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Backyard Eating

Michael Levenston '70 sows the seeds of sustainability



Old Boy Covers New Ground

By John Carson

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If Michael Levenston '70 had walked up to you at a party 30 years ago and started to regale you with stories of worm composting, you might have grimaced, made your excuses and sidled away.

By his own admission, it sounds, well, weird. "It's a pretty oddball area, and you can't go to a lot of people about this," he says.

But today Levenston is the global go-to guy for that subject and other green issues that fall under the umbrella of urban agriculture. He started the Vancouver-based non-profit City Farmer Society in 1978, when no one used the words "urban" and "agriculture" in the same sentence.

"It was a bit of an oxymoron," he recalls. "If agriculture, you're rural; if urban, you're a modern consumer. Our outlook at City Farmer was mostly aimed at the backyard farmers who had veggie gardens. It was the non-commercial demographic and we wanted to teach them about the environment through our organization.

"Urban agriculture has a slightly wider definition now because commercial growers within the urban metropolitan region are part of that term," he says.

At UCC, Levenston enjoyed being in the natural environment, whether it was the ravines near the College, at Norval or on the playing fields. "They still look lush and natural in the City of Toronto. When I was in the Prep, Norval was a wonderful place to visit. My inclination was for less urban, more natural settings," he says.

After studying at Trent University in Peterborough, Ont., Levenston moved to Vancouver, where City Farmer sprouted from the roots of a federal grant. "We were working for the federal government teaching energy conservation — that was a popular term in the '70s," he says. "A few of us were interested in the food system and how individuals and cities could save energy, and we thought the food garden model held potential."

City Farmer has a very central demonstration garden which is accessible for people in the region. It runs

a telephone hotline and is an education centre for all manner of things to do with the urban landscape and greening. Internationally, it's well known because of its website, which was set up way back in 1994.

"Everyone who is involved in urban agriculture has come back to our website, so we're known around the world," explains Levenston. "We've always been surprised about its popularity. Locally, our garden — globally our website. I estimate 100,000 to 200,000 online visitors a month.

"We look like a retro site because I haven't improved the coding since the '90s and made it look modern. But, it receives a huge audience, and I have to say, it's because content is king, and our content is always referenced by others," he adds.

This visionary Old Boy is the first port of call for the media when they need a source on urban agriculture. The day before *Old Times* interviewed him, he was busy with the major outlets.

"Yesterday I had CBC Toronto on the phone asking about chickens in backyards, and CBC Vancouver doing a story about a new community garden set up by a developer in downtown Vancouver. That's quite unusual and controversial, so the local media are interested," he says.

A British TV show dedicated to law also contacted him because they wanted to use one of City Farmer's video blogs about a chicken raiser in Vancouver — that's against the bylaw, so the show was very interested. "We deal with people all week long," he says.

City Farmer has a worm-composting program that is the largest in the world. The process uses smaller bins for apartment dwellers, which is different from backyard systems. That initiative has garnered a lot of global attention too. "Germany's *Der Spiegel* did a large article about our worm program and we've also had *National Geographic* cover it online," he adds.

So, what sowed the seeds of Levenston's passion?

"My motivation was that I didn't know or learn about this as a child growing up in Toronto, and so it fascinated me that you could peel back a lawn and

grow some veggies out of that,” he says. “Like many urban people, I wasn’t exposed to it, and it was a revelation. It was my lack of knowledge on this subject as a youngster that continues to motivate me, even after 30 years.”

Paradoxically, the City Farmer founder chooses to oversee the operation from his home base rather than get out into the field, so to speak: “I’m asked to travel a lot, but prefer to travel virtually through the Internet; I’m madly on e-mail from about 4 a.m. to 11 p.m.!”

That’s not to say his influence hasn’t been heard on a global scale. The subject he has based his life’s work on has progressed from being a trendy fringe subject to a mainstream talking point.

“Back in 1978, urban agriculture didn’t have a place in the world as an important topic, but that has

time employee with about eight part-time employees that staff the garden and run our workshops. What’s amazing is that you can have such a large reach and be so successful with limited resources, if you do it the correct way — and that’s with passion.”

There is a lot of ground for Levenston to cover, but some hot topics are at the forefront of urban agriculture.

“Our bread and butter is composting — that is central to a waste point of view for our cities, and we spend every day all through the week teaching people how to compost. We love it as urban agriculture because you’re taking basic household waste such as food and yard waste and turning it into a good, healthy product that improves the city’s soil for your veggies, fruit and ornamentals,” he explains.

“We also spend a great deal of time talking about water, because conservation of that is essential, even though in rainy Vancouver it doesn’t seem like the thing to do! But it is a huge issue and many of the garden tours we do relate to water — whether it’s the green roof on our tool shed, the green lane, which has a permeable surface, or our rain barrels.

“The hottest topic right now is eat local: food grown close to where you live. We all hear about *The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating*, a best-selling book in Canada by a Vancouver journalist. I can talk about the ‘zero-mile diet,’ because you can go out of your back door and pick what you’ve grown, as opposed to finding local producers in 100-mile-wide regions. I think waste, food and water are the three main areas of discussion today,” adds Levenston.

This busy Old Boy recently found the time to visit his *alma mater*.

“A fellow student, Dave Fairlie ’70, and my wife and I visited UCC and were thrilled that there was a young person’s food garden in the Prep, right by the entrance,” he recalls. “Dave and I had entered the school together back in the early ’60s as youngsters walking up those steps, and now in that same location is this fabulous food garden, which is the kind of thing that we talk about at City Farmer. It was such a thrill to see the students out there with easels doing artwork, food tasting and understanding different foods.

“The whole trip back was a fabulous experience for me. To see the College taking this on is great. The instructor told me, ‘It’s so nice to see an Old Boy who actually became an environmentalist.’

“I think she observed that’s what I always was at heart; I do too, now. The College has embraced urban agriculture and that is absolutely the right thing to do,” he adds.



City Farmer's head gardener, Sharon Slack (right), demonstrates worm composting to UBC School of Journalism students.

changed so dramatically,” explains Levenston. “It is now a serious subject of discussion in the United Nations and development groups, in food and agriculture groups, in the World Bank and in academia.

“My nephew — who has just started Queen’s University — almost fell out of his seat in a geography lecture because the speaker was talking about sustainability issues and referenced City Farmer. This is the kind of change in thinking on the subject that is happening in modern society. It is being discussed and worked on at all levels.”

You can hear the excitement in his voice, and a tinge of awe too, as though he himself can’t even believe how things have changed for the better over three decades.

So, you’re thinking City Farmer has to employ hundreds to reach that level of success, right? Wrong.

“We all know that ‘small is beautiful’ and we are a very small organization,” he says. “I am the only full-