

The Gabriola Commons



Progress Report to the BC Agricultural Land Commission

November 2010

The guiding principle underlying the Gabriola Commons is the philosophy behind sustainability – improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems. Respect for the agricultural capacity of the land is central to this vision.

From the earliest workshops and inventories carried out with the community of Gabriola, there has been agreement on the goals informing the long-range agricultural planning at the Commons:

1. Creation of an unassailable reserve capable of food production for generations to come
2. Agricultural food production largely for the benefit of the community
3. Development of a model of environmentally-sustainable, community-based agriculture, using renewable energy practices and following organic farming guidelines.
4. Preservation of heritage species and seeds.

The following report provides an overall assessment of our progress towards these goals as we advance in the third phase in our 3-phase “Agricultural Path”.

1. Creation of an unassailable reserve capable of food production for generations to come

In our reports of 2007 and 2008 we described the gradual transformation of the grasslands of the Commons into orchards, experimental gardens, food bank gardens and community allotments. Our work these past two years has focussed on extending the areas under cultivation as well as improving the quality of the soil in the areas already created:

a) Extending the areas under cultivation:

- The creation of 30 **community allotment gardens** (each with an area of 400 sq.ft.) in the south east corner of the land proved to answer a strong community demand. By mid-summer 2009, the list of potential growers waiting for space encouraged us to plan the extension of the area to allow for another 20 allotments of the same size. This meant opening new ground into territory claimed by tenacious spirea and wild rose shrubs. With the influx of more volunteers, however, the land clearing, fencing and laying down of irrigation lines were achieved in time to plant this last spring.

A local excavation company contributed time in laying down a secondary access road to the allotment gardens, connecting residential communities near South Road to the Commons. A project initiated by Gabriola Lands and Trails Trust (GaLTT) in partnership with the Commons extended this with a boardwalk connection near the community gardens connecting South and North Roads for community use.

- The **Haskap** was a plant unknown to us until a newcomer to Gabriola introduced us to it. Grown by her father in Saskatchewan, it is a member of the honeysuckle family, producing large blueberry-like berries, but sweeter and containing four times the anti-oxidants! Tolerant of cold weather conditions and not fussy about soils, it sounded like a plant for us to try and last year we planted a row between the blueberries and the apple orchard. If it likes Gabriola we'll be planting more of this in years to come.
- For several years we have expressed an interest in experimenting with **grains** as part of our plan to create an "unassailable reserve of food production." We needed first to test the suitability of our soil and climate here on Gabriola and a small planting in 2009 of a variety of grains in the elders' "Dragon Garden" was visibly successful.

This spring a new area south of the Community Garden was ploughed and fenced and we launched an experimental planting of 7 main grains: 3 wheat (Marquis, Ethiopian Blue Tinge, Red Fyfe), Barley, Oats, Kamut and Amaranth (all seeds donated by the generosity of Dan Jason of Salt Spring Seeds!) A border of mustard separated each planted area.



Whether we were simply favoured by the unusually wet spring remains to be seen in future years, but there was no doubt left about the possibility of growing grain on Gabriola. Following advice from Salt Spring Island grain growers, we didn't enrich the soil and found we didn't need to irrigate either. Our main challenge came from the birds at the key moments of sowing and harvesting! Controlling the thistles that spring up inevitably when new land is opened is another challenge to be dealt with.

Dan Jason extended his interest in our project by giving a workshop in the fall. A large number of participants came to observe and try out various methods of threshing and winnowing the grain we had harvested and stored in large sacks. Several weeks later an unexpected donation was made by our local recycling depot: a large French stone mill for grinding flour by hand. Now we're hoping our local expert in cob oven building will launch his next project on the Commons to permit us to transform our grain into food!

b) Improving the quality of the soil:

- Several years of growing a variety of crops are gradually transforming the soil in the two upper garden areas. What was in the beginning dismayingly impoverished and rocky ground is on its way to becoming the dark, rich, velvety-textured soil a productive vegetable garden requires to thrive. This is being accomplished through the addition of compost, donated manure and seaweed, as well as by tilling in fall rye cover crops.
- As was described in our 2008 Progress Report, the soil in the south portion of the Commons, assumed to consist of deep reserves of peat, instead proved to be challenging: 6-8 inches of impoverished soil over a layer of diatomaceous earth over 5 feet of clay on sandstone bedrock! That this was combined with a high water table for six months of the year and a tendency to become a frost pocket in early fall and late spring completes the picture of a less than ideal growing area.

