

Urban farm reaps bountiful harvest for immigrant families

Year two of the Land of Dreams' 30-acre urban farm in southeast Calgary has brought twice the bounty of the first.

The 32 circular plots for gardeners to grow fruit and vegetables – compared to 16 last year – yielded about 1,000 pounds of food this year after a reaping of 200 pounds of kale, carrots and sunchokes (Jerusalem artichokes) within two weeks. Five hundred pounds of produce was picked in 2019.

The unique quality of the Land of Dreams, an initiative spearheaded by the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS), is that Canadian immigrant families, particularly the Yazidi people of Sinjar, Iraq, are the leading gardeners.

Starting in May, nearly 100 newcomers grow garlic, potatoes, tomatoes, radishes, strawberries, cucumbers, zucchini and plants native to them like watercress (from the kale and broccoli family) and cousa squash (a Middle Eastern version of zucchini).

Back in May, Rod Olsen, a regenerative farmer who serves as project manager for the Land of Dreams, said watching these newcomers garden is a profound experience for him.

"Newcomers who have been displaced can feel like they do not have power or any agency," said Olsen. "When they heal the soil, they gain a sense that they're able to impact Mother Earth in a positive way. I think that it equals us all.

"I think we all as a human species are carrying this sense of ecological grief, and most of us don't know what to do. We are being given a beautiful opportunity to get right at a core at what we can do and what we need to do. They can become leaders to teach the rest of us Canadians that this is what the land needs right now."

Witnessing these men, women and children collect their spoils at wrap-up gatherings is also a highlight.

"It is incredible to watch. It is super fascinating, cool and educational to see that the Yazidi women tend to strip the leaves off the garlic plant while we in North America leave them on. We keep all the leaves on for photosynthesis so that the bulb gets bigger while they harvest all the leaves, which leaves them with smaller bulbs."

A memorable moment of year two was introducing beehives, which were housed in several outdoor fenced areas. The bees generated enough honey to fill 70, 375-

millilitre glass jars.

While year two of the Land of Dreams winds down, Olsen is also making some 2021 season plans. He and the CCIS are keen on securing a grant to build a greenhouse.

Establishing more plots is also on the agenda, but likely more in the vein of traditional straight garden rows. Designing the original 32 plots in four eight-plot quadrants was done in homage to the Indigenous medicine wheel.

Engaging First Nations communities to participate in the Land of Dreams is also an aim of Olsen's, and that relationship is growing as elders make appearances to bless the land.

Ultimately, growing the CCIS gardening family is the central mission so that an even more bountiful harvest will be enjoyed next autumn.