



URBAN POLLINATORS

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COMMENT AND ANALYSIS FROM JULIAN DOBSON

THIS MONTH: PLACEMAKING WITH DIRTY HANDS

A GREEN ROUTE TO URBANISM

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FROM SMALL SEEDS TO TASTY TOWNS

WELCOME

Urban Pollinators is a consultancy and practical think tank founded by Julian Dobson, commentator on regeneration, placemaking and community issues. This newsletter is part of a series of regular commentaries on topical subjects. We hope you find it useful and informative; please pass it on to anyone you think will be interested.

This month we've summarised the key points of the collaborative submission Urban Pollinators and eight other organisations have made in response to Mary Portas's review of the UK's high streets. You can also download the full submission at our website.

PLACEMAKING WITH DIRTY HANDS

Three years ago, Mary Clear planted her front garden with vegetables and put up a notice. 'Grow your own,' it said. 'Or share this stuff.' Meanwhile Nik Green started filling neglected bits of public land with herbs and vegetables.

Mary's 'propaganda garden' and Nik's guerilla gardening could have stopped there. They could have been like many other local growing projects that bloom in a burst of enthusiasm and turn into a grind. Instead, they've turned Todmorden, at the far end of Yorkshire's Calder Valley, into a town with a new sense of life and a magnet for 'vegetable tourists', from celebrity chefs to Prince Charles.

Much has been said and written about Incredible Edible Todmorden, to the extent that it has become a bit of a byword for local growing. And it has been extraordinarily successful in its colonisation of unusual spaces, from the front yard of the police station to the sides of the Rochdale Canal towpath.

Much less has been written about why this really matters. What's happening in Todmorden and, to differing degrees, in many other places, is the beginning of a survival strategy for towns and neighbourhoods in the 21st century. It shows how we can bring together the huge global issues of resource constraints and environmental change with the quest for local empowerment and responsibility and a recreation of community.

A sense of place: A green route to urbanism

Todmorden got growing with some cheeky reuse of public space and a can-do attitude. As Pam Warhurst, Incredible Edible's co-founder, put it: 'We don't ask permission. It takes too long and anyway we're improving the place.' But there's much more to it than chutzpah.

Walk around Todmorden now and you'll find signs and maps for a new 'green route' of walkways with edible and bee-friendly plantings, designed to bring a unity and identity to the town.

Until now Todmorden has essentially been split into three segments, divided by the Burnley, Rochdale and Halifax roads. The green route creates a pedestrian circuit from the railway station, along the canal, through the new NHS health centre with its fruit trees and 'apothecary garden', past the Hippodrome Theatre and back towards the market in the town centre - itself becoming a showcase for local produce.

Throughout the green route there will be signs explaining the plantings, which have all been done by volunteers, and their use for food and significance for wildlife.

This is destination management without the use of expensive consultants or the creation of endless strategies and official documents. It's local people deciding what kind of town they want to create and building an identity and reputation around that, starting with small actions and joining them up to create coherence. In the phrase coined by Jaime Lerner, mayor of Curitiba in Brazil, it's 'urban acupuncture' - small interventions that make a big difference.

One reason why the actions of a small group of volunteers have made such an impact is that they have been highly visible, and that visibility has been infectious. Some of the earliest actions included herb planters on the railway station platforms and a garden just outside, so edible plants were the first thing visitors would notice.

An early example of guerrilla gardening was at the derelict Abraham Ormerod health centre where the serial killer GP, Harold Shipman, once worked; it was not long before the nearby community college and police station, both on the busy Burnley Road, had their own conspicuous raised beds.

The canal, too, which is popular both with boat users and walkers, is a showcase for planting. British Waterways has now told Incredible Edible Todmorden that it welcomes planting beside towpaths, having seen what happened when local people went ahead and did it without asking.

By planting in strategic places and creating clear links between them, Incredible Edible Todmorden has turned what could be seen as random outbursts of enthusiasm into a form of organic planning, putting the town on the map by mapping the town. And while Todmorden may have a head start, others are following and pioneering their own approaches to edible placemaking.

Detroit is already famous for its community gardens and urban agriculture in neighbourhoods blighted by the disappearance of industry and collapse of property values, and there is a growing 'urban agriculture' movement across the US. More modestly, Brighton and Hove Council recently became the first in the UK to issue [guidance for planners](#) on community growing, designed to encourage places to grow food at the heart of new developments.

