

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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Finding a Farm in an Unused Plot of Land

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In Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, not owning land didn't stop a group of creative individuals from farming. Instead, being landless became their inspiration.

"The idea of landless farming came out of necessity. We had rented farmland, and worked on different farms, and we had no real capital to purchase our own farmland," said Simon Hun, partner, Landless Farmers. "We saw land everywhere that could be 'farmed' or gardened."

Pictured: The sole method of transportation for Landless Farmers in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, whether it's bringing tools to and from the farm or delivering vegetables, is through bicycle.

And so Simon and his partners decided to leave their rented farm and start farming within the City of Winnipeg. These individuals came together with a desire to challenge the boundaries of what farming meant, becoming the Landless Farmers, who believe in cultivating land for the better. Their mission: to find unused plots and repurpose it for farming. Simon shares that part of the collective's Inspiration was the MST (Landless Workers Movement) in Brazil, a movement that for the last two decades involved its landless citizens occupying unused land and repurposing it for both agricultural and housing purposes.

Initially, the Landless Farmers collective involved six individuals, all who were passionate about farming and their community. Each year, their goals and the members of the collective vary slightly. However, their core principle remains the same, "to run an environmentally, financially, emotionally, sustainable, urban, pedal-powered farm," said Simon. Their sole method of transportation, whether it's bringing tools to and from the farm or delivering vegetables, is through bicycle.

Located in the Pan Am Forest next to Pan Am Pool on Grove Street, the farm is only 15 minutes southwest of downtown Winnipeg. Their farm is intentionally grown in the public eye to promote the importance of agriculture to the increasingly urban Winnipeg community.

As part of their initiative, Simon and his fellow farmers encourage the community to come and see the farm. In fact, it's in the brochure.

"Our farming goals are not strictly about farming. We chose our farming on a public site because we wanted to be in the public scene, to help promote the importance of agriculture," said Simon. "We want to bring back the knowledge that food comes from the land and not the grocery store, and that it takes hard work and dedication to grow."

Increased food awareness is just one of the benefits of developing a farm in such a public place. As part of Winnipeg's local park, the plots are designed so that the Winnipeg community can see the beautiful, healthy food that the earth can provide. The plots have become a part of the Winnipeg community and so it's critical to take the time to listen and speak with community members about the farm. Simon said that one of the benefits about farming within a community is simply hearing community members walk by and talk about their garden. There was even a time where 60 local Grade 7 students became active members of the collective: pulling weeds, watering and even harvesting. Today, this CSA farm grows more than 40 different varieties of vegetables, all which are delivered to local consumers and restaurants through pedal power.

However, farming within city land has its own unique set of requirements. In order to conform to the urban environment, the half-acre farm is divided into several plots specifically designed to fit into existing landscape and pedestrian walkways. The plots aren't linear, as in traditional farms. In fact, most of the small plots are curved to gently flow into the park landscape, which can make the planting plan a little more complex. The plots provide food for several families and restaurants while maintaining an aesthetically appealing landscape.

Protecting the environment is an essential part of this CSA. The majority of their weeding is done through hand digging with a sharp hoe and music in their headphones. However, there are moments, particularly after a grueling weeding session, where machinery will need to be used. Floating row covers, despite its negative aesthetic value, is the primary pest management method used to deter bugs and geese. Geese have become a significant challenge for this farm. However, the collective has learned that sometimes you just have to accept some loss (whether it's from geese or the occasional human looter). Overall, the preventative methods are extremely effective and they help communicate alternative pest management systems to the community.

"The people who walk by have learned to understand that there are methods to pest control other than chemicals," said Simon. "Our main method for dealing with pests is to operate under the CSA model. We plant a large variety of crops so that our customers always receive something."

However, farming on city land brings forth its own set of challenges. Irrigation equipment cannot be left overnight and no onsite storage means that tools need to be transported to and from the location daily. The Landless Farmers are also required to pay both water and sewer charges despite the fact that the water

doesn't reach the sewers. In fact, the farm has helped decrease the amount of water runoff into the sewers.

"We are learning to overcome these challenges, by simply learning to work as fast as possible, honing our physical abilities and planning our planting plan as best as we can to maximize efficiency," said Simon.

In part, what has led to this farm's success is their successful adaptation into the urban environment. Growing a traditional plot wouldn't have worked. Instead Simon and his fellow farmers have learned to regularly evolve their farm.

"In essence, what we are doing is a mixture of landscaping, home gardening and organic farming. These are three very different methods of working with the earth," said Simon. "We are still very much in a mode of discovering how we are going to mesh these three ways of working to create a new kind of farming."

Simon's Tips for Urban Farming:

- Plan your plot: Ideally it should be integrated as part of the park's landscape.
- Connect with your community: They are the key to your success.
- Learn methods from a large-scale farm and adapt them to urban farming.
- Adapt and evolve with the needs of your community and the CSA. **GT**

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