Nevertheless the extended community allotment gardens have almost all been taken by community members willing to try a diversity of techniques to transform the land for food production: mulching with cardboard or bales of hay (or alpaca wool!), building raised beds, adding a wealth of composting material and creating less hostile microclimates through a variety of means. The comparison was dramatic between the poor soil in the newly created gardens and the richer soil built up over the last two years, first through a squash and potato cooperative, then through the first 30 allotment plots.

2. Agricultural food production largely for the benefit of the community

The essential mandate of the Commons is to benefit the community of Gabriola. All of the agricultural projects undertaken: the two upper gardens, the orchards, the allotment gardens and the grain field, are upholding that vision. Produce from the land at the Commons is enriching the shelves of the local food depot and the kitchen at the local elementary school. Community members frustrated by the shady, rocky land they live on are able to grow their own food in the sunny, irrigated allotment gardens. Community events such as the Fall Fair feature food from produce grown on the Commons. A community-wide grain co-operative is in the planning stages, inspired by the encouraging results of the Commons' grain experiment and the workshop given by Dan Jason on threshing and winnowing.

- **A farm gate stand** is in the planning stages for 2011, anticipating the sale of the first good crops from the orchards and blueberry field as well as vegetables planted in the Kitchen garden with this intention (artichokes, garlic and herbs are already underway, asparagus will be started this spring.) Proceeds from the sale will help finance Farm Management Team projects such as a greenhouse, cold frames, extensions to the irrigation system, improved fencing.
- **The Community Kitchen project**, which will permit us to process produce growing on the land, has been advanced by a major grant from the Nanaimo Community Foundation.



This has permitted us to upgrade the infrastructure in the former goat cheese factory (built in 1982) to current building codes and install electrical, gas and plumbing lines to service the future kitchen. A 500 gallon propane tank was donated to complete the installation.

The next phase of this project will consist of renovating the exterior shell of the building, making it insect and rodent-proof. (A severe storm in 2009 revealed that the existing asphalt shingle roof was failing and needed to be replaced. A series of donations, a grant and a benefit concert permitted us to install a good quality standing-seam metal roof which

gives the whole building a bit of pizzazz!) This phase will include replacing the insulation and drywall and painting.

A final phase will consist of complementing the existing donated kitchen elements with what is missing (stainless steel counters, a large hood and ventilation system, light fixtures, etc.) and hooking everything up for a major community opening! A volunteer management structure is being organized, consisting of local commercial chefs, the PHC staff and other islanders wanting to rent space in the kitchen.

3. Development of a model of environmentally-sustainable, community-based agriculture, using renewable energy practices and following organic farming guidelines.

- Developing as a model is a goal which we are slowly working toward with a lot of appropriate humility, recognizing that we are just beginning and there is much to be learned from others. What distinguishes the Commons from other farming endeavours is the fact that we are not bound by economic constraints when we research such aspects of growing as building soil, experimental planting, designing greenhouses etc. An unsuccessful experiment is not a disaster as it would be if one's living depended on the income from a crop. We are gradually coming to appreciate this significant advantage as we plan for the future.
- To pursue this overall goal we have begun exploring partnerships with Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo:

a) Green Building and Renewable Energy program

Over the past two years we have worked with students in this program, exploring the extent to which renewable energies can replace petroleum-based energies. This project began with a survey of the island's restaurants and pubs which produce waste vegetable oil and examined the process of converting this WVO into biodiesel fuel which could be used in any diesel motor, such as tractors or trucks that we might use. The feasibility study is promising and this is a field which we would like to explore further with the trained technicians, under the supervision of a mechanical engineer (a former research professor at UBC.)

Note: It is possible that the mention of "renewable energy practices" in our original application to the ALC was not specific enough and that we require the approval of the Agricultural Land Commissioners before engaging in this project. This is definitely an aspect of environmentally-sustainable practices in which we would like to continue and welcome your counsel in obtaining this approval.

b) The Department of Horticulture

We have already worked with one of the professors in this department when preparing for blueberry planting. This promises to be a fruitful long-term association, with the opportunity to offer the land at the Commons for future research and experiments.

c) The Department of Chemistry

We are considering approaching the department with the possibility of setting up a satellite soil testing lab, in order to acquire a more in-depth knowledge of the soils not only on the Commons but on the island in general.

