

## The Tomatoes of Bureaucracy by Jutta Mason

Ever since 1974, the city has rented out allotment gardens. When we moved back in 1980 we put our name down. There were none left, but they said they'd call us if there's a cancellation. And there was one. We put the kids in the car and drove up to look. There it was, number 22: one plot in a tract of thirty-six, bounded on the east by a four-lane road, on the north by a coca-cola bottling plant, on the west by a dump with tires and plastic and bedsprings, and on the south by a parking lot. Overhead, there were big hydro lines, and a little further west the meat packing plant belched smoke every half hour, nasty smoke that makes me think of burning bones and gristle. But we planted our seeds anyway, and soon enough the garden was crammed with vegetables. Inexperienced gardener, we'd planted things too close.

But it didn't matter. I remember coming back into town after a weekend away. When we came back, before we even went home, we drove to the garden plot. The kids ran up to the plot and stopped, in shock. Where did those red tomatoes come from? They were all green a few days ago! And look! A green pepper! And another one, hidden in the leaves! There were also gorgeous orange bugs on the potato plants. I took them off and ground them into the dirt. We went home with a basket full of things to eat. My older son, who's never liked vegetables, held a grubby handful of beans, tight.

The next year we planted things a little wider apart. The children dug and planted a bit, but mostly they ran around and shouted and picked flowers and ate and had water fights. Once they got cut by some glass in the parking lot. I yelled at them sometimes for running too close to the four lanes of traffic, and later they would sit, disconsolate, in the hot sun, waiting to go home. In the years to follow, we brought them less and less. It was wonderful to have a garden, but getting there was always hard.

One spring I met a friend I hadn't seen for a while. She had three small children and her husband had left her. Life in the apartments where they lived was a bit bleak and the grocery money ran out before the cheque came. She said she wanted to grow things with her children--to show them how her family made it through hard times when she was a child, and to let them taste a tomato when it's still warm from the sun. She had applied for a city garden plot, but she was too late, they were all taken. I offered her a section of mine--with some relief, since my kids didn't much like coming up there anymore and there was never enough time to take care of the garden properly. So I was glad to share our space with her.

My friend had put by some money to buy seeds. She had some garden tools, but no car, and she lived far from me. To get to the garden she had to put all the kids on the streetcar. They each carried a shovel or a bag, and after almost an hour and two transfers, they walked up the road to the garden plot. They planted their seeds and they watered. But then they had trouble getting there again. First the little one was sick, and then there was no money for the streetcar, and then the weather was very wet. Their seeds sprouted, but so did the weeds. When they finally got there again, they had to search out what survived.

For a few weeks they made a big effort to come more regularly. They got to know some of the other gardeners. My friend told me after their first harvest that she was very happy. This was just what she had in mind. When the other gardeners stopped by to chat with her it reminded her of her home town near Moncton.

But her cheque ran short again and money was tight for the streetcar, and the sun dried up the

earth. They went one more time, to find most of the plants shrivelled, and then they gave up. Gardening so far from home, making that long trip every time, was too hard.

I talked to some other women whom I met with their children at the community centre. They said they also wanted to grow things, they wanted their children to dig and plant and get muddy. We heard a rumour that the city planned to open another allotment section, only a block from the community centre. People began to talk of getting plots there all together, helping each other with the kids and the digging and the watering, trading seeds, making a little house for shade for the kids, maybe even a special section where the kids could play and dig tunnels without getting yelled at for wrecking a garden. We talked to some Parks people and they said: "a children's garden? Sounds good, sounds educational. We're very interested. We're going to have a meeting, and we'll let you know...."

But the meeting didn't happen, there was some problem with getting the land, there was some disapproval somewhere about something that we never got details on, and the garden idea just faded away.

