They were slightly skeptical, but willing nonetheless. As soon as I got the go-ahead, my friends pitched in to help me build a coop and a run, and I drove out to the country to pick out my new birds. I kept the hens for about eight months, enjoying the company and the eggs, before January 18th, 2008, when I received a "notice to comply" from Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) giving me a deadline of the end of the month to "permanently remove all fowl from the property" (MacEwen, 2008).

I was confused and frustrated by the letter. I hadn't heard complaints from my neighbours, and I had been checking in fairly regularly with them. Neither could I find anything in HRM's land-use by-law that mentioned chickens at all. When I called the city, the development technician from HRM who authored the letter told me that fowl are not permitted in an R-2 zone because they are not listed in the by-law as being permitted.

I approached the Food Action Committee (FAC) for help and advice. We all identified a need for the issue of backyard chickens to be brought to the public's attention. I put together a press release, which committee members helped to edit. A few other FAC members helped put together and circulate a petition asking HRM to pass legislation that would allow city dwellers to keep a limited number of hens in their backyards. We used the Ecology Action Centre as a drop off point for petitions and announced their availability on the EAC website. Nicole Arsenault, FAC Liaison at the time, was listed as a media contact in the press release, and was called upon for her opinion a number of times during the media frenzy that ensued. Marla MacLeod and Mark Butler, who were both easily reachable by the media because of their presence in the EAC office, also spoke publicly on the issue.

During January and February of 2008, FAC's paper petition, and a similar online petition initiated by an unaffiliated community member, collected over a thousand signatures. My district councillor, Sheila Fougere, begrudgingly agreed to present the petitions to HRM's Peninsula Council. She was of the opinion that Councillor time spent talking about backyard chickens was a waste. This stemmed in part from the media's previous critique of Fougere and other Councillors' "wasted time" on cat by-law debates. Before the meeting where Fougere was to present the petitions, FACers, other EAC members, and community supporters gathered in front of City Hall on one of the coldest winter nights with banners, chicken-combed toques hand-sewn by FAC member Pat Brennan-Alpert, and five live chickens: my three, and another two from another backyard. Fougere presented the petitions to the Peninsula Community Council and put forward a motion that the "Council request an information report on the by-law regulations across the Municipality that apply to the keeping of fowl for the purposes of producing eggs and how the Peninsula Land Use Bylaw may differ from others. Also if there are any provisions in the other by-laws that may be applied to the Peninsula that would consider allowing for a personal number of chickens for producing eggs" (Peninsula Community Council minutes, Feb 11, 2008).

By-law officers had extended the deadline for my hens' eviction to the end of February at my request, given that there had been some uncertainty over the political outcomes at the end of January. At the end of

February, I took my chickens to FAC member Jen Scott's farm an hour outside of the city. By the time the staff report came out a year later, my district had elected a new municipal councillor, Jennifer Watts, who sees urban agriculture as an integral part of sustainability. Many of us were disappointed in the dismissive nature of the report, which provided minimal information about by-laws in Canadian cities, mostly cities that prohibited backyard chickens, and concluded:

The current provisions for the keeping of livestock are longstanding. With the exception of the original complaint, staff has not experienced any similar incidents that suggest the by-law no longer meets the needs of Peninsula residents. Further, given that HRM's approach is generally consistent with other municipalities, it is staff's opinion that no further action is warranted. (Dunphy 2008)

When staff presented the report to the Peninsula Council, Jennifer Watts moved to table the issue in order to "meet with members of the community to receive feedback and come to Community Council in the future on this matter."

FAC organized the first meeting of the Citizens Advisory Council on Urban Poultry at Watts' prompt. The group decided to work towards an educational outreach event, where a wider audience could participate in a discussion about urban chickens. FAC member Jayme Melrose prepared an in-depth presentation on urban chicken legislation solutions from poultry-friendly North American cities, including Victoria BC's blanket statement of support for urban agriculture, including chickens and other small livestock (Urban Agriculture Resolution).

