

City kids grow with gardens; [Final C Edition]

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VANCOUVER - Teneille Williams stands over a patch of dirt. It doesn't look like much, but she excitedly points to where she plans to plant tomatoes, garlic and maybe some wheat.

It's a funny agricultural combination, but Teneille, a Grade 4 pupil at east Vancouver's Graham Bruce elementary, has a plan: It's a pizza garden.

For most city kids, this muddy corner of the University of B.C.'s farm is the last place they'd think of going for a pizza. But over the year, Teneille and her classmates have started to think a little differently about where their food comes from.

Teneille's class has a head start on Vancouverites who are just starting to plant this year's gardens.

They are among about 80 pupils from three Vancouver elementary schools who have been coming regularly to the farm all school year as part of the Intergenerational Landed Learning Project.

The five-year-old project pairs groups of kids with retired farmers to plant an organic garden. It's about making kids aware of the importance of local land and food, says Jolie Mayer-Smith, a researcher at UBC's faculty of education and program co-founder.

When school groups first come to the 24-hectare farm, Mayer-Smith and her research team ask them what they know about food and the environment.

"I would say that most children today have no idea where their food comes from," Mayer-Smith says. "They didn't know that carrots grow underground. They had no idea what a bean plant looks like."

Kids aren't the only ones disconnected from their food sources. According to a B.C. Ministry of Agriculture report, the province's farmers produce only 48 per cent of the meat, dairy, fruit and vegetables that we consume.

UBC farm is the last working farm in Vancouver, its website says. And it may not be around for long, because it's on land that the university's official community plan says is "held in reserve for academic or future residential use." The university is discussing a new campus plan.

Because of the scarcity of local farmland, Mayer-Smith says urban children do not understand the links between people, land and food.

"If you want to help them understand what environment is, you have to think locally, you have to do something locally," Mayer-Smith says. "They have to have some kind of grounding in a space that they have some sort of control over."

Helping out in the garden is Joan Stead, 70, a retired hairdresser who is one of 40 "farmer friends" volunteering on the project.

Stead had been growing her own fruits and vegetables for 40 years. But recently, she moved into a condo in Delta.

Now she gets her gardening fix at UBC farm. "It's just nice to get back with hands in the dirt, with the kids, teaching them something so you can pass on the knowledge," Stead says.

Teaching and learning across generations is a central part of the project. Teneille says that spending time with Joan is the best part of being on the farm.

Teneille's teacher, Doug Palylyk, says these intergenerational friendships are valuable for his pupils. "As a teacher, you see the lack of mentorship between elders in the community and youth," he says. "This is one place where that gap is really bridged and kids are really interacting with elders."

The project has been slowly growing since its inception. Four schools and a number of home-schooled children have participated so far, but Mayer-Smith says there's more interest from teachers than space, volunteers and coordinators.

As for the future of the farm, UBC director of planning Joe Stott said that until the university's official community plan is amended, the farm property is designated as institutional land for educational use.

"But it's not protected forever and ever in perpetuity as UBC Farm," Stott said.

"Some are assuming that the farm would be discontinued," Stott said, because they think "there's not much going on at the farm." He also said the farm has its impassioned supporters.

The farm also houses children's summer camps, agricultural research projects and a market starting in late May.

Mark Bomford, program coordinator at the farm, says he's optimistic it has a future on campus.

With the long-term fate of its site unclear, it has been difficult to secure financial support for the Landed Learning Project, Mayer-Smith says.

Past funders of the project include NSERC-PromoScience, Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC, Farm Credit Canada, Imperial Oil Foundation, Canadian Home Economics Foundation, McLean Foundation, Vancity, and the BC Youth in Agriculture Foundation.

But current funding runs out at the end of the year, Mayer-Smith says, and she is looking for future support. She estimates the program costs \$75,000 to \$80,000 a year to run.

For Mayer-Smith, it could mean the loss of a vision she's been building for years.

"This program -- helping children understand their connections to the earth -- is probably the most important research project that I've been involved with since I've been at UBC," she says. "And I think it's making a huge difference."

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