

FOCUS

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Food fight!

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Anarchists with pitchforks descend on UVic

Twice last month, UVic administration, under cover of night, razed food gardens that students planted to highlight the value of secure and visible food production on campus. The students did not have permission to saw chunks of sod from a small area in front of the library and plant peas, strawberries, garlic, and native plants donated by Cheryl Bryce of the Songhees, who once harvested the land for camas bulbs.

“Planting a garden is the same as throwing a brick through a window,” joked a student during the second “Resistance is Fertile” gardening party on March 31st.

But UVic’s higher ups don’t appreciate satire. They are positively grim. There’s been an arrest for “assault by trespass,” an ongoing police investigation and talk of criminal charges. They’ve labelled the gardeners—their own students—vandals and anarchists (in the derogatory use of the word!).

They would have us believe the gardeners wore black bandanas and carried pipe bombs.

I was at the March 31st event. It was beautiful and cheerful, in step with Vancouver residents who quietly cut away boulevard grass and planted food, a movement that city had the sense to embrace.

The hundred-plus engineering, sociology, music, nursing, and political science students glowed with sweat and—was it idealism? Horror! Hundreds more watched (all seemed happy; if there were detractors, they were silent). I was impressed by the gardeners’ self-possession, their know-how as they mixed soils and raised small fences against the rabbits, their physical exuberance, and their puns: “Saladarity!” “Lettuce turnip the lawn!”

UVic spokesperson Bruce Kilpatrick argues there are ample channels for green engagement. There is an Office of Planning and Sustainability, a commitment to sourcing local foods for campus menus, LEED certified buildings, and academic departments from environmental studies to law and business that take the environment seriously. There are student seats on the Campus Planning Committee and the Sustainability Advisory Committee; the University also supports a lovely herb garden behind the Graduate Students’ Society offices and accessed by Grad Pub cooks.

If UVic is so dedicated to nature, why then were the spiral-shaped garden beds treated with such hostility? It’s not as if student activism on campus is unheard of. Some call it a generation gap, others say the topdown governors are too interested in big bucks—Pepsi was



invited during Earthfest week to publicize their green initiatives.

“The University says they plan to go carbon neutral within two years. They physically cannot do that without making [deep] changes,” says education student Matthew Christie. “Ecological and social issues are two sides of the same coin—you can’t have a sustainable campus that isn’t socially just. Empowering students to lead in environmental change, listening to the Songhees and Saanich people about management of their traditional lands, and taking all development issues to student and community referendums are just a few ways that the university could be more sustainable.”

The University says there were only 35 rogue gardeners and some weren’t even students. “There were people coming on campus with shovels and pitchforks asking directions to the library!” Kilpatrick said in an interview. It’s a shocking image—that mob

with torches and pitchforks in so many zombie movies. But the shovels weren’t weapons. Kilpatrick disparages the gardening group’s “list of demands.” Terrorists have lists of demands, and I expected a truly radical document. Instead, it is a mildly phrased “garden vision” that “seek[s] to open dialogue” and “propose[s]” initiatives toward a “garden campus”: a garden in the centre of the campus that would be a visual hub, and demonstrate active commitment to food sustainability; a 15-acre educational farm on the Cedar Hill corner lands; 10 acres of ethnobotanical gardens managed with the First Peoples House; 500 fruit and nut trees; an Urban Agriculture School; an annual UVIC Harvest feast to celebrate. The last initiative of the “Garden Vision” is intense: “We seek to cooperate with UVic to make this happen, but we will not cease negotiations and action until these demands are met.” Food security advocates are exasperated: over a decade, several student and faculty proposals for an integrated campus have met silence.

The administration says a few people can’t decide what is best for all. “You have a group of people descend on land that is being used as a recreation and circulation space, in a prominent location, and decide they are going to change that space,” Kilpatrick said. “There are many channels the students could use, they can approach the Office of Sustainability...”

Or, in the words (paraphrased here) of the satirist to the gardeners: “Don’t do this! You can apply to join a committee, attend meetings to draft a plan for a plan for a vision...”

“PLANTING A GARDEN IS THE same as throwing a brick through a window.” —UVic student

Who wouldn't rather plant a camas bulb? "If you were a first-year or second-year student, it would be very difficult to find a place in the decision making," a longtime University employee told me. The guerilla gardening collective, being non-centralized, non-hierarchical, and non-authoritarian (now *that's* anarchy!) are frustrated by bureaucracy and understandably impatient about wasted land: in the greenhouse era, the time is now.

Small-scale agriculture is hot. Last year, for the first time in decades, more North Americans registered as farmers than the year previous. In the midst of the gardens brouhaha, the local environmental Dogwood Initiative launched Reclaim the Commons Robin Hood Gardening Initiative that will garden Victoria's empty lots to "promote food sovereignty."

Author Bill McKibben, on tour to promote *Eaarth: Making A Life on a Tough New Planet*, told NPR: "We've reached the limits to growth that people started talking about 50 years ago. We need to start focusing on security, on stability, on resilience, on figuring out how to allow communities to thrive. That has a lot to do with decentralization, with scaling down, with spreading out, with building food systems and energy systems that are small and stable enough to succeed."

I'd bet students would flock to a university with plentiful nut trees, just as retirees flock to this City of Gardens. But the University considers the Garden Vision outlandish. "It'll cost nine million dollars!" Kilpatrick exclaims.

Really? "We created an entire garden in a single afternoon with wonderful vegetables for absolutely zero dollars," notes Christie. And so what if it does cost nine million dollars? Vision ain't cheap.

The administration could have left the garden, warmly challenging the students to maintain it. They could have made a deal: in exchange, the students would have to devise a viable rabbit control plan.

One thing is sure: everyone on campus, from cafeteria staff to philosophers, is talking about food security. It's a fertile discussion.

Sara Cassidy is a Victoria writer who grows vegetables in her front yard.



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