



## Life

# FORTE: The PLOT — more than just a garden



By [Theresa Forte](#), special to Postmedia Network

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*A view across the lush vegetable beds in the PLOT garden in Surrey, B.C. (Theresa Forte/Special to Postmedia Network)*

When is a garden more than just a garden?

Let me introduce you to a garden that began last March as a social practice art project in the city of Surrey, B.C., with a simple goal: Soften a harsh city scape. The garden opened its arms to everyone from the mayor to local neighbours and people living on the street with equal welcome — a garden is a great equalizer.

## **Beginnings**

Newton, one of six centres that make up the city of Surrey, has been plagued with gangs, drugs, poverty and homelessness for some time. The city encouraged artists to beautify the town centre as a way to soften the harsh environment. Visual artists Cora and Don Li-Leger proposed a garden as social practice art project, they received a small grant and were offered a piece vacant land, next to the arena where a hockey mom was killed while picking up her son. (Social practice is where human interaction actually becomes the art itself.)

To get started, they invited 12 people to come together: How could they make this empty field into something? The PLOT (short for Peas-Lettuce-Onions-Tomatoes) was born.

“One of the people who came was Amy Eustergerling, a Metis/Cree elder who lives close to the garden,” Cora says. “She immediately saw that the site would benefit from having a medicine wheel. Several people were very interested in the spiritual aspect of the whole thing, so they spontaneously formed this little committee, it was amazing. They took ownership right away.”

Don drew up a formal plan for the garden, with long vegetable plots radiating from the circle toward a square pollinator meadow with a serpentine pathway.



*The long vegetable plots radiate from the Medicine Wheel to a square pollinator meadow with a serpentine pathway. (Don Li-Leger/Special to Postmedia Network)*

“The Medicine Wheel anchors the project, not just physically, it spiritually anchors the project,” says Don.

News of the project spread by a sign out front, brochures and word of mouth, Sunday was their work day, people would just show up and the group started to lay out the beds.

“We are on a busy street, people would stop and ask what we are doing, and so it grew,” Don says.

“West Coast Seeds gave us 50 seed packages, and a local organic farm, started all our plants for a small fee, that gave us a really good start.” The bulk of the grant funds went to purchase top soil.

### **Culture of sharing**

Don and Cora had a vision of a very productive garden where everything would be given away. The food would be given to community members, volunteers and people in need. That was also one of the hardest things for people to get their mind around.

Volunteers asked, “What if someone steals the vegetables?” Cora says, “You can’t steal the vegetables because it’s a sharing garden. We had to constantly push that. In the beginning, we had an abundance of lettuce, chard and spinach and we could not get people to take it. They wouldn’t touch it, so we gave loads to the food bank.”



*A pop-up stand in the garden with a sign: Take only what you can use. Neighbours regularly donate produce from their home gardens. (Don Li-Leger/Special to Postmedia Network)*

They organized a lunch on Sundays, based on food from the garden, usually a big salad. Then it evolved, people started bringing in ethnic food to share. "People started bringing food that they were very proud of and it changed the whole theme," Cora says. "One Italian lady in particular, brought us figs and prunes (homegrown), she baked special cakes and she got all dressed up on Sundays and sat here and held court, everyone really liked her."

They had trouble with tomato blight, so hundreds of pounds of green tomatoes were harvested. Volunteer Brendan DePaulo took the tomatoes home and bottled up green tomato relish and brought them back to share with everyone. "I had wanted to try canning, and my friend's family from Quebec made this great green ketchup, so I gave it a try." The jars were gleaned from his parents' basement. "I just had to buy new lids."

"We left it open so that people could have room for self-expression within the garden: the medicine wheel, the great square with the serpentine path. At the end of the property there was a dead tree, one of our members decided to turn it into a wishing tree. People would tie ribbons with their wishes written on them and tie them on to the tree, like prayer flags in the wind."

The garden means different things to different people.

In the words of one volunteer, 'This garden is my therapy, I can be outside and feel so healthy, I love this place.'

A wife regularly sends her husband to the garden for their salad (they live close by). They are foraging and enjoying this beautiful garden, they can see how plants grow and that food tastes really different when you grow it yourself. A young family stops by weekly and helps with the garden; they are hoping the project will continue.

One lady who visited hardly had any teeth. She told Don if they brought something soft she would eat with them on Sunday. So Cora made something soft for her, but she didn't show up. After the lunch was done, she turned up. Don asked, 'Where were you?' She answered, "I felt I had to clean up before I came." Cora was touched — this lady felt she had to make herself look more presentable before she came to lunch. It was a matter of self-respect.

A group of people get together daily for tea, reading or just talking, but if there's work to be done, like cutting the lawn, they will do it, they want to help out. The garden has become a gathering place. It's a nice place to sit and visit, with rainbow coloured picnic tables and plastic lawn chairs.

"It is remarkably quiet.

"We were hoping something like this might happen, but we didn't fully anticipate how quickly people would come together, it's only been a few months. It speaks to the level of need in that community, I'm not just talking about poverty and nutrition, but also social isolation, and this is one of the biggest problems in cities like Newton, with such a diverse population."

I was able to visit the PLOT in late September. Amy had a pair of small vases in her hands, she asked Balla if he'd cut a few flowers for her.

"I just want something small for the bedside tables."

She was bringing a little bit of the garden to cheer up her friends in the hospital.



*Amy Eustergerling and Balla with cut flowers for hospital bedside tables. (Theresa Forte/Special to Postmedia Network)*

When is a garden more than just a garden? When it becomes the heart of the community.

The City of Surrey has extended the PLOT for 2017. Brendan DePaulo and Teresa Klein will co-facilitate the project for Friends of the Garden. Visit the PLOT Facebook page for more information.

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