Even the government is catching on. In August the Department of Communities and Local Government published a guide to creating community orchards¹, with secretary of state Eric Pickles declaring the government would 'make it easier to transform unloved corners of towns, cities and villages into thriving green spaces, help local people protect the orchards already there and access the land needed to establish new ones'.

A sense of belonging: Building community together

Incredible Edible Todmorden has always worked from an understanding that people respond to simple shared ideas rather than heavy-handed persuasion. 'If you eat, you're in,' was an early motto.

What its members found was that simply by planting, neighbours could start conversations. People would stop and ask why; some would join in and grow their own. One family took vegetables from Mary's propaganda garden and returned the next day with some of the curry they'd made. At Ferney Lee old people's home, boring

¹ *Community Orchards: how to guide*, DCLG, 2011. See <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/orchardshowto>

lawns became full of raised beds with chard and rhubarb. Schools created gardens to teach children about horticulture.

Social landlord Pennine Housing caught the vision and saw an opportunity to benefit their tenants. They gave out free seeds and planters and offered money towards the cost of raised beds. They changed the rules so tenants could keep chickens. They laid on cookery demonstrations and training courses to help bring home the message that home-grown veg is healthy, cheap and good for curious kids.

This is community development without shortcuts and without funding programmes. It happens conversation by conversation, engaging with people on their own terms and making them welcome. Mary Clear calls it 'the medicine of kindness'. It challenges the political narratives of 'broken Britain' or 'sick society' by insisting that everyone has something to offer. In doing so it has much in common with asset-based community development², an approach that works from the positives in a place rather than treating it as a problem.

The shared language of food is uniting local people across the generations. The vision was for children to know how to feed themselves in the future; the knowledge those children needed resided with older people. Incredible Edible Todmorden celebrates what is arguably the last great oral tradition in the developed world: the tradition of making food from seed and crop.

A sense of relevance: Why it matters globally

If all Incredible Edible Todmorden did was to bring neighbours together, it would be good. Changing the look and the feel of the town and instilling a sense of pride is better still. But in the face of economic crisis and global change there needs to be more.

What sparked Mary and Pam to take action was a talk by Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University, London. He was in Todmorden last month for the project's third anniversary, and his message about the dangers of climate change and resource depletion had not changed.

For most of the 20th century, he said, industrial-scale agriculture supported by a network of global supply chains had produced cheap food and a better quality of life, to a point where the average spending of British households on food had fallen from 30% of their income to only 9%. Since the 19th century it has been cheaper to import food than to grow it in the UK.

What has changed now is that Europe and America can no longer control the world's food system to ensure an indefinite continuity of cheap produce to fill our supermarket shelves, and this shift in the balance is only just beginning.

Pressure on good quality agricultural land, and especially on water, from a growing global population with aspirations to emulate Western lifestyles, means the long fall in food prices is over and the dependency of food trade on oil and fossil fuels is being exposed. These pressures are likely to grow with the longer term impacts of climate change.

² See, for example, <http://www.synergos.org/knowledge/02/abcdoverview.htm>

However, we continue to live as if food is expendable. In the UK, according to WRAP (the Waste & Resource Action Programme), households currently throw away 5.3m tonnes a year of usable food - food that would cost £12bn a year if it was sold at market prices instead of dumped³.

To put that in its global context, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation says the number of undernourished people across the world reached unprecedented levels in 2008-2009. It adds: 'The experiences of the food price and financial crises have provided a sharp reminder of the vulnerability of world food security to shocks in the global food system and the world economy and have demonstrated how rapidly an already unacceptable level of food insecurity in the world can deteriorate in the face of such events.'⁴

Much of the land in the hungriest parts of the world is used to grow cash crops to satisfy Western tastes, while fertile parts of many African nations are being bought by foreign governments to provide food for their populations in future. As pressure on productive land increases, economics will force European nations to use more of their land to feed themselves. In this respect Todmorden and movements like [Transition Towns](#) are ahead of the game.

A sense of power: Changing the terms of debate

Growing vegetables and planting trees might seem a fairly feeble response to these global threats, even if you've managed to create a thousand-strong orchard, as Incredible Edible Todmorden has. Nothing could be further from the truth.

