

TURNING TOMATOES INTO SAUCE

By KYLA DIXON-MUIR

Hungry Mountain Farm of the Yukon brought a basket of tea leaves to the Gardens Of Diversity Conference to add to the institutional carafes of coffee produced by the hotel. A blend of spearmint and camomile from Quebec, raspberry leaves from the Yukon and kinnikinick from Labrador, the tea represents to me the holistic intentions of those present and the wide range of locales from which we hail.

Community gardeners are reaping their harvests in quite diverse political soils. Tara Treanor, for example, came from Guelph, where she represents her town's only community garden. It's located in an industrial area in the second-poorest ward – ironically, across the street from a research lab that approaches food issues from the opposite end of the spectrum.

"Our government just doesn't get it," she sighs. "We can't garden without water, and we don't get a penny for it, just buckets of empty promises. We have no taps, and access to water from fire hydrants has been tied up in red tape since we started in 2001." Her project only survived, she says, because a kind neighbour has allowed them to collect water from rain barrels connected to her downspout.

A delegate from England tells a different tale to a York University Environmental Studies presenter as I eavesdrop. "It's embedded in law in the UK that if five people ask for a community garden, it must be done. Sometimes, though," she cautions, "they'll try to get around that legislation by offering land that's at too great a distance away to be practical."

Inspiration flows everywhere. Alex Eshelman rhapsodizes about Montreal when I meet her in the hall between workshops. We belong to the same garden, and she knows how discouraged I've been this year by the theft and vandalism we've experienced. "Do you know how good they have it there? Every garden has secure fencing, electricity, a shed, a fridge and toilet."

I hear from someone else that Havana produces 50 per cent of its food in the city's community gardens, and I'm awestruck by the potential available to us here, where City Hall recently passed a motion to put a community garden in every ward.

"City staff are under-resourced," says Rhonda Teitel-Payne of the Stop's Community Food Centre, "and not all staff are visionary. The GTA amalgamation is still having effects."

I know from experience what she's talking about. Our Riverdale Meadow Community Garden was started by a member of the Bring Back the Don task force when he was searching for underground waterways to develop the Chester Springs Marsh. Dalton Shipway continues to encourage us. "Community Gardening is an appropriate edge-of-the-valley activity, and this natural peninsula of land has rural-quality soil."

The problem of responsiveness from above consumes Sunday Harrison, a children's garden advocate and teacher who works with Riverdale Farm. We've met up in a workshop called Advocating For The Garden. "Governmental departments are like silos," she observes. "They don't talk with each other in ways that would facilitate development for us. If I could make just one policy change, I'd have the city reallocate current budgets so existing school gardens could run programs

throughout the summer."

Jutta Mason from Friends of Dufferin Grove Park presents a workshop called A Saucy Response To Red Tape, in which people heard how her group took "tomatoes of bureaucracy" and turned them into sauce. It makes me ponder the wise words of another delegate: "The positive side of a dumb government is that we have lots of grassroots efforts." @

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