

Success Stories from Ndilo and Dettah

How School Gardens and Community Gardens are Growing Healthier Communities



Lila Erasmus (holding the box of potatoes) and her family in the Ndilo Community Garden 2014

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The Community Gardening Mentorship Program

During the winter of 2012, Lone Sorensen from Northern Roots was working on a program called *Local Food Learning and Leadership* – a collaboration with Ecology North. This was an opportunity to build good quality gardening programs to help people learn to grow their own vegetables.

At that time, Lila Erasmus was the Director of the Sacred Circle in Yellowknife. The Sacred Circle promoted healing and health in heart, mind, body and spirit through the use of traditional Indigenous healing practices. Lila Erasmus, who is a member of the community of Ndilo in the Akaitcho Region and Lone of Northern Roots, had a meeting to talk about gardening and healthy food. Working together, Lila and Lone came up with an idea of sharing their knowledge and putting it together for a community gardening learning program. They named it *Spirit Garden Teachings*.

For five weeks in the late winter, many people came to learn about Dene & Indigenous culture put together with growing a food garden at the Sacred Circle in Yellowknife. Beh'sha Blondin, a respected Elder and Medicine Woman, blessed these new teachings with a smudging ceremony, drumming and prayer.

When spring arrived, Lila and Lone continued to work together. Lila gathered Ndilo community members who wanted to learn how to grow vegetables. Lone found some funding to pay for the program.

A community garden had been built a couple of years earlier. Melissa Doctor Sangris had been the driving force in making sure that the garden was built with the blessing of Chief and Council but had moved away. By 2012, Ndilo community members had a garden and a garden mentorship program that was based upon the *Dene Way of Life* and made especially for them. They had the hands-on learning that made the most sense to them as new gardeners. This was the start of the Community Gardening Mentorship Program and for the next three years, gardeners from Ndilo learned how to work with the soil health and how to grow great vegetables to feed their families. Having a consistent mentor that truly knows the North of 60 growing conditions and that can work alongside new gardeners has been the key in enhancing the skills to be food self-sufficient. Since the spring of 2012, the program has become popular in the community. Five new gardeners in 2012 grew to 12 adult gardeners in three seasons. More than 20 adult gardeners have participated in the gardening program in Ndilo for one or more years. Committed gardeners who have joined the program have a great amount of gardening skills to add to their Indigenous food skills. As well, adult gardeners often bring their children, grandchildren, other family members and friends to the garden to water, work or harvest.



Ndilo Community Garden (2012 & 2013)

Based on the *Spirit Garden Teachings*, the Ndilo Community Garden Mentorship program started in June 2012. The soil was very poor and it was a big challenge for new gardeners to feel successful in their first year.



The soil was changed in the spring of 2013 and still it was not the good fertile organic soil the Yellowknives Dene First Nation (YKDFN) had asked for. Some gardeners were disappointed in the low yields, though appreciated learning how to grow vegetables.



The Erasmus family harvesting in the fall of 2012.



The garden was expanded from six to nine garden boxes (raised beds) during the fall of 2012.



Ndilo Community Garden (2013 & 2014)



By 2013, the number of interested gardeners more than doubled!



In the spring of 2014 we once again had to change the soil and this time it was done right! The YKDFN took charge of their own garden soil and were now finally able to garden to its full potential. We experimented with adding caribou hair and had excellent results – the vegetables grew much bigger and healthier.



These two gardeners (*below*), Alice and Patrick are committed and have been reaping great amounts of produce from their gardens. They have both been at it for three seasons.



Three generations of new gardeners planting potatoes in 2014 (*above*). This became quality time while learning to grow some favourite vegetables.



Ndilo Community Garden (2014)



Tadeh and his mom Aleisha were thrilled to harvest and eat from their 'three generations' family garden for many weeks. Tadeh was also able to help assist children in other gardening programs.



Surprised and enthusiastic gardeners enjoying and sharing their joy and the produce they grew.



Alice has worked very hard and enjoys taking part in the gardening mentorship program. She now has three seasons under her belt and the yields from her garden are fantastic. Alice is also growing food at home and is ready to start assisting other gardeners.



Fall Harvest Fair in Ndilo (2014)

After consultations with the Chief of Ndilo, the adult community gardeners in Ndilo, the Wellness Program staff and some Yellowknives Dene First Nation Band (YKDFN) members, a decision was made to host the Annual Fall Harvest Fair in September 2014 in Ndilo.

For many years the Fall Harvest Fair was held indoors in the City of Yellowknife in a location with limited space.

In Ndilo, there were opportunities to do many outdoor activities. Garden and backyard tours put on by Ndilo community gardeners, games for children, a petting zoo with goats, Dene cultural workshops, a vegetable show-off, a potluck feast and a drum dance. Two sets of serious business-minded groups of children set up lemonade stands to sell drinks and home baked treats.

Working together with Ecology North, Yellowknife Community Garden Collective, YKDFN Wellness program, the K'alemi Dene School principal and Northern Roots, the community of Ndilo hosted a very successful Fall Harvest Fair. Over 250 people attended the various workshops, garden tours, activities and potluck.