FAC received funding from the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) Citizen Science Program at Saint Mary's University and organized a public screening of "Mad City Chickens," a documentary about backyard flocks in Madison, Wisconsin. The May 13th film screening was followed by a panel discussion including city planners, Jennifer Watts, Jayme Melrose, rural chicken farmer Aaron Hiltz, periurban chicken keeper Jane Parker and myself. The panel was followed by questions and comments from the approximately eighty attendees. The level of public participation in the event confirmed that there was significant public interest in pursuing legislative options for keeping chickens in Halifax, and on December 14, 2009, Jennifer Watts put forward a motion that the "city staff open a planning application to consult with the public, address any potential issues (e.g., separation distances, number of hens, prohibition of roosters) and, if appropriate, draft amendments to the Halifax Peninsula Land Use By-law to permit backyard laying hens" (Peninsula Community Council December 14th, 2009). Planning staff began the public consultation portion of the process by holding a public information meeting on February 10, 2010.

FAC plans to continue its involvement through activism and promotion during the next phase of the public consultation process, a potential collaboration with the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) on an international chicken coop design competition and, if the city decides to allow backyard hens, through outreach and education activities supporting backyard chicken farmers.

### *Creating a Buzz: The Halifax Honey Bee Society*

It all started about two years ago, when a few aspiring bee enthusiasts got together for an impromptu workshop on beekeeping. We then decided that we wanted to continue our learning, and formed a discussion group and book club, whose members would later become the founding members of the Halifax Honey Bee Society. Because one of our members is an experienced beekeeper, and another has quite a bit of experience working with bees and beekeepers, we decided that we wanted to move from discussing bees to keeping some bees ourselves. We draw our inspiration from other beekeeping projects happening in urban areas all over the world.

In 2009, we started with five bee-hives, hosted by members in urban, suburban, and semi-rural locations. This year, four of those hives have over-wintered successfully, and we will likely end the 2010 season with even more hives, as hives become strong enough to split.

Encouraged by the model of Community Shared Agriculture (structured so that members of the community support farmers by assuming some of the financial risk of the early season, benefiting from farm products and knowledge throughout the season), our hope is that this project will be supported, financially and otherwise, by folks in our community who are interested in bees and who want to be part of helping this important pollinator to thrive in the city.

Those of us directly involved in keeping the bees are doing so entirely on a volunteer basis – it's all for the love of bees and for the wonderful learning opportunity that this project presents. This undertaking does, however, require money for bees and equipment, and the project offers an exciting opportunity for people in Halifax who want to learn about bees – and that's where membership comes in. Our members ensure the stability and security of this project by paying a small yearly membership fee. In return, the basic fee (sliding scale, so that it is accessible to all who want to join) covers all educational visits. For a small additional fee, we also offer our members the option of a honey share, which they will receive in the fall, after harvest. This is truly a grassroots initiative, and we're excited and encouraged by our steadily growing membership, and by the fact that whenever we discuss urban bees we are met with a great deal of enthusiasm.

Our goals are to preserve and promote beekeeping skills in the city, to provide settings where this globally imperiled species can live with fewer stressors, to provide educational activities for our members, and to enjoy and learn about these fascinating and hard-working insects. We, the founding members and board of the Halifax Honey Bee Society, are primarily responsible for the care of the bees, and we organize bi-weekly group hive visits, so that our members can join us in the hives and learn with us as we anticipate and adapt to the needs of our bees through the seasons. Each meeting is well-attended by budding and aspiring beekeepers, and our members learn with us by rolling up their sleeves and helping in the hives. The honey bee is an endlessly fascinating insect, and working in the hives inspires discussions about evolution, ecology, pollination, animal behaviour, and intelligence, in addition to more specific topics about honey bee biology.

As is the case with urban chickens, honey bees are not permitted by Halifax city by-laws to exist in areas zoned as residential. As a result, our project is also a way to take an active stance against the city's current limitations on urban agriculture. Keeping bees in the city, despite the fact that they are prohibited, is one of the ways that we are driving the food movement forward in urban Nova Scotia. So far, we have found that our efforts have been met with unanimous support from community members and media, and the city seems content to turn a blind eye to our activities unless they receive a complaint. The charismatic honey bee is slowly but surely charming the city of Halifax, and we are using this opportunity to build awareness, and to encourage the willingness to change, and the capacity to do so, in our community.

#### *Campus Action on Food at Dalhousie University*

Campus Action on Food (CAF) is a working group of the Nova Scotia Public Interest Research Group at Dalhousie University. CAF works towards food justice on the Dalhousie campus by striving to create a space for food options that are sustainable, representative of student diversity, and accessible to people of low income.

