

Since the start, Community Futures Development Corporations (CFDCs) in British Columbia have been involved in youth entrepreneurial development. The variety of the initiatives underway defies brief summary: from youth internships that introduce young people to the working lives of CFDCs and the field of CED, to youth leadership programs which encourage leadership and confidence.

Here is one exciting CFDC-sponsored initiative that captures many of the characteristics of CFDC youth work across the province and is making a real difference to youth in Northern B.C.

Grow Young Locally

By PIPPA ROWCLIFFE AND SHARON ROBERTSON

What originated in a perception that young people are excluded from agriculture has evolved into a sustainable, thriving, youth-run community garden in the northern town of Smithers. This garden will either lease you a parcel of land for you to manage yourself, or rent you a piece of land that you can then pay some of the young staff to plant, weed, and care for.

The produce, all organically grown, is sold at the local farmers market and is always sold out. Although totally unplanned and unexpected, the farm has also become an informal drop-in centre where youth gather to share a coffee and their stories.

How did all this come about? In reality, it has been the product of a clearly stated need, heard by people with the ability to facilitate real results, supported by a sensitive funding agency, and implemented by the people who have a stake in its success – the youth themselves.

A Need & An Idea

In August 2000, at a Youth Rural Dialogue Session held in Houston (one of a series sponsored by Canadian Rural Partnerships), participants raised three major needs with regard to youth living in rural areas: jobs and education, more activities for youth, and access to the land.

This last issue proved to be one around which some energy developed. At the time, CFDC Nadina, with offices in Houston and Smithers, was helping to get “Northern Root Gardens” off the ground. (See sidebar, p. 17.) Northern Root started in 2000



as a market garden providing organic produce, value-added products, and access to community garden plots. But it had grown to connect people in the community and to support a local barter system.

So, CFDC Nadina stepped forward to help a group of interested youth meet, talk, and develop a proposal for funding an activity in the agricultural sector. The proposal spoke to the alienation from the land that young people experience because of the price that agricultural land commands. In addition, there is a net inflow of fresh produce into the North, despite the large amount of fertile land available for cultivation. A plan for a youth-inspired and -led project began to take shape.

A Plan

The plan was to lease small parcels of land from private landowners that young people could farm. The produce would be sold at local markets to help to finance the lease of the land. Fourteen young people would take basic training in small-scale production. Northwest Community College agreed to support the project by developing a special 15-hour course on the subject. CFDC Nadina would provide on-going business training to support the youth in making the venture profitable. This formed the guts of the “Grow Young Locally” proposal.

Grow Young Locally and Northern Root Community Gardens have sought to build community as well as create jobs and grow food. Residents of all ages have responded. Here, local volunteers put a new roof on Northern Root’s old granary. Photo credit: Northern Root.

An Initiative

In January 2001, the Canadian Agricultural Rural Communities Initiative supplied \$16,900 in project start-up funds to CFDC Nadina and the dream started to become a reality. Two very positive partnerships moved the project even further forward. Smithers Community Services agreed to lend parcels of land at the Smithers Experimental Farm to the youth. At the same time, Northern Root Gardens came on side to provide mentorship and support to the young participants of Grow Young Locally.

The project began to truly reflect a commitment on the part of the entire community to the principles of sustainable, locally-owned agricultural activity, and to youth, the guarantors of Smithers' future.

A local youth was hired as the project co-ordinator. Nine youth were brought into the project and set to work hard through the relatively short northern summer to bring the project to life. Their productivity was remarkable.

They brought in sand, composted manure and topsoil, and worked it into the garden beds, some of which they later allotted to medicinal herbs. They completed garden maps and plans. They developed a rainwater irrigation system and a composting system. They built chicken coops, and designed, constructed, and planted a solar greenhouse. They turned and developed new land.

The training the youth took included a small business workshop, direct farm marketing, small farm business development, and a northern organics field day. They designed and carried out canning workshops and community participation days. They also harvested and prepared their produce and sold it at the weekly Farmers Market.

How did all this come about? It is the product of a clearly stated need, heard by people with the ability to facilitate real results, supported by a sensitive funding agency, and implemented by the people who have a stake in its success – the youth themselves.

A Success?

Yes, the project has been a huge success. The harvest was bountiful. The Farmers Market opened its arms wide to welcome and work with the Grow Young Locally youth. Close to \$1000 was collected in sales – a considerable achievement for the garden's first year of harvest.

Anecdotally, there have been clear increases in the awareness in youth of the issues involved in sustainable agriculture. The youth on the project learned a great deal about farming fundamentals, irrigation, greenhouse growing, composting, entrepreneurship, and life skills. Even if they move out of agriculture later, many of these skills will continue to serve them well.

The Grow Young Locally project and Northern Root farm have also become a safe, and trendy gathering place for youth from across the community and for local people in general. Many citizens volunteer at the garden in return for produce or the opportunity to have their own garden plot.

A huge contributor to the success of the project has been its network of supporters: funders, other local groups, and the community itself. A clear need was identified that the commitment and support of many residents transformed into a reality.



Northern Root

The BC Food Systems Network (www.fooddemocracy.org) defines "food security" as something a community possesses when all its residents, at all times, "have access to nutritious, safe, personally acceptable and culturally appropriate foods, produced in ways that are environmentally sound and socially just."

Achieving local security – and helping people ready themselves for the onrushing crisis in the northern economy – is the target of Northern Root Community Garden Association. Largely driven by youth since its launch in the summer of 2000, Northern Root has grown from a market garden into a medium of community connection and exchange. Currently, 15 local citizens, families, and organizations own garden plots adjacent to the society's larger garden on the outskirts of Smithers, B.C. They and the society share a small greenhouse, storage shelter, and root cellar.

Community partnership building is central to Northern Root's approach. Grow Young Locally partnered with Northern Root to encourage and support local youth to engage in sustainable agriculture. The Gaia Project's mentorship program connected Northern Root and LifeCycles Project Society of Victoria (see p. 11, this issue). Other supporters ran the gamut: Human Resources Development Canada, Smithers Community Health, School District #54, the Driftwood Foundation, Katimavik, several local businesses, and many volunteers.

In a new program, "Garden to Kitchen," staff and volunteers will use the facilities of an old experimental farm (including a fully functional community kitchen) to process locally grown foods into consumables for residents of the Smithers and the Bulkley valleys. The food's processing and packaging will promote educational, therapeutic, and nutritional exchange, and serve as a living model of an environmentally sound and healthful food system. In the words of members Megan Ryan and Crystal Philpott, the purpose of Northern Root is to reconnect "agri" to our "culture."

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