



INTERTWINED HISTORIES: Plants in their Social Contexts

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make the waste places

fruitful gardens

the calgary vacant lots garden club

1914-1952

jim ellis

Long before the guerilla gardening movements of New York and Los Angeles, and before the resurgence in popularity of community gardens across North America, there were social assistance programs involving the cultivation of urban vacant lots. The first organized civic programs were in Detroit, New York, and Philadelphia in the 1890s, designed to help the unemployed in the midst of an economic recession.¹ These efforts were largely envisioned as social reform and self-help for the urban poor; Bolton Hall, a prominent progressive activist and advocate of the back to the land movement, wrote, "Placing the half sick, the disabled, worn-out people and the unemployed on vacant lots, where they can employ themselves raising their own food, is now no experiment, but an important support of many families which would otherwise be dependent upon charity."²

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In the eyes of social reformers, the vacant lot movement did more than simply feed the poor: the Third Annual Report of the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association drew attention to “the effect it has had upon many of the gardeners from a social and moral standpoint.”³ Inspirational tales of reformed alcoholics, industrious widows and children, and renewed family ties were frequently offered. Although the movement was widespread in the 1890s in the United States, few civic programs appear to have lasted into the next century. In Canada, the movement seems to have had more life: an article in the April 1918 issue of Canada’s *Agricultural Gazette* surveyed the plans for twenty cities and towns across Canada to use vacant lots for urban agriculture, although this popularity may also have had to do with planting victory gardens.⁴

In Calgary, the impulse to form an urban gardening organization responded to some of the same practical and philosophical concerns that informed the American movement: practically speaking, fruits and vegetables were expensive, and most were imported from British Columbia. Philosophically, the vacant lot club combined the interests of social welfare with the Garden City movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1912, the charismatic British city planner Thomas Mawson visited a number of Canadian cities, and gave an inspirational speech to the Canadian Club of Calgary titled “The City on the Plain, and How to Make it Beautiful.” Mawson was particularly interested in public parks, access to green space, and garden suburbs with allotment gardens, based on the long-standing British experience with allotments. Although his larger plan for a redesigned civic core was not taken up, his advocacy for urban gardening was enthusiastically embraced.

The Calgary Vacant Lots Garden Club was formed in 1914 out of a meeting of the Parks and Playgrounds Committee of the City Planning Commission; representatives were invited from the Horticultural Society and the Consumers’ League, a social welfare group formed from the Local Council of Women. Examples of programs from other cities were surveyed and discussed. The resulting executive of the newly formed club included Alexander Calhoun, the city’s first librarian; William R. Reader, the city’s Parks Superintendent and a member of the Horticultural Society; and Annie Gale, a member of the Consumers’ League who would go on to become the city’s first female alderman from 1918 to 1924. Officially, the purpose of the club was “to encourage home production, greater vegetable diet, and reduce the cost of living,” and it had the beneficial side effect of “transforming Calgary into a city of smiling gardens,”⁵ thus realizing, in a somewhat less grand way, Mawson’s vision of a garden city.

MAKE THE LAND PRODUCE

Calgary Vacant Lots GARDEN CLUB

Organized March 2nd, 1914

Rules and Regulations 1920

Officers for 1920

Honorary President
HIS WORSHIP MAYOR R. C. MARSHALL, Esq.

President
JOHN BARNECUT

Past President
JAMES A. WALLACE

First Vice-President
A. J. COWLING

Second Vice-President
SAMUEL J. FEE

Secretary
LOUIS U. FOWLER

Treasurer
GEORGE W. MYERS

Journal Secretary
EBER C. BELL

Auditor
A. H. CARR, C.A.

BY CULTIVATING LAND YOU HELP

The Headquarters of the Club are in the Basement of the City Hall, Second St. East.

The Secretary, or others in charge, are always ready to supply information and accept applications for membership.

The Club has a large number of lots in different parts of the city to select from, the owners consent having been secured.

MEMBERSHIP FEES

The membership fee is \$1.00 per annum, which entitles the member to use one lot (25x120); land equal to three thousand square feet constitutes a lot. If a second lot is given, 50 cents additional is charged.

No member is allowed more than two lots until after April 15th, and, if lots are available, a reduction is made for ten or more lots.

PLOWING

Members are urged to spade, or dig their land, if at all possible. If the plowing is done by the Club the cost is from \$1.25 to \$1.75 per lot. The Club undertakes to plow where there are six or more lots together.

REGULATIONS

Members are expected to cultivate the land throughout the season, the oftener the better. The practice of "Dry farming principles are urged." This means constant cultivation, as dry seasons are bound to occur.

Weeds must be kept out; if allowed to grow, the Club reserves the right to take the lot back, after giving seven days' notice. This condition is on the membership card—Read it.

Members wishing to use City water should make application to the Waterworks Department for special permit.

It is contrary to a City by-law to allow piles of manure to stand on any lot.

No provision for fencing can be made by the Club. Members may erect temporary fencing if they wish. Barbed wire should not be used, as it is contrary to the

YOURSELF, AND ASSIST OTHERS

City by-law. Wire used on baled hay can be secured free, and makes a good fence.

Signboards may be placed on the lot—the Club has a number that are free for the members.

In the event of an owner requiring the land for building purposes, the member is expected to give up possession on request. The Club will return the money paid.

Every member is urged to grow a flower border next to the sidewalk; at least two feet should be reserved for this purpose. Flowers will not only improve the appearance of the City, but will create a sentiment in favor of the protection of the lots.