- Learning from others:

We have been fortunate to be able to offer workshops to enthusiastic community members given by farmers/growers with a wealth of experience:

- Susan Brown, a farmer from the BC Interior, gave a valuable workshop on grafting last spring to a large group of islanders.
- Dan Jason of Salt Spring Seeds gave a well-attended workshop on threshing and winnowing grain last fall
- Carolyn Herriot paid a visit to Gabriola at the request of the Garden Club and was generous with her time at the Gabriola Commons, sharing her observations and advice.

All of these events are helping to anchor the role of the Commons in bringing to Gabriola informed speakers on a diversity of issues concerning local food growing.

- Field trips:

This spring the Farm Team will be setting out on our second major field trip (the first being the visit to Linnaea Farm on Cortes Island), visiting Galiano and Pender Islands to learn about their local food growing projects and share our own experience.

Some Farm Team members have already visited Makaria Farms near Duncan to learn more about their experiments with grain growing. This is another partnership we intend to continue.

A workshop weekend on Salt Spring Island at Foxglove Farm featuring well-known organic growers Eliot Coleman and Mark Ableman focussed on all-season growing. Techniques learned at this workshop will be put into practice back on Gabriola.

4. Preservation of heritage species and seeds.

The importance of saving the seed of plants which have been proven to thrive in our particular climate and soil conditions has become self-evident. It is our intention to establish as diverse a seed bank as possible over the years, featuring untreated, open-pollinated non-GMO seeds.

We are very appreciative of the relationship that is developing with Dan Jason of Salt Spring Seeds who has not only donated all of the grains which were grown in our experimental grain field this past year, but has been generous with his time and observations. Our growing collection of a rich diversity of beans originated also with Dan.

The timber frame structure intended to house projects such as this seed bank will also serve as a research centre in organic agriculture and demonstration of environmentally-sustainable practices on the Commons.

Summary and future planning:

Emerging from the early soil survey conducted in the summer of 2005 and refined through a number of community consultations and forums, the three-phase plan for developing the agricultural potential of the Gabriola Commons proposed 2010 as a point at which to evaluate our progress.

We have encountered challenges and recognize that in some ways our initial mapping of the land was optimistic. We now know for example that the near surface bedrock identified in the higher land near North Road actually extends over a much broader area than our soil survey revealed. More significant was the discovery that what we had categorized as Class 2 land in the southern portion, based on an expectation of deep reserves of peat, actually consists largely of poor soil over deep clay. Our recent experience in developing community allotment gardens there has further revealed the whole lowland area around the pond to be a frost pocket with late spring and early fall frosts shortening the growing season for any but the hardiest of vegetables. Nevertheless we are working with what we have and the abundance of water and the excellent sun exposure have contributed to an amazing production of delicious organic food.

The process for the rezoning of the Gabriola Commons has been long and careful. From the initial "Land Use Proposal" all projects proposed by the community received approval in principle by the ALC, with final approval withheld on three of the projects until it was demonstrated that our intentions to develop the land's agricultural potential were serious. Consequently our application to the Islands Trust for a Land Use Bylaw Amendment was presented as Phase One of a potential two-phase application, leaving the three projects (an Elders' Eco Village, a Land Stewards 3-unit residential cluster and a Library/Education Centre) for later consideration.

Of those non-agricultural projects which were fully approved by the ALC and are now awaiting Fourth (and Final) Reading at the Islands Trust level, our awareness of evolving community needs suggests that the skateboard park may not materialize, unless there is a resurgence of passion for the sport on the island.

The Commons' cooperation with GESS (Gabriola's Emergency Social Services) may not consist of providing a central office location (as considered in the "Land Use Proposal"), but may rather explore the means of answering community need in an emergency situation and working with local organizations like the Lions, People for a Healthy Community and island churches to answer critical needs as they arise.

On the other hand, there remains a clear desire to see projects such as the Community Kitchen, the Performing Arts Centre and the Arts and Recreation Studio materialize and, of course, agricultural projects such as a greenhouse, an equipment shed and root cellar retain high priority in our planning for the future.

Looking back now at the fenced and irrigated orchards, community and research gardens, grain field and community allotment gardens as well as the progress made on the community kitchen, we realize that this could only have been achieved over the past five years because of a multitude of enthusiastic community volunteers and donors. With the ongoing support of our community, we intend to continue exploring the possibilities implicit in "community agriculture", building on the framework that has been created to encourage local food production and offer the facilities for the processing of local produce.



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