The struggle against the corporatization of food systems at Dalhousie University can be seen as a microcosm of the larger global struggle for food sovereignty. Currently, contracts between the Dalhousie Student Union (DSU) and food service providers Sodexo, Aramark, and Pepsi grant these corporations the exclusive right to sell food on campus. By giving a small handful of corporations an effective monopoly over food services in what is otherwise students' space, these exclusivity contracts are significant barriers to student food sovereignty. Furthermore, as stipulated by the signing corporations, these contracts are confidential – only to be viewed by corporate representatives and members of the DSU Executive. The confidentiality of these contracts, premised as a measure to protect corporations from their competitors, prevents students from knowing the conditions that govern food provision on their campus.

CAF has been challenging both the confidentiality and the exclusivity of these contracts by organizing free food servings in the Student Union Building – a space in which Sodexo is designated as the sole legal food service provider. CAF uses food donated by or bought from local producers to cook healthy vegetarian and vegan meals, which is served to students in reusable containers. These food servings have been greeted with enthusiasm by students, and with antagonism from the DSU. Nevertheless, CAF's and other student groups' efforts over the course of the 2009-2010 academic year have brought the issue of student food sovereignty to the attention of the DSU, which is now reconsidering its policies regarding contracts with service providers. CAF will continue the struggle for food sovereignty on campus and hopes to eventually establish a student-run food co-op, which will provide students with the alternative food options that they are increasingly demanding.

In an effort to connect students to a source of sustainable, locally grown food, CAF is beginning an urban gardening project called Edible Campus, similar to a project already established at McGill University. CAF will install container vegetable gardens on bare concrete spaces around campus. The vegetables produced will be used for CAF's food servings, and eventually for the student-run food co-op. In addition, CAF will offer educational workshops to empower students and community members with the skills needed to grow some of their own food, to raise awareness about food sovereignty issues both in Nova Scotia and globally, and to make the connection between food sovereignty and environmental and social justice. By 'greening' concrete spaces on campus, the Edible Campus will not only provide alternatives to the corporate, industrial food system that produces most of the food served at Dalhousie; it will also be a step towards reclaiming students' space in the university.

### **Discussion: Is this Science Education?**

As JASTE is a journal dedicated to giving a voice to activist science and technology education projects, it seems reasonable to devote some time to considering whether or not the activities described here can be considered science and technology education.

The central theme that connects our work is food sovereignty. We stand in solidarity with people around the world who are asserting their right to choose to participate in localized, sustainable food systems rather than globalized industrial systems. We come together to learn and teach, so that we are better equipped to assert our right to choose good food and to control (and know) what goes into our bodies and into the environment.

As activists, our orientation is towards nurturing a food movement and driving change that is good for our local community, and we have also joined the larger fight to dismantle the destructive globalized, corporate-controlled food system, and to build localized food systems that are socially and environmentally sustainable. We strive to work in our communities to build models for alternative ways of producing, thinking about and consuming our food. We want to build our community's resilience in a time when converging global crises (i.e., climate change, peak oil, resource depletion, and economic instability) are signalling the inevitable collapse of the industrial food system.

Together, we are learning the art and science of growing vegetables, keeping chickens and bees, and we are simultaneously working to identify and overcome the barriers that prevent citizens from meaningful engagement with food production. We are learning about how food systems are structured, and we are analysing the various models of production, to choose methods that work well in our communities. Our university students are taking on big corporate agri-business through the simple acts of growing a little bit of food, or buying from local farmers, and cooking and eating that food together.

While not all activities are explicitly educational, all have the goal of advancing the food movement and driving citizen action. The objective is to build a strong food culture. We know that we cannot do this

without educating in ways that are meaningful and persistent. This is not, therefore, science education for science's sake. This is politicized science and politicized science education (as is called for in Hodson, 2003), working with community members to grapple with the issue of how we can produce enough good, enjoyable food and still live lightly on the planet. We agree with Roth and Lee (2002) that real, persistent science literacy emerges from collective praxis, where citizens are engaged collectively in real work, solving real problems that are relevant to their lives and communities. Food action provides a myriad of opportunities for activist science and technology education that is accessible to people of all ages, from every culture and from all socio-economic backgrounds, simply because the entry point is *food* – a rich, culturally significant, scientific, social, technological, economic and environmental issue that is relevant and interesting to us all.

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