By growing and sharing their own food, people are building independence from global supply chains and a degree of resilience, cushioning the impact of shortages or price rises. By creating alternative routes to market for local producers, food growing projects can loosen the stranglehold of the big four grocery chains, which between them sell 76 per cent of all groceries in the UK⁵. By learning horticulture and food preparation skills, individuals increase their self-esteem and ability to provide for themselves.

However, changing the way business works and consumers' buying habits is a long term process and the squeeze on household income is making it harder for people to take long term decisions that might involve more short-term expense. A recent study commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)⁶ found that community food enterprises in southwest England were having to deal with a fall in consumer demand for organic produce.

On the other hand, there is a growing network of voluntary organisations concerned with food and related issues. The Defra study also reported findings by the Food Ethics Council that around 25,000 organisations spend up to £700m a year on food-related issues, employing 20,000 paid staff and using the equivalent of 80,000 full-time volunteers.

³ *Household Food and Drink Waste in the UK*, WRAP, 2009. See http://www.wrap.org.uk/wrap_corporate/publications/index.html

⁴ *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11*, Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2011. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>

⁵ *The Right to Retail*, Res Publica, 2011.

⁶ *Can Community Food Enterprises Inform and Deliver Food Policy?* Defra, 2011. See <http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Document.aspx?Document=SEARFinalReporttobepublished.pdf>

What this suggests is that while alternative business models for food production are still in their infancy, there is enormous interest in growing food for personal consumption and for sharing. Waiting lists for allotments have risen in recent years, and now stand at nearly 88,000 people across England - a total of 57 people waiting for every 100 plots provided by local authorities⁷.

The value of Incredible Edible Todmorden and community growing projects lies not only in building the ability to cope with the risks of climate change for a future day when the chickens of unconstrained consumption come home to roost. They also create the opportunity to manage and enjoy life now. That in turn reduces people's vulnerability to shocks and challenges.

In the long run, there can be much more. Alternative terms of trade and exchange, from local currencies to time banks⁸, can support local food networks and generate more equitable ways of doing business. By preserving and propagating traditional and unusual seeds and plant species, growers can decrease the risks of disease and reduce reliance on the few large companies that dominate the market. By planting for biodiversity, it is possible to mitigate some of the effects of urban development and large-scale farming.

A sense of achievement: From small seeds to tasty towns

As Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the RSA⁹, put it at the Todmorden celebrations last month: 'You have to act to hope.' Todmorden shows how such action can become viral.

The town's schools are just one example. Every local primary school was given a disused pleasure boat to use as a planter. One school got permission to grow vegetables in a graveyard. All of them have now clubbed together to plant their own orchard.

At Todmorden High School, where head of catering Tony Mulgrew has been a champion of home-grown food for several years, there is now a commercial-scale polytunnel that supplies the kitchen with fresh produce. A £750,000 aquaponics unit is also on the way, secured with a £500,000 grant from the Big Lottery Fund and a donation of land from Calderdale Council. It will produce fish, fruit and vegetables to be served in the canteen and used in food technology lessons. Any surplus will be sold to the town.

Of course, not everyone strikes lucky with the lottery. Not everyone manages to communicate their vision in the way Todmorden has done, with more than 20 Incredible Edible projects across the UK and many more like-minded initiatives sprouting nationwide.

But the tools that are changing Todmorden are freely available and in more and more places, people are starting to pick them up and explore how they can change the sense of place, the bonds within and between communities, and local resilience in the face of economic and environmental change. The path to a tasty town doesn't lie in following a secret recipe, but in having the faith and imagination to think that if you plant a seed it will grow, and if you plant enough of them, enough of them can grow to change everything.

⁷ *Allotment Waiting Lists in England 2011*, National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners, http://www.transitiontownwestkirby.org.uk/files/ttwk_nsalg_survey_2011.pdf

⁸ See, for example, the Timebanking UK website: <http://www.timebanking.org/>

⁹ The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce: www.thersa.org

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We always welcome your comments and feedback. You can [contact us via our website](#) to have your say, update your details or suggest ideas for future newsletters and articles. You can also view details of recent projects [here](#), or read what people are saying about us [here](#).

And if you'd like us to work with you, help you with writing, research, facilitation or training, or speak at an event you're organising, please [contact us](#) or speak to Julian Dobson on 07545 874556.