



Two urban agriculture projects bring art to Vancouver's gardens

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Grow

At the Bulkhead Urban Agriculture Lab until November 30

MOPARRC

At North China Creek Park until September 21

It may not have been the nadir of my dimness, but it was certainly the most twitlike thing I did last weekend. Believing the end time was the start time, I arrived at the Grow project's mason-bee workshop three hours late, just after the participants had left. Still, the enthusiasm of artist Holly Schmidt and landscape architecture student [Chloe Bennett](#) shone on undiminished. Standing in the middle of what's been dubbed the "Bulkhead Urban Agriculture Lab", a public-art project on the south shore of False Creek, just west of the Olympic Village, they generously shared their knowledge and insights.

Bennett, who led the workshop, gave me some literature on mason bees, extolled the early-spring pollinating capacities of these little blue creatures, and described ways of housing them in urban settings. Schmidt, who is the lead artist of Grow: An Art + Urban Agriculture Project, sketched out that enterprise's scope and mandate. Organized by Other Sights for Artists' Projects, Grow is both an intervention in a marginal patch of land near the former city works yard and an experiment in growing food in a "postindustrial" landscape.

In collaboration with other groups and individuals, Grow cultivates a wide array of vegetables, herbs, and edible flowers in reclaimed and repurposed containers, all sitting on recycled wooden shipping pallets. At the same time, it sponsors walks and workshops, and—against a backdrop of high-end condos and the nonconsultative hideosity that is B.C. Place—promotes dialogue around issues of “sustainability, food security, and collective initiatives in urban areas,” Schmidt says (see www.grow-urbanagricultureproject.ca/).

The Bulkhead is also, she emphasizes, a place of social interaction and community involvement. “A lot of people come onto site and end up sharing their ideas about gardening—and meeting their neighbours.” And it’s true: on this sunny day, with bicyclists, joggers, and dog walkers streaming past, many urbanites stop to look, talk, volunteer, and admire the crops of kale and beets, potatoes and tomatoes, mustard, mint, and... mindfulness.

The Means of Production garden is an active community space, too. And somehow I managed to arrive there last week in ample time for a workshop on “invasive basketry”—making useful things out of strands of culled invasive plants such as Scotch broom and morning glory—led by artist Sharon Kallis. Before the other participants arrived, Kallis toured me through the upper part of the garden, at the corner of East 6th Avenue and St. Catherine’s Street, and recounted its origins. In 2002, this small parcel of land, previously used as a dump, was planted and cultivated as a source of artists’ materials, including fibres and dyes, under the guidance of artist Oliver Kellhammer working with the Environmental Youth Alliance. After Kellhammer left the project, Kallis said, the artists’ part of the garden declined, although the EYA continued to work with the community, expanding the growing space down the hill to include indigenous plants and a terraced fruit orchard.

In 2007, Kallis and others came together to form the Means of Production Artists’ Raw Resource Collective, to revive MOP’s original aspiration to grow materials, such as willow, that artists could use in their practices. As well, they conduct workshops, give talks, and—not least—organize community tea parties. (The last tea party of the season will be on August 28 from 1 to 4 p.m. See moparrc.wordpress.com/ for info on programs and events.)

MOPARRC also sponsors residencies for artists who want to experiment with the growing space allotted to annuals, using it as “a living lab”, Kallis said. “Pierre Leichner is right now doing a project that is about controlling nature, where nature overcomes. He’s doing root-binding experiments with different food crops.” At the same time, musician David Gowman has been cultivating an array of plants as sustainable materials for making wind instruments.

Neither Grow nor MOPARRC is going to win any awards for the beauty of their gardens—but that’s not what they’re about. The organizations and individuals behind them are making a new genre of public art that focuses on community, utility, sustainability, and reclaiming marginal urban areas for cultivation. Schmidt and Kallis create green works that don’t merely register concern but that actively develop solutions to problems—and that seed new ways to involve us all, early and late, in our urban environment.

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