

Black Creek SNAP: Growing Food and Green Opportunities by Cathrin Winkelmann



Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's Sustainable Neighbourhood Retrofit Action Plan (SNAP) program is an integrated, one-window approach to urban retrofits at the neighbourhood scale. Implemented in collaboration with municipal partners, community organizations, landowners, and residents, SNAPs address a broad range of objectives to improve the local environment with measurable results and to help communities better adapt to climate change by greening local infrastructure, retrofitting their homes, and encouraging positive behavior changes. Most importantly, they achieve these objectives while addressing key socio-economic objectives of the community and fostering community resilience.

One of six SNAPs, the Black Creek "SNAP" is located in the Jane and Finch area. Its motto is "Growing Food and Green Opportunities" and addresses numerous challenges, including food security, health, and job skills training through innovative urban agriculture initiatives in an area designated as a food desert. With the support of a Local Food Fund and other grants, the Black Creek SNAP has piloted a number of novel urban agriculture programs, a few of which are outlined below.

Surplus Harvest Donation Program

The Black Creek SNAP developed a program, in which single family homeowners in the neighbourhood donate their surplus vegetables and fruit from their impressive backyard vegetable gardens and fruit trees to a local seniors' meal program located at an affordable housing complex with three multi-unit affordable residential buildings at the corner of Jane and Finch. Partnering with Black Creek Community Farm, FoodShare, and Second Harvest, the SNAP team coordinated the program, which was originally piloted in summer 2014. Black Creek Community Farm collected, weighed, documented, washed and stored the produce, and Second Harvest picked up the produce and delivered it to the seniors' program. With 270 pounds of excess harvest donated during a poor growing season in 2014 and many inspired donors and grateful recipients, the limited pilot program was considered a great success by all and was ripe to expand. In 2015 we worked with FoodShare to grow this program, and we were able to collect and donate "micro-locally" another 438 pounds to the seniors' meal program and an after school program.

Black Creek Orchard Co-op and Jane & Finch Learning Orchard and Fruit Tree Services

Black Creek SNAP homeowners with fruit trees are joining forces to tend their collective urban orchard. Initiated by Black Creek SNAP after having recognized the need for vastly better care of the numerous valuable, productive fruit trees in this neighbourhood, the co-op is comprised of a diverse group of fruit tree owners, some of whom have fruit tree care skills, experience and knowledge, while others do not. Some of the members are strong, young and healthy, but many are not, and their older age, disabilities or lack of mobility has a correlative negative effect on the health and productivity of their fruit trees. The group meets regularly to exchange information, lead presentations to one another and attend presentations led by professionals; however, it has become patently clear that there is a real need for active practical cooperation to tend their collective urban orchard in this low income neighbourhood. The Black Creek SNAP has helped to build capacity in their group by providing them with a tool library, created in partnership with the Black Creek Garden Resource Network, which they can share and use to help each other plant, prune, prevent disease, better maintain, and harvest the fruit from their valuable trees, some of which are more than 40 years old. A long term goal is to create a social enterprise opportunity by pooling the harvested fruit and creating a Black Creek Orchard wine label and preserves, which can be upsold at markets around Toronto and even beyond.

For those that are not in the co-op, yet still require assistance in better maintaining their fruit trees, the SNAP team developed an additional food security and social enterprise opportunity. The SNAP team planted a “learning” orchard in the local neighbourhood and collaborated with Orchard People to train fixed income apartment dwellers on fruit tree maintenance using the orchard and already established trees in the neighbourhood as their laboratory. These tenants received a certificate from Orchard People in basic fruit tree maintenance and have been connected with Black Creek SNAP single family homes that need fruit tree care services but cannot afford to pay the hourly consultation rates of a highly experienced professional arboriculturist. With at least 700 fruit trees in this neighbourhood alone, the job skills training and economic development potential of this initiative for tenants is more than promising.

Tower Balcony Gardening Program

Since 2014 the Black Creek SNAP has been partnering with FoodShare on a very successful balcony container gardening project at five high rise apartment towers in the Black Creek SNAP. Tenants attended workshops, received the materials to grow produce on their balconies, and measured and recorded their production. Residents with gardening experience applied and were paid honorariums to act as community project liaisons in the buildings, helping other participants, answering questions and coordinating events. In total 142 balconies received containers and produced over 535 pounds of fresh produce with lots of greens, which FoodShare measured as approximately 1,500 servings of locally grown fruit and vegetables. Participant feedback has confirmed that the benefits extend beyond improving physical health and saving money to include education, skills training, empowerment, development of connections with neighbours, and improved mental health.

Intergenerational Skills, Knowledge & Land Sharing Program

Research we conducted when developing the SNAP indicated that there is an abundance of vegetable gardening and tree care knowledge among this diverse neighbourhood of avid gardeners and fruit tree owners, many of whom are retired and many of whom are immigrants, who actively farmed their yards in their countries of origin and are interested in passing their skills on to a new generation. There are also scores of people in this neighbourhood who would like to garden but do not know how or who have a backyard that they do not use and indicated to us that they would be open to others “farming” it for them or simply need some gardening assistance. For this reason, we created a program, which matches people who have skills, knowledge and land with those who do not. There are two streams to this program:

- 1) Donate Your Backyard:
Interested Black Creek SNAP homeowners offered their backyards to a not-for-profit organization called Enactus, comprised of local George Brown students, who wanted to farm with homeowners who had a fallow backyard. Creating a unique social enterprise opportunity, students farmed these homeowners’ backyards, gave a portion of the harvest to the homeowners, and then sold the remaining produce to raise money for their own tuition. It was a win-win situation for all involved.
- 2) Intergenerational Agricultural Skills and Knowledge Sharing:
Black Creek SNAP residents volunteered to share their gardening/arboricultural skills and knowledge with others in the community by conducting workshops. Four resident-led workshops have been held since 2014 on topics that include seed saving, grafting, pruning, pole pruning and sulfur spraying.

Given that the Black Creek SNAP’s main objectives also include sustainably managing stormwater and conserving water, the Black Creek SNAP has additionally implemented various demonstration projects to showcase vegetable gardens supported with rainwater harvesting. These include vegetable gardens

at Black Creek SNAP demonstration homes, a community vegetable garden and/or rain water harvesting system at a church and Toronto Community Housing Corporation buildings, including one for seniors. However, the most large scale demonstration project is at the affordable housing complex at the corner of Jane and Finch. The Black Creek SNAP has led with the residents, property owners, and property managers the design and construction of not only the aforementioned learning orchard, but also a 63-plot allotment garden and pollinator gardens to support food production. Rain barrels also provide harvested water for irrigation.

By bringing this diverse neighbourhood together in new ways – specifically populations that do not usually interact – these Black Creek SNAP programs and projects not only addressed food security and skills training opportunities, but they also created community cohesion. They connected homeowners and apartment dwellers and brought together different cultures, nurturing community cooperation, fostering resilience, and building capacity in a neighbourhood too often profiled in the media for its socio-economic challenges and not enough for its existing human capital and immense potential. These pilot programs and demonstration projects have illustrated that you can, indeed, address all three pillars of sustainability while improving the local environment. For this and myriad other reasons, we believe the Black Creek SNAP can serve as an effective model for transforming and strengthening neighbourhoods throughout Ontario.

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