In the future, there is potential for the Fall Harvest Fair to grow and expand to include a fall harvest and cultural market. It could also grow to include an Indigenous Gardening Gathering where gardeners can share food and garden stories.



Fall Harvest Fair in Ndilo (2014)



Garden and back yard tours courtesy of Ndilo community gardeners.



Medicine workshop in the Wellness building (*left*).



Face painting at the K'alemi Dene School (*right*).



Potluck feast with lots of locally grown ingredients (*above*). Alice's display of vegetables from her garden and backyard (*right*).



The Elder's Garden Project in Ndilo (2014)

Muriel Betsina of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation was taken away from her family and put into residential school when she was five years old. For many years she did not leave the residential school even to go home for visits in the summer. Muriel was very good and fast working in the kitchen and the nuns wanted to keep her there. From the kitchen while working hard, she would watch the other children working and playing in the gardens outside. Muriel longed to be out in the sunshine and fresh air to play and pick fresh vegetables with the other children. Muriel shared her story of how her father used to grow cabbages, and would find ways to bring the growing cabbages along with the family, as they moved their summer camps to new areas, over a wood cutting season in the Sahtu Region.



For her birthday in May 2014, some family members along with the gardening mentor for Ndilo decided to give her an unusual present. Two raised gardening beds for growing vegetables were built in Muriel's backyard. Using rough lumber from a pile in the yard and doing it the Dene Way, soon Muriel had a space to grow vegetables at hip height. Caribou hair was used for building healthy soil.



Many others that live at Muriel's house and visit her: foster children, grand- and great-grandchildren and others, helped to care for the garden. They were thrilled about the many benefits of growing their own food. Fresh food grown in home and community gardens complements the Indigenous foods: caribou, duck, moose, fish, beaver and berries and many other wild foods from the land.



The garden mentor worked with Muriel throughout season, and she was very pleased that she had a healing experience and lots of healthy, fresh salads, peas, potatoes, carrots, herbs and big beets to eat – Muriel loves beets!



The School Gardening Program & Youth Leadership at K'alemi Dene School (2013 & 2014)

As part of the Food Learning and Leadership Program, Northern Roots developed an indoor gardening program that was offered in the K'alemi Dene School in Ndilo, as well as in the Kaw Tay Whee School in Dettah in 2013. While the program was offered to many schools across the Northwest Territories, the two schools within the Chief Drygeese Territory were able to be part of a longer term and more consistent program.

The K'alemi Dene School in Ndilo is a kindergarten to grade 12 school that has about 100 students, most of them are Yellowknives Dene First Nation members. As a part of the curriculum, Elders and hunters teach and share the *Dene Way of Life*, including language and on-the-land learning. The indoor and outdoor school gardening program is a good fit with this curriculum. The Youth Leadership program in the school had their first gardening experience in 2013 and participated in the garden mentorship program for the entire summer. By 2014, the K'alemi Dene School built the first part of the School Garden. The students and youth are learning through the school gardening program both at school in the spring and fall, and also during the summer. A food garden needs care for the entire season.

When school is back in the fall it is time to harvest the potatoes and carrots and use them in the school for feasts. At the 2014 K'alemi Dene School annual Thanksgiving Feast, the students and teachers served a locally harvested caribou stew with home-baked bannock. Local hunters provided the meat, and the potatoes and carrots for the stew were grown and harvested by the students and youth of the school. The raspberry and Saskatoon berry jams for the home-baked bannock were grown and harvested in the area and made by youth, students and teachers at the school. The K'alemi Dene School may well be the first school in the Northwest Territories to serve an almost completely from-the-land local meal for the community!

In 2015, the K'alemi Dene School plans enhancing their food growing skills within the school and youth leader staff. Collaborating with Northern Roots they are planning to expand the school garden in order to grow more vegetables and to plant berries.

Enjoying local food at the K'alemi Dene School annual Thanksgiving Feast!



K'alemi Dene School Garden & Resiliency & Leadership Program (2013 & 2014)



In the summer of 2013, the youth participated in the gardening program as a natural extension of the *Indoor School Gardening Program*. The first year they had a plot in the community garden in Ndilo. The youth soon started digging out bushes and weeds for building their own garden by the K'alemi Dene School.

By the fall of 2013, the first phase of the K'alemi Dene School Garden was built. In the spring of 2014 more soil was added (*below*).



This kale plant survived the entire winter with very little light in a windowsill at the K'alemi Dene School.



K'alemi Dene School Garden & Resiliency & Leadership Program (2014)



From neglected bushes and weeds to abundant vegetable garden! The entire length of the K'alemi Dene School will be made into vegetable garden beds and berry patches one piece at a time.

2014 was an incredible start. Some teachers include gardening and cooking garden food in the curriculum.



Learning during the winter how to grow shoots like these are part of the Indoor School Gardening Program, which prepares students for growing food in the garden in the spring.



Students of all ages work in the garden before school is out for the summer. During the summer holidays, the youth program becomes the gardeners.



