

Cultivating Christchurch: Connecting our next generation with the land

Written by Bailey Peryman, co-Founder of Cultivate Christchurch.

Cultivate Christchurch is building a network of productive urban farms that are propagated and powered by our next generation. With the support of our community, Cultivate is aiming to grow skills and provide meaningful work experience while engaging and inspiring young people to lead lives they value.

The project is born from the combined experience of Fiona Stewart (nee Hargreaves) and myself, Bailey Peryman. Both of us have agricultural backgrounds, Fiona was raised on her family's farm (Kakahu Angus) and studied psychology, education and mental health at the University of Canterbury. I have experience with developing a local organic produce distribution company (Garden City 2.0 Ltd, now operated by Ooooby Christchurch), started various community gardening initiatives and studied environmental management and organic horticulture.

Figure 1. Co-Founders of Cultivate Christchurch (Ltd), Bailey Peryman and Fiona Stewart.

Overview

"Production needs no introduction"

- Curtis Stone

Agriculture is social. This is especially so when practiced in cities, and will increasingly be a force for positive societal change in the 21st century. Our model of urban agriculture is designed around the central tenet that small-scale farming can be people-centred and economically viable. Just as the opening quote suggests, we are hard-wired to be attracted to food producing areas. What is important to get right is how we then welcome and support those who do enter into our farm spaces. At Cultivate, we believe each individual has within them the essentials for health, wealth and happiness. When every person is accepted, free and safe to explore and find their flow, we can see a culture emerging where benevolence, courage and curiosity prevail every day for the greater good.

Our project is concerned with the spirit of youth and how we connect with young people who need extra support. In particular, there is a distinct lack of practical training options, work experience and critical social support services for those who have been disengaged from education since a young age – often with learning difficulties that are compounded by complex family, mental and physical health circumstances. In the same vein, we see young people who are rail-roaded towards careers that mean little more than a job. Forming positive relationships with each individual enables us to begin understanding people's needs, goals and how participation in Cultivate's farm system can help them become the best possible version of themselves - in whatever direction or form this may take.

I have been interested in urban agriculture since researching the Transition Town movement as a student and learning about the Cuban system of food production and composting – 'Organiponicos'.

More recently, market gardeners Jean-Martin Fortier¹ and Curtis Stone² have provided excellent examples of how young people, starting with very little in the way of resources, can get onto the land and make a good living producing high quality organic food. Some of the more compelling aspects of these small-scale intensive approaches are the absence of tractors and expensive machinery, the use of land for low and even no cost, and the relatively high returns being created using smart marketing approaches.

Figure 2. Les Jardins de la Grenillette, Broadfork Farm. The Fortier family farm, the subject of Jean-Martin Fortier's text, The Market Gardener that now reads as a handbook for aspiring young agrarians. Image from www.possiblemedia.org.

This relative success has been put into perspective for me while spending time on small market gardens around Christchurch, meeting, speaking with and working alongside various suppliers for Garden City 2.0's veggie-box scheme. Although they are within the Greater Christchurch region, for people coming from urban backgrounds these farms are still 'out in the wops'. And despite being small in relation to agriculture on the Canterbury plains, the size of these farms is still not the 'human scale' that is more appropriate for suburban settings. They are also a large step-up for students coming out of local training institutions like the Biological Husbandry Unit (BHU) at Lincoln University. There are a number of factors that make Christchurch well-suited to small-scale intensive market gardening within the urban environs, given how sparsely populated it is for a city. It became apparent that the models developed by the likes of Eliot Coleman, Jean-Martin Fortier and Curtis Stone would be suitable, the test would be integrating them with a broader social mission.

I have followed and very much liked the sound of community-supported agriculture(CSA) for a number of years now, but only recently discovered that it has some of its roots in the biodynamic agriculture movement. This led to discoveries of what appear to be more natural expressions of a farm system in terms of a social organism – Dottenfelderhof Farm in Germany³, and Hawthorne Valley Farm⁴ being my favourites so far. In these two examples, the 'community-supported' dimension of the farm individuality takes on a higher level of embeddedness and integration to the inner workings of the local food system.

It is this depth in association and purpose that has inspired me to further test and observe how these successful farm systems could be applied within suburban Christchurch – a city with the luxury of space, sufficient infrastructure and a rich agriculture heritage. This is very much taking on a spiritual dimension of healing for our communities, and it is also feeling more appropriate in these times for Christchurch where people have demonstrated strong outpourings of togetherness and 'community spirit' during the experience of the earthquakes. It seems there is a sensitivity and awareness among people who are capable of accepting and talking openly about these feelings as they relate to the (in)humanity of the situation we now live in and the changes happening to us. I have observed in some people a distinct yearning for reconnection with the land and cravings for real food. Agriculture is a gateway for this.

¹ See www.themarketgardener.com

² See www.theurbanfarmer.co

³ Klett, M. (1990). *Growing Together, Why Should We Bother?* International Bio-dynamic Initiative Group. East Sussex, England.