The next year, in winter, as the children played in the community centre gym and I sat at the side with the other women, we looked out the windows at the hard, brown ground. The land beside the gymnasium sloped upwards into a little strip of hill, flat on top, beside a fence. There were some old swings up there, due to be moved down the hill when a new playground got put in there. Nothing else. Few people ever walked up there along the fence. In the summertime the sod got yellow and there was no shade. I looked at the fence again, and suddenly I got an idea. The garden. The hard yellow strip by the fence could be a garden. Broccoli and tomato plants, beans trellised against the fence, corn taller than the children. Borders of flowers; maybe even some berry bushes. Some little gardens for the kids to grow their own stuff. When they got bored, there was the playground; when they got hot, there was the gym, or even the pool.

We decided to try it again with the city. We made some phone calls, wrote a letter. It was different bureaucrats this time. There was a little flurry of encouragement followed by a message: this is not an interesting idea. Deflation. Another phone call or two, followed by a bit of interest after all. But there was a strange quality to this interest: it had no face. "They," the unseen others, were interested, maybe. Everyone I talked to reported on whether "they" were still considering our proposal. Suddenly it was on an agenda, but we weren't not bidden to the meetings where "they" might be physically present. Still, we could write another letter. So I wrote to the city people, about growing tomatoes with the children.

I made some more phone calls and found out that the new people I was calling had already heard of our proposal. It had been discussed at some meetings. "The proposal" seemed to have an unseen life of its own, and it had become an issue to be discussed by people whom we had never met, who had not seen the hill, or the fence, or maybe even -- we suspected -- a tomato plant.

The news came that the community must be consulted. But who is the community? One thing was clear: the women at the community centre who came there with their children were not it. We used to be the community until we resolved to grow a garden. Then we became a special interest group. There was an advisory council that was supposed to represent the community, and they were consulted. But at that time the council actually consists of people appointed by the staff of the centre, since no one had turned up for the community elections. So they were hesitant to give their approval. Even if they had given give it, it would probably have held little weight anyway. A community survey of the surrounding area was ordered, to see if the people living in the neighbourhood would find a garden offensive. I

asked: what if there are two people, or six people, who find a garden offensive? What if there are ten people who object to the moon? Are the garden or the moon to be outlawed because of an opinion poll?

Meantime at one of the city meetings a soil test was ordered. Then there came a long silence. Three months later, after a little prodding, a soil test was ordered again, and the community survey was ordered again. I heard about a meeting of the Board of Health, asked to speak there, and was allowed six minutes. I wasn't sure if it was even the right meeting, but I asked the people there: is there a chance that the bureaucratic rhythm could be adapted to the rhythm of the growing season, which was fast approaching, so we could plant our tomatoes? The answer was a benevolent maybe.

The delay from the soil test would already take the start-up, if it happened, past the time when the first seedlings could go in. But now some community meetings were planned, and a flyer went out to the neighbouring houses. And one day a brochure arrived in my mailbox, from the provincial Health Promotion Department, saying that they were offering ten thousand dollars to groups wanting to start community gardens, so they could hire co-ordinators. Co-ordinators of tomatoes? It sounded like a joke. But I called the number anyway. They told me they were an anti-recession project. The co-ordinator should be an underemployed person who already had some gardening skills and might be helped by this job to work herself into related jobs in the future. It happened that we know of just such a person among the people who use the community centre. Wonderful. She could help people get the gardens dug up, she knew about composting and about pests, she knew about harvesting and preserving. She could talk to the bureaucrats. We filled out the grant application, and they hinted we were contenders. The garden began to feel real. We walked along the top of the hill, measuring with our feet. A modest little garden strip, but nice. The children talked about planting beans and forget-me-nots.

In the end all the meetings happened on one day. In the afternoon, six people came from four different city departments. They had come to talk logistics. They said they were not speaking on their own behalf but were conveying the feelings and inclinations of their superiors, whom we didn't know.

It seemed like there was trouble. Their superiors were worried and unhappy about the idea that we planned to divide the garden into individual sections. They wanted this to be truly a community garden, and it couldn't be that if there were sections looked after by individuals.

We were puzzled, then incredulous. "How better to grow a garden than for each person look to after what they plant from start to finish? Who can garden by committee? Is it not enough that there will be mutual help in everything?"

No, it wasn't not enough. Individuals are private: by definition, they are *not* the community.

