

## Urban Minifarm

Kaarin Thompson, August 25, 2007

A big truck had just dumped 14 ½ yards of aged cow manure, blocking half of the street. So many people stopped to ask us questions that it took more than a week to move all the manure! The goal? Become more environmentally aware through organic living. First step: turning our lawn into an urban minifarm.

With no background in agriculture, the public library was my guide. After much research, I decided our urban minifarm would be based upon the principals of permaculture. This organic method is one of the most sustainable ways of getting the soil in shape.

### Why grow your own food?

#### 1. Nutrition

Several studies state that organic food has higher levels of vitamins and minerals. And if you are a foodie, there is nothing like freshly harvested fruits and vegetables! How would your diet change if you grew most of your own vegetables? How would your child's diet change?

#### 2. Exercise

Very few of us in the urban setting get enough exercise. Breathing fresh air, stretching, and connecting with your environment do wonders for our health.

#### 3. Community

Growing food connects us with our communities. Who doesn't love a fresh piece of organic fruit/vegetable, still warm from the sun?

#### 4. Working with the Environment

By improving the soil, we improve the amount of water that is absorbed and retained in the soil. In addition to keeping trees healthier, there is less runoff in storm drains, keeping our rivers healthier.

#### 5. Other benefits

Stress is one of the major contributing factors to health problems. We all know that eating right, exercising, drinking plenty of water, and time with family and friends are essential to good health and lowering stress levels. Since people are often short on time and energy, growing your own food offers many benefits at the same time.

### Getting started:

Mow the lawn very short with a mulching lawnmower. Sprinkle some bone meal on the lawn. Next, gather wax-free, brown boxes from the local grocery store (just ask, most will be happy to give them away). Lay the flattened cardboard boxes, overlapping them, and water them thoroughly to keep them in place. Spread 4-6 inches of aged cow manure on top of the boxes and water thoroughly. The spreading of manure is labor intensive, so enlist some help if possible. Next, add a layer of straw, 6-8" high, on top of the manure. Last, plant certified organic seed potatoes 12" apart through the straw (poking a hole with a screwdriver through the cardboard). Non-certified potatoes may harbor disease. Water regularly and keep soil moist. Make sure to keep the straw and soil moist. Keep watering, the potatoes will sprout and get about 12" high and wide. Once the potatoes begin flowering, consider digging up with a garden fork.

*Other minifarm types:* Consider turning part of your lawn, balcony, or sunny window into a kitchen garden. Does your home, apartment building, business, or school have a sunny spot? The best time to start is late summer or early autumn. Warm soil combined with rain will speed soil improvement and germination. If you start now, you may even have home-grown, organic potatoes for Thanksgiving!

There are so many books on gardening, I recommend reading books by authors who stress organic methods. There are many ways to grow food. Do some experimenting and share the results with your neighbors!

Recommended reading:

*Food Not Lawns*

*Permaculture in a Nutshell*

*Rodale's Illustrated Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening*, the complete guide to natural and chemical-free gardening, by Pauline Pears (Editor-in-Chief), DK Books

*The Post-Petroleum Survival Guide and Cookbook*

Recommended viewing (DVD):

*The Future of Food*