⁴ See <http://hawthornevalleyfarm.org/about/>

The local context

There is a profound opportunity to restore some of the ‘red zone’ land deemed uneconomic to remediate by the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) and subsequently cleared of all housing. Red zone areas total over 600 hectares, although the majority of this is adjacent to the Avon-Otakaro River (450ha)⁵. Initial mapping conducted by a local landscape architecture firm shows that 215 hectares of this is suited for food production (see fig. 3). This is based on criteria including the flood water plain, changes in land heights post-earthquake, soil classes and the proximity to remaining residential areas and suburban centres.

Figure 3. Spatial analysis completed by Rough and Milne Landscape Architects, 2015.

The main challenge is that this land is currently ‘off limits’ as far as CERA is concerned, and they’re not yet prepared to engage in discussion about interim land use proposals. Foraging from fruit trees is tolerated where they remain (many sections have been stripped bare), but there is no formal care for these 1800-plus trees. Maintenance, mostly mowing of the grassed areas and spraying of edges with herbicides, is carried out by contractors.

Significant portions of the soils in the red zone are rated as Class 1, 2 and 3 – river loams that are highly suitable for food production, in particular horticulture. Many residents of the area tell of lush growth and ‘easy’ conditions for vegetable gardening. For a number of years now since the earthquakes, there have been numerous proposals for community gardens, orchards and food production that have failed to gain any formal traction and approval from local authorities. There are no signs in the media or research that suggests that areas proposed for food growing would be unpopular with local communities.

It's incredible to think that we tolerate this as a society. Of the many conversations I have had about the prospect of growing food in parts of the red zone, people are consistently exasperated at the lack of Government approval – and those outside the city often struggle to understand how heavily ‘locked down’ the recovery process has been from a citizen’s perspective. The land is so clearly suited to producing food and providing a place for people to connect, regain a sense of purpose and be well. The land is also adjacent to areas with long-standing social issues (poverty, inadequate housing, and crime) that have been further entrenched by the earthquakes. Local food sovereignty, resilience and security is intertwined with these injustices.

Making it happen

The number one challenge is to do our work in the context of a political-economic system that is austere, market-oriented and not at all youth-friendly. Given the need for a more distinctly cooperative business model fit for these times and the project purpose, we have decided to

⁵ For more information about CERA and the residential red zone – see this website:

<http://cera.govt.nz/residential-red-zone>

establish Cultivate as a social enterprise – beginning as a charitable company⁶. Before the company was setup, we operated under the legal auspices of the Soil & Health Association Canterbury Branch.

Outside of the seed funding from our key partnerships with the Vodafone New Zealand Foundation and Wayne Francis Charitable Trust, we currently generate the majority of our income from produce sales. Our business plan is to steadily increase sales over the coming 3 years to reduce our reliance on grant funding to less than 10% of total operational costs. This integrates dedicated support for each individual to realise their most ideal livelihood through working with food as a form of social enterprise. For example, people take home produce or seedlings in return for participation, they learn experientially when joining in with Cultivate’s work schedule, and revenue from produce sales will create opportunities for participants to gain employment with Cultivate, or to benefit from our support to pursue their personal goals.

We are working closely with the Akina Foundation⁷ – a social enterprise incubator. This is providing invaluable development of our impact, community engagement and financial models. These have been important in the process of securing multi-year support from our seed-funding partners. Akina’s ‘compass network’ partners have also provided invaluable legal advice (Russell McVeagh) and ongoing support developing our environmental management and safety systems (McHugh and Shaw).

We employ young farmers in training or moving on from their studies at the BHU. Their role is primarily to drive the production cycles and help to make the individual tasks understandable to those who are less experienced with farming practices. The working urban farm setting functions as a ‘pipeline’ for young people to initially engage with our team and gain some work experience. This includes working with the Youth Coordinators we employ to liaise with existing organisations and youth health service providers. These relationships typically lead to groups or individuals coming down to the site for a few hours. From there, it is clear from an early stage those who do want to become more associated with Cultivate (e.g. as interns, casual employment) and pursue personal goals while contributing to common tasks on the farm. Many people approach the farm each day we are there, and at the time of writing we anticipate developing more workshops for the wider public to enjoy accessing come Spring time.

Critical success factors

We feel like one of the most critical factors to the success of the project is accessibility – both in terms of geographical proximity for ease of transport, and presenting our site and community as a safe, fun and beneficial environment to be in. By having such a central, urban location with significant foot-traffic, we increase the visibility and therefore the recognition of what a healthy food growing environment looks like.

My colleague, Fiona, has experience in developing a residential farm training programme for young people based in the high country. In short, she found a willingness to engage and great educational outcomes, but socially, the kids were removed from their communities, families and friends and

⁶ See our registration here:

<https://www.register.charities.govt.nz/CharitiesRegister/ViewCharity?accountId=79744bd8-29e4-e511-8f45-00155d0cccdc&searchId=dcf09c07-913a-468c-b918-c95e3888b1d3>

⁷ See www.akina.org.nz

found it difficult to sustain engagement. Urban agriculture is a promising alternative to this programme. So far, we have a 100% success rate with our relationships with six young people, measured by their willingness to continue participating in Cultivate, and ongoing success with meeting personal goals.