A compromise was suggested by the city staff. Part of the garden could be under the care of certain individuals, part would be looked after by committee and will be open to anyone in the community who wanted to garden, any time they felt like it. More incredulousness. "What do you mean?"

One of the staff people tried to explain. "Well, let's say I'm walking by and I see what's going on here, and I want to do some weeding. Then I can just go in the garden and do that. I'll feel like I'm included." Another staff person expanded on this: "And let's say that the nearby school want their kids to learn about gardening. Then they can come over here one day and put in some seeds. Other kids

from another school can go in on another day and learn about pinching off the tomato plants. And in the fall other kids can learn about the harvest." "Well, and the public health department can come in and give the gardeners classes in nutrition." "And remember, the plants that are grown in this garden shouldn't be taken home for private use. They could be used for barbeques at the Centre, say, as a garnish."

The people at the meeting looked at one another. They start to try to plead their case, to reason with the city people, to argue from analogy, from experience, from common sense. "You tell us that this is not a community garden," they said, "unless we behave in these ways that you prescribe for us. But you are not the community, we are. The community is made up of individual people. If you want to know how the community behaves, what the community is, don't tell us, watch us! Why are you telling us how to do this thing that we want to do, when you're only speaking from your bureaucratic imagination of what a community is?"

The city people said they were speaking political reality. They were only trying to tell us all how to get what we want. "You are arguing philosophy, and that won't get you anywhere," they said.

"What? What? Arguing philosophy? But it's practicality we're arguing!" "You can't grow tomatoes by committee! The community is not a committee!"

The city people shook their heads and wrote things down. "We'll have to write this differently in our report," they said. "Otherwise you'll never get anywhere. We want you to get what you want--we hear it's been great elsewhere, in Chicago, in New York. But you'll have to learn to bend. We understand what you're saying, but it's not up to us. There are going to be departmental meetings, and the people there won't like this, we can tell you that right now."

I asked them: what would they like?

"We don't actually know that in detail. But we know this will never go over."

Later that evening there was another meeting, of which people living near the centre had been notified. I dressed up a little. Five minutes before the meeting the room was empty except for two women in the front. They had gray hair and were neatly dressed. I sat down beside them and introduced myself. They told me that they had nothing against community gardens, but not right by their garage. Dirt would blow over into their yard and the gardens would attract odd people. "Already last year there were some teenagers hanging around the fence, coloured kids, and we had to call the police." They told me these things in a strong accent and my heart sank. I asked: "what were the kids doing?"

"Nothing, but they might have meant to cause trouble. The police drove up along the lawn with their cruiser, and the kids went away. What we want there is tidy grass. Already last year there were weeds and the grass wasn't watered properly. But having a garden would be much worse. No. No way."

More people came in: two older men from the senior men's club, three white-haired people who sat down in the last row at the back, a younger woman, whom I recognize from the advisory council, and a woman from the afternoon meeting, with her baby. The city people sat in a semi-circle at the front.

I talked a bit about how good this garden would be for families with young children. One of the

old men stood up and says the idea was terrible. "The land around the community centre is there to provide fresh air for seniors," he said. "The land is there for the community, not for the outsiders who come there with their children!"

The community, it emerged from what he said, did not extend as far as Bloor Street, four blocks away. It involved only the houses immediately around the centre, whose owners, he said, paid the taxes that supported the place. "The staff of the centre have handled this whole matter very badly," he said. "There should have been many more notices. Then everyone would have come to the meeting to protest. And anyway," he said, "the community is maybe seventy per cent Portuguese, and any use of the land should reflect that."

Several of the city people flinched. Ethnic composition was a sore point for them.

The two women in the front row said that they didn't want the garden next to their property. Then a woman in a flowered dress, who came in after the meeting began, motioned her intention to speak. She said that she was one of the people who worked for many years to have the community centre built. "This land," she said, "had a tire factory and two other industries. We fought to have the factories removed, and now we are about to see all our work undone. The city has assured its citizens of our right to green space. And now you people" -- looking at the city staff -- "are going back on that."

