Families have yardsticks to capture the leaps and bounds of children’s growth spurts. Pencil marks turn into railroad tracks on a wall or kitchen doorjamb. The green side of Calgary’s food scene is growing in the same way, but its core elements of local food production, processing, distribution, access, consumption and food waste recovery are tricky things to measure. Calgary Eats! (formerly The Calgary Food Committee) spent two years talking to 360 organizations and 1,400 people to gather the baseline data necessary to track progress towards a vision plan called imagineCALGARY. That plan sets goals for how our city needs to change so that future generations will enjoy living here. Milestones on its growth chart towards food sustainability are reported annually at the Calgary Eats! open house. Here’s a snapshot of how some members of our food community are making their marks on Calgary’s sustainability growth spurt.

UP on the ROOF

An aerial view of Calgary this summer will show several green dots emerging like lotus leaves from an otherwise tarmac-topped cityscape of towers. There’s a variety of reasons to create green space on a rooftop. Verge Permaculture, for example, worked with The Mustard Seed to install a rooftop garden to feed souls along with bellies. The Mustard Seed’s clients, who struggle with homelessness issues, report finding that time on the roof tending the vegetables is a haven from the streets below, and many of them appreciate a chance to contribute to the meals they’re fed at the shelter.

Over at downtownfood, a popular restaurant with modern-bistro food, a collaborative rooftop ecosystem has become an experimental urban agriculture project for chef Darren MacLean and his restaurant’s partners, Greengate Garden Centres and Leaf Ninjas. Last year they produced 40 kinds of vegetables and herbs as well as honey from two beehives that were sponsored by Apiaries and Bees for Communities. This year there are plans to add a greenhouse.

On a recent visit to Catch Restaurant and The Oyster Bar, I was led by executive chef Kyle Groves through multiple levels of kitchens, onto a service elevator and up one last flight of stairs to the roof of the Hyatt Regency. His tales of last year’s hailstorms, heat and drought had him sounding like a truly devoted green thumb. Catch’s 500 sq. ft. garden of raised beds see Groves adding more hours to his already long days, but his step has a spring in it as he dances from raised beds to pots to a sheltered corner for two beehives. He realizes the volume of food produced here will never meet his restaurants’ needs, but treasures the opportunity he and his staff have to grow some of their own ingredients.

Catch isn’t the only business buzzing with the energy of creating a greener food system. Gael Blackhall of the Calgary Horticultural Society reports that both the Bridgeland Riverside Community Association and West Canadian Graphics have rooftop gardens that will be completed this year, and the buzz doesn’t stop there.

SKY HIVE-WAYS

Os and Angela, UNA Pizzeria + Wine, City Palate, Calgary Food Tours, The Fairmont Palliser, Hyatt Regency Hotel with Catch and The Oyster Bar, Sunnyside Market, PEL Recycling, and Intrinsi Osteopath are all businesses sponsoring the Bees for Communities (B4C) program of Apiaries and Bees for Communities (ABC). Eliese Watson of ABC uses the 18 hives sponsored by these nine companies to mentor more than 20 apprentice beekeepers. She’s brought 400 hives to Calgary for hobbyist backyard beekeepers to enjoy and keeps track of the health of them all. Bees do well in cities like Calgary where pesticide use has decreased and there is rich biodiversity in plant life. Honeybee pollination is responsible for one-third of all food products, so their love of the flowers on our vegetables and fruit trees is a major boon to the health of our city’s gardens. The city, in turn, is working on adding more trees for the bees.

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Nicole Schaefer of the city’s Office of Sustainability reports that there are four pilot program orchards in a public private partnership spearheaded by the REAP business association. Stephanie Jackman of REAP says, “Our community orchards program is expanding from 50 trees planted last year to 150 this year. Donors include Naaco Food Truck, Leela Eco Spa, Conscious Brands and Green-gate Garden Centre, and orchards are created in food insecure areas of Calgary.”

