

Story and photos by CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT

CULTIVATING AN URBAN GROWER

Spend just 10 minutes with Carmen Lamoureux, founder of the Urban Farm School in Calgary, and you'll want to dash home to plant some food. In your flowerbed. In a pot. In a patch of dirt next to your condo building, even.

Her passion is that contagious.

"Growing up, the bush was my playground," says Lamoureux, describing a childhood in Northern Alberta, where foraging berries with her four siblings was a summer adventure, venison and moose meat filled the family freezer, and homemade wine and preserves stocked the pantry.

"Mom was an amazing, amazing woman. Super resilient...She made everything an adventure." But her resourcefulness met its greatest test when the family was posted to Algeria. "The only way we ate as well as we did there was because my mother was able to create really strong relationships with various local vendors...learning to cook foods that we'd never encountered, like couscous and tagines and artichokes."

The experience left its mark, says Lamoureux. "What that engendered in me was not taking our food supply for granted."

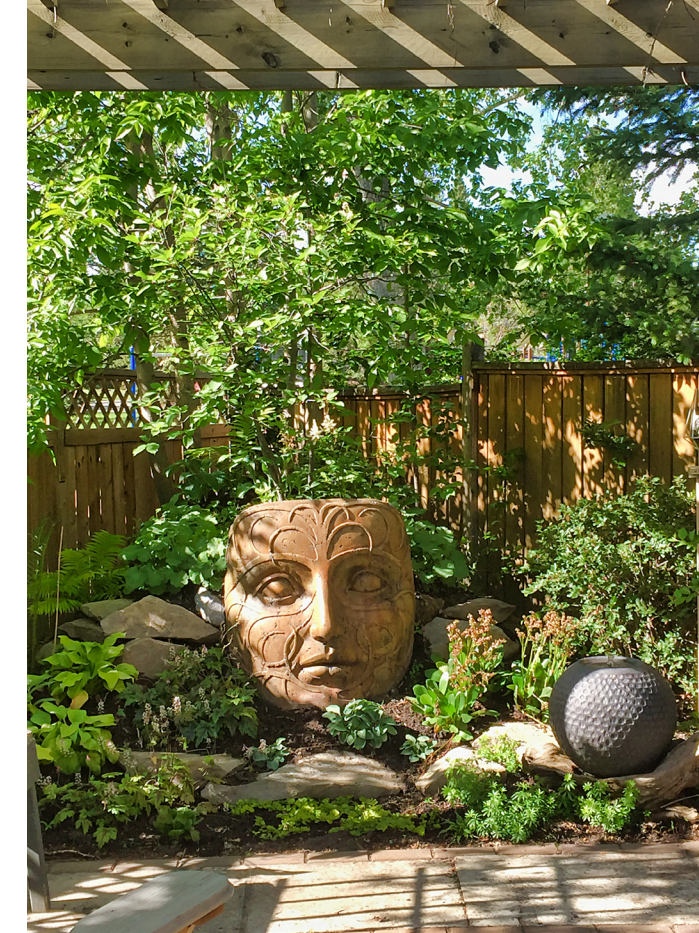
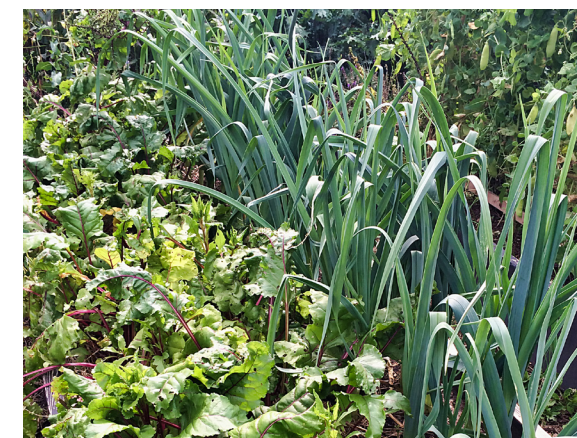
Fast forward to Lamoureux's university days, to the backyard of an old house she rented in Edmonton's Little Italy. Here she found community and mentorship among the neighbourly nonnas, who dispensed gardening wisdom over the back fence along with glasses of wine - and made her a food gardener for life.

But step into the Calgary yard that she has nurtured for the past 28 years, and you'll quickly realize hers is no ordinary garden. Here, cherry tomato plants stand four metres tall. A warm corner boasts massive cobs of corn. Apples and pears drape from espaliered branches. And among the hundreds of other edible plants, artichokes have pride of place.

Yes, artichokes growing in CALGARY.

With private corners for solitary reflection and a long table for gathering with friends, the atmosphere is one of abundance and welcome and inspiration. Which, if you're like me, yields quickly to intimidation: I could never produce something like this.

Not so, says Lamoureux - and here I learn what happens when passion and experience meet science. With her existing background in forestry and sustainable land management, Lamoureux decided in 2013 to secure a certification in permaculture design and to open her garden as a teaching space. Since then, nearly 1100 students have taken her Urban Farm School workshops, from container-gardening and seed-starting sessions



for newbies, to advanced design and foodscaping classes for urban farming enthusiasts. She's pulled together a team of experts offering topics like mushroom growing and chicken husbandry; has taught sessions for **Verge Permaculture**, the Calgary Horticultural Society, and Lee Valley Tools; and, since 2019, has offered a full schedule of workshops at Greengate Garden Centre.

The trick to growing food successfully and regeneratively, she tells me, is to look to natural ecosystems as mentors. Take forests, for instance. "There's this fantastic system at work here...that requires no intervention...Nobody's going in there raking up leaves, nobody's going in and putting on fertilizers. They're self-regulating, self-managing systems. And they're brilliant!"

How to apply eco-systems thinking to the garden? Utilize mulches and compost to mimic nature's optimal conditions for soil health. Group plants in mutually-supportive "guilds." For example, place rhubarb - an efficient water harvester and mineral accumulator - together with edible groundcovers like thyme or alpine strawberries, and beautiful nitrogen-fixers like blue false indigo. Or plant yarrow near an apple tree to attract the pollinators that eat the moth larva that cause apple scab.

And if you can only commit to baby-steps? Combine basil and nasturtiums in a big pot with a tomato plant to create a mini-guild.

Best of all, a well-designed growing system should require little effort when it matures: no weeding, little watering, no chemical fertilizers or pesticides. "The only time I really spend [working in the garden] is in the spring," says Lamoureux. "After that, the most time I spend every day is walking around in the evening with my glass of wine to look at how everything's doing."

The deal is sealed when I'm invited into Lamoureux's pantry. Like the garden, diversity reigns supreme here, in both products and preservation technique. Frozen berries and vegetables are squirreled away in the freezer. Jars of fruit preserves and pickles are stacked three deep. Canisters hold produce that's been

processed in the dehydrator, like dried apples, kale, leeks, and herbal teas. Green beans benefit from three treatments: freezing, canning, and pickling.

Among the jewelled jars, I sample a smoky corn and tomato salsa. Nibble Italian peppers destined to tug a nonna's heart-strings. Taste a handful of dried tomatoes that go down like candy. Intense flavours ordained to capture the imagination of every food fan and inspire us to grow our own.

To learn more about the Urban Farm School and see the full calendar of workshops for 2020, check out urbanfarmschool.ca.

Catherine Van Brunschot is a Calgary-based food and travel writer and small-time food gardener whose yard only flourishes in her dreams - so far. Read more of her stories at <https://catherinevanbrunschot.com>.

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Photos of Carmen Lamoureux's backyard garden, which has become a classroom for those who want to learn to urban farm.

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