Members cultivating the same lot year after year should realize that it is their duty to keep up the land to its original fertility by proper fertilization.

One of our big ambitions is to raise the standard of potato cultivation. Good seed, constant cultivation, proper harvesting and grading methods are necessary to make the Alberta potato the equal of any imported. We hope to have good seed potatoes and other seeds to sell to our members at cost. It does not pay to use poor seed.

PRIZES FOR 1920

The Club will offer prizes for the best Gardens cultivated by the members on vacant lots secured from the Club, the owners, or agents (provided no rent or other remuneration is paid the owner or agent). The City will be divided into districts, the boundaries being the Sections. Prizes will be offered in the different Sections, and for the best lots in the whole City.

JUDGING

Judging will be done at different times during the summer and autumn, by the most competent persons that can be secured. The following scale of points will be used:

Freedom from weeds, 30; cultivation, 20; general appearance, 10; arrangement and condition of crop, 10; varieties, 10; flowers and plants, 10; economy of space, 5; freedom from disease and insects, 5. Total, 100.

EVERY PERSON SHOULD BE A PRODUCER

MEMBERSHIP

The membership shall consist of:

All persons elected as honorary members by the Executive Committee, as provided in the Constitution and Laws.

And all persons who have paid one dollar or more, and received a membership card, or receipt.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

The Executive shall consist of one Representative for every hundred, or major fraction of one hundred, of the members who have paid a membership fee of one dollar or more for the year, before the first day of the month in which the annual meeting is held.

The Representatives shall be elected at the annual meeting by open nomination, and election by ballot.

Two Representatives from the City of Calgary, one to represent the City Council, and one the Parks Department, the City Council to elect or appoint the two.

One Representative from every Society, Organization or Association in Calgary, whose objects are the improvement of the City by the cultivation of land (not less than ten lots of three thousand square feet), or the holding annually of a Fair, Show or Exhibition by or under the auspices of the Society, Organization or Association.

Every Society, Organization, Association, or Corporation that shall annually contribute to the funds of the Club fifty dollars or more shall be entitled to one Representative on the Executive Committee, if not otherwise represented.

The Executive Committee may, by two-thirds vote, add not more than three members to the Executive during any one year.

The retiring President shall be a member of the Executive.

ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of the Club shall be held on the second Tuesday in November, provided, however, that the Executive may change the date to one during the same week.

EXECUTIVE MEETING

The Executive Committee shall meet on the third Tuesday of each and every month at 8 p.m.

Special meetings may be called by a resolution at a meeting of the Executive Committee, by the President and two other members of the Executive Committee, or three members of the Executive Committee.

Vacant lot garden plots were first made available in 1914; the 1916 *Municipal Manual* reports that in its first year the club had 173 members who cultivated 243 lots. In 1915, this jumped to 450 members who farmed 976 lots.⁶ The numbers continued to climb; the Canadian *Agriculture Gazette* reported in 1918 that “in 1917 over 2,000 twenty-five foot city lots were cultivated and this year it is expected that number will be increased. A dollar is charged for one 25-foot city lot and 50 cents for each additional lot. On request the ploughing is done at cost. Lots are ploughed free for the families of soldiers. Lectures are given with a view to stimulating the interests of both children and adults.”⁷ By 1920, when membership in the organization hit an early peak at 1,340, the city had been divided up into twenty sections, and prizes were awarded to gardens based on freedom from weeds, cultivation, general appearance, flowers and plants, arrangement, variety, economy of space, and freedom from disease.

The vacant lot gardens took on different social roles and social meanings across the decades. As with the earlier American programs, the gardens were originally a social welfare scheme that provided good food and moral uplift to the poor. Additionally, the gardens were promoted as beautification efforts and a source of civic pride; a contest in 1915 aimed to dispel the notion that good potatoes could not be grown in Calgary. During the first and second world wars, the club took on a patriotic cast and the lots became known as victory gardens; in 1943, the club peaked at 2,366 members cultivating 3,229 lots. During the Depression, they were an increasingly necessary source of cheap food. After the end of the food shortages of the Second World War, gardening was once again seen as a leisure activity, and the numbers of available plots dwindled in response to increased construction; for those lots still vacant, the soil was largely exhausted from potato crops. The club was disbanded in 1952.

Community gardening is once again flourishing in Calgary. One organization in particular, Grow Calgary, is in many ways the direct heir to the vacant lots cultivation movement. Founded in 2013, their garden is located on eleven acres in Calgary’s Transportation Utility Corridor, provincially owned land designated for road construction. It is Canada’s largest urban farm, employing volunteer labour to supply women’s and homeless shelters with organic produce. Like the vacant lots gardens, however, its tenure is precarious: the construction of a new ring road is now threatening its existence, at least on its current site.⁸

notes

1. Lawson, *City Bountiful*, 24–26.
2. Hall, *A Little Land and a Living*, 95–96.
3. *Vacant Lot Farming*, 8.
4. "Vacant Lot Cultivation," <http://www.cityfarmer.org/VacantLot.html>.
5. "Calgary Vacant Lots Garden Club," 1915.
6. *Ibid.*, 1916.
7. "Vacant Lot Cultivation," <http://www.cityfarmer.org/VacantLot.html>.
8. Giovannetti, "Province Set to Evict Urban Community Farm," A18.

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- Vacant Lot Farming*, Third Annual Report of the Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association, 1899.

Trophy, circa 1938, Collection of Glenbow, Calgary, Canada, S.61.64.1