Calgary Eats! says that food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe, healthy and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Several Calgary neighborhoods do not meet these requirements so those are the areas that the orchards are targeting.

Meanwhile, Adrian Buckley of Big Sky Permaculture observed that a huge amount of food was going to waste each year when fruit fell to the ground from trees already in existence throughout the city. He organized The Calgary Urban Harvest Project as a volunteer initiative that harvests thousands of kilograms of fruit annually and splits it between the fruit tree owners, the volunteer pickers and the Calgary Food Bank.

Another socially conscious initiative that supports the Calgary Food Bank is Grow Calgary. This 11-acre site is Canada’s largest urban farm complete with a seed farm, seed bank and apiary. It goes a long way to address issues of food security and access and is run by 500 volunteers who grow 14 kinds of vegetables to round out the non-perishable items in the Calgary Food Bank’s food hampers.

Growing Gardeners is one of several socially conscious initiatives in Calgary. Weir is a forerunner in aquaponics – a combination of food hydroponics and fish aquaculture engineered to create year-round self-contained growing units. Weir has grown for Fine Diner restaurant in the past and is currently working on a commercial-scale installation called Earthly Power Aquaponics Ltd. Aquaponics technology can easily be experienced at MARKET Restaurant, whose supply of micro greens is produced using this system.

River Café and Boxwood have found an ingenious way to grow on their restaurants’ grounds. They have a sequential system for substituting the fully harvested plant-filled container gardens that surround the sister restaurants with lush replacements that are grown off-site.

Community Natural Foods grows foods at each location and invites patrons to harvest whatever’s in season. Rouge Restaurant has extensive gardens and extends its season with the help of two on-site greenhouses.
City folks like gardens in their backyards, but even backyards need to be green with envy over the plots of others. In 2000, there were only four urban gardens in Calgary, but now there are 74 public (of 36 on city land) and 67 private having a defined user group site, with 25 more being developed this season. The Calgary Horticultural Society has a community garden network and coordinates both how to “find a garden” and how to “start a garden” at the city.ca site.

Even non-food businesses are green designers in remodeling their land use and dedicate it to food production. A fun example is an installation done by Leaf Ninjas for New Urban Developments in Narmaya, which developed a new green space and food forest out of a blank parking lot. Leaf Ninjas’ Luke Kimmel says that other businesses were so impressed with this meaningful transformation that Leaf Ninjas’ staff is now being asked to consult on even more conversions and believes the trend will grow.

Good gardeners know that nothing will grow well in bad soil. Mike Dorion of Living Soil Solutions treats yards and gardens with fish waste lipids, worm compostings and compost applications. Compost diverts waste from our landfills and takes organic matter full circle to replenish the earth.

COMING AROUND AGAIN

There are 22 food businesses certified by Leaders in Environmentally Accountable Food Service (LEAF) in Calgary. Composting and recycling are a huge part of these businesses’ successes in increasing their environmental impact. The city just applied for a $133 million dollar P3Canada grant to public and private partnerships to fund public infrastructure improvements from the federal government. If Mayor Hansen’s and council are successful, they will use those funds to build an organic composting facility that will see 80 per cent of the city’s waste diverted from landfills. A reduction in wasted food is another way to increase the sustainability of our city. But why is so much food being wasted? Maybe lack of cooking skills accounts for so much food ending up as garbage.

CONSUMPTION: THE PRESERVATION OF THE SPECIES

Cooking classes and heritage food skills workshops are on the rise in Calgary and its green treetops to its flowing waterways and fertile soil is one way to understand the reframing relationship between natural systems and human communities.

Facing connections between food and our city’s clean-air rooftops, down through its green treescapes to its flowing watersheds and fertilizer use is one way to understand our city’s food sustainability. Being thoughtful about the food we put on our plates and where that food comes from will help decide our future. Calgary’s story could be one of abundance.

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