I said that surely gardens were green space. The woman in the flowered dress said no: no one would be able to walk there, on that strip where the grass now grows. And also: "I come from an agricultural family, and I know something the idealistic proposers of the garden don't know: nothing will grow on that hill. The gardens will not flourish, and they will be an eyesore." And even worse: she had had her soil tested regularly and she won't grow vegetables. "The heavy traffic and the pollution of the city makes the soils poisoned and you can't eat food that's grown there. Even if new soil tests seem to show no problem, this proves nothing except that there were too few soil samples."

The woman who was there with a baby said something about enlarging the limits of "the community," about beautiful gardens where neighbours would help each other, and exchange the harvest and the flowers, gardens so interesting that the sight of them would draw people in as they stroll past on a summer's evening; and about how good it was for young children to see how food grows, and to plant their own.

The woman in the flowered dress said she appreciated that argument. But she had her own garden, she said, and her neighbours had their own as well. They didn't know anyone who hadn't got a garden, who would have to grow things on public land. "It just doesn't make sense."

The two women in the front row nodded their heads emphatically. "Right!" They couldn't agree more. "Let people get their own land to grow things. The most important thing is that public lands should be tidy. That means, no gardens, at least, not at this community centre."

The man who spoke about taxes before now got up and said that the people who wanted this garden were two, maybe three people, and that if the city went ahead with this he knew the taxpayers of the area would be angry. His point was strengthened by the woman who felt the earth was too full of poison to grow food: she said she was certain that there were three hundred people who would come out to a meeting against this, if they knew what was at stake.

I fell into a daydream. Three hundred women in flowered dresses and men with Sicilian moustaches were pitted against three hundred women with babies in nursing slings and toddlers clinging to their knees. Both sides were armed, with weed-eaters and pitchforks and hoes and spray-bottles of pesticide. The city staff stood at the side, taking inventory of ethnic composition. Police cruisers swarmed around the perimeter, chasing off coloured youths who might do something. Meanwhile, up on the hill by the fence, Parks employees were cutting the orderly grass a little shorter....

I had dinner guests waiting at home. I excused myself: I had to leave the meeting early. There was no reason to say anything more or to argue. When I got home, the kids were running in the laneway, in the warm dusk, and my friends were waiting at the dinner table. They had been waiting a while already.

"Well," they said. "How did it go?" I told them there would be no garden. "No garden??....Why??"

Because of the coloured kids....because of the tidiness.. ...because the earth may be poisoned.....because people who don't have land can't grow gardens....because improper ethnic composition frightens the city people....because seven people at a meeting can make threats of bringing three hundred more... ....because a garden can sometimes seem like a tire factory to some people who have worked a lot and played very little, all their lives.....because tomatoes are too political for bureaucracy....

Then I ate dinner with my friends. The next morning I called up one of the city people. He regretfully told me that the project was probably too doubtful and ought to be dropped. It would mean the privatization of public lands, and was opposed by the community. Besides, it turned out that the Parks Commissioner wanted a garden that would be "community based...educational, and recreational, to enhance existing programmes," and what we wanted was too different from that.

Neither the tomatoes of bureaucracy nor the tomatoes that transcend bureaucracy were planted this year, in our desired community garden, and not the next year nor the year after. They may not be planted until the trucks run out of gas on their way here from California or from the Holland Marsh, and the city people emerge like moles from their meetings, fetch their children from home and take off their jackets, unbutton their cuffs and dig in some peat moss to make a good place for a plant to sink its roots. Then perhaps an old bent-over Sicilian lady will take a slow walk around the fence that separates her daughter's house from the community garden. She'll come and sit down on a little bench overlooking the rows of broccoli and cauliflower and dahlias, and then the children can show her their beautiful warm tomatoes. She will not think about the dirt that the wind might blow over: she'll think about these children. The kids will not think about the disapproval of the city staff: they'll think about the weathered hands of the old lady as she holds the tomatoes. Perhaps tomatoes and children may one day be able to redeem us, the landless gardeners and the city workers and the people who have worked so much they have forgotten how to play.