Another factor we feel will be critical to success is making sure we strike a balance between being inclusive, while meeting our goals of being productive and sustainable as an urban farm system. This is especially difficult given the labour we begin with may be relatively untrained as far as agricultural skills go, and the same people are often in need of additional support outside of educational purposes.

While the general public does appear to have an appreciation for community gardening, there is less understanding of what is involved with operating a financially sustainable urban agricultural model. Success of our project will mean a shift in public understanding of this activity as a more social form of community development, to one concerned primarily with local and community *economic* development. These are different rhythms, processes and work ethics that I suspect will resonate more positively with certain individuals over others, and ultimately come to expression within our own social organism.

Peterborough Urban Farm – our first site

Our first site was secured through the Life in Vacant Spaces Trust⁸ who broker access to land and buildings in the central city that are currently unused for whatever reason. The Peterborough Urban Farm is a collation of three parcels totalling 3000sqm which had multiple buildings on them and was mostly paved, pre-earthquake. The space is divided into three sections roughly 1000sqm each, just like typical quarter acre residential properties. The middle lot is still paved as a parking lot, but suited to locating containers for storage and temporary structures. The other two lots were grassed with 300mm of topsoil on average before reaching loosely compacted hardfill. Soil tests revealed safe levels of heavy metals and are otherwise typical of ‘under-developed’ urban topsoils.

Figure 4. Before and after of the Peterborough Urban Farm. This is the first plot where we are producing out of.

We have access to the space for at least a year (review August 2016), although this is likely to extend two or three more years until the property owner decides to redevelop. There are some planning constraints affecting the site, but the planning framework is in a state of change at present, and given our use is ‘transitional’, we will not need a resource consent for most if not all of our proposed activities.

In the first plot (see fig. 4), we increased the depth of soil on one half of the space by cutting the 300mm of topsoil on one side and placing it on top of the other. We were able to achieve this quickly with the help of family friends that own a construction company with large diggers operating

⁸ For more information about the Life in Vacant Spaces Trust, visit www.livs.org.nz

nearby in the city centre. After taking up the lease in September 2015, we have made weekly sales of produce from mid-December through to the time of writing.

The area with the soil removed was backfilled with woodchip mulch from arborists who otherwise have to pay to dump it. We also operate 'Cultivate Waste', an organic waste collection scheme taking kitchen scraps from inner-city restaurants using cycles with trailers to cart wheelie bins. This provides approximately 1000 litres per week of organic matter treated with Zing Bokashi to integrate with the woodchip on the other half of the plot. Green manure crops are helping to stimulate the soil food web, and we expect to begin producing out of 400-500mm of soil (where we had none) in Spring 2016.

The other 1000sqm lot will undergo the same process of green cropping, organic waste integration and soil building but without the major cut and fill by a digger. Perennial herbs and insectary plants are planted throughout the permeable boundaries and edges of the site. Barrels for brewing liquid manures are set up, along with a propagation shed for seedlings. At the time of writing, we have completed two applications of (Biodynamic) BD500-preparation with the descending moon. Our attempts to describe this practice to those participating have generally gone down with great intrigue.

The site has a prominent boundary with Manchester Street and Peterborough Streets, which is at present, and historically, a focal point for street-based sex workers. In the first few weeks of beginning to work the site, we have met numerous local homeless people, one who now sleeps on the site, as well as some long-standing residents of the area – including one couple who have lived across the road for 59 years. Needless to say, the site has a very rich social life. There are safety issues surrounding the site that we are working with an inter-agency group to address, including the Police; however, the reception and initial progress has left people feeling very positive about our project.

As mentioned above, our aim is to convert this space to a showcase for urban agriculture in Christchurch and give confidence to other landowners that we might do the same on their property. At the time of writing, there are two lease negotiations that are reaching the signing-off stage - both at no cost. One for a de-commissioned propagation unit associated with Hillmorton Hospital, the other a 1.7 hectare paddock within a large property that is being subdivided over the next 10 years.

Conclusion

We are very pleased with the initial progress, which at times has been dizzying in how quickly all aspects of the project have come to life. The beginning of a highly functional, well-spirited and committed crew is forming. It is certainly a sign of the times that food production is so readily accepted in the city; however, there remain significant challenges if we are to reach the kind of scale, intensity and widespread integration of our deepest values that we hope for. There is all manner of industry waiting to sprout from this work, but the most exciting experiences so far have been seeing inspiration arise from within our supporters, friends and associates. We feel strongly that we are cultivating both the land and a future of health, abundance and vitality for people and local communities.

Figure 5. Autumn light in the Peterborough Urban Farm.

For more information about the project, or to offer assistance, material support or donations, then please visit our website – www.cultivate.org.nz. You can also contact us directly via email (bailey@cultivate.org.nz) or phone (021 122 7638). Cultivate Christchurch is also on Facebook (www.Facebook.com/CultivateChCh), and we are beginning to document the project visually through Instagram (www.instagram.com/cultivatechristchurch).