K'alemi Dene School Garden & Resiliency & Leadership Program (2014)



Harvesting, cooking and eating the vegetables we grew!

The next phase of the K'alemi Dene School has been built in the fall of 2014. In the spring of 2015 more soil will be added and the next area will be prepared. In 2015 we plan to add berries.



Take a Kid Harvesting Program (Youth Agricultural Program) (2014)

Northern Roots worked with the Yellowknives Dene First Nation Community Wellness staff in a partnership with the existing children's summer program in 2014. Once a week throughout July and August in 2014, the program leaders and children participated in gardening sessions that took place in the Ndilo Community Garden and in the new community garden in Dettah. Two field trips took the children to berry picking spots as well as on community garden learning tours and workshops in the Yellowknife Community Garden Collective gardens. Northern Roots coordinated and trained the summer students and program leaders on a variety of gardening activities. Approximately 20 children aged six to ten participated, and approximately six summer students and program leaders were involved with supervision.



Eating radishes from the first harvest in the kid's garden, a plot in the Ndilo community garden.

Harvesting berries during the *Take A Kid Harvesting* program.



Dettah Community Garden

Until 2014, the community of Dettah did not have a functional and usable community garden. Throughout 2012 and 2013, the Dettah community was offered gardening activities through an existing youth program and through neighbouring community Ndilo's garden programs.

During the spring of 2014, the Elders Senate was presented with several suggestions for a more suited location for a new community garden, and a decision was made from within Leadership to move forward to construction.

A new community garden was built in Dettah, with financial support from the North Slave Region of Industry, Tourism and Investment. The garden includes a gravel pad with geotextile underneath, five raised beds, a garden shed, and a water tank.

In 2014, one new gardener came forward and has taken a keen interest in participating in the gardening mentorship program in the new Dettah Community Garden in 2015. One adult gardener grew potatoes at home in sacks, and is keen to join in the Dettah community gardening mentorship program in 2015.

The Take a Kid Harvesting/Children's Agriculture Program in 2014 participated in digging, planting a few late seeds and watering in the new Dettah Community Garden. The gardeners donated some of the produce to the Kaw Tay Whee School.



Lone, presenting to the Elders Senate in Dettah, in the Fall of 2013, to determine a better location of the new community garden.



Dene Regional and National Chief, Bill Erasmus, giving a thumbs-up for locally produced food while enjoying an all-local picnic in 2013.



Dettah Community Garden (2013 & 2014)



Doug Ritchie (YKDFN Special Projects Coordinator) and Lone (Northern Roots) researching potential garden sites in Dettah in the summer of 2013.

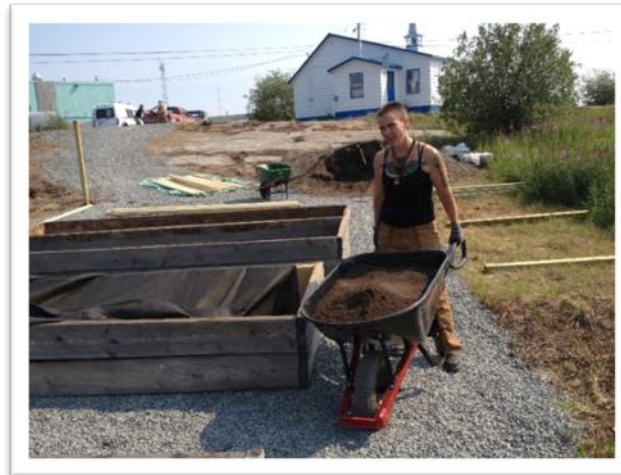
The original community garden was built in Dettah by the GNWT in 2011. This garden was not in a suitable location for growing a garden, and nothing could grow in the peat moss that was provided. Attempts to garden were discouraging and the garden was abandoned. The frames/boxes were moved and reused in the new location in 2014.



Once the Elders Senate made a decision about where to build the garden in Dettah, construction started in July 2014. Heavy textile fabric was laid under gravel to prevent weeds and tree roots growing through the bottom of the raised beds. Soil was purchased from a local contractor, who we knew provided soil with good composition and reasonable fertility. The soil was tested to ensure it was free from contaminants.



Dettah Community Garden (2014)



The summer student/agricultural GNWT employee helping to fill soil in the boxes.

The kids from the Take a Kid Harvesting/Children's Agriculture Program helped work the soil. We added some organic fertilizers to improve the fertility and planted a few radishes and lettuces. We also planted some peas for green fertilizer. It was too late in the season to plant anything else.



Two gardeners harvesting lettuce and radishes that were shared with the Kaw Tay Whee School in Dettah.



Garden Expansion in Ndilo: Community Greenhouse (2014)

A greenhouse, started in the fall of 2014, is being built in Ndilo. Completion is scheduled in the spring or early summer of 2015. The greenhouse will become part of an expansion of the Ndilo Community Garden.



Doug Ritchie (YKDFN Special Projects Coordinator), Chief Betsina, and the architect Stephen Fancott discussing and measuring the foundation for the greenhouse.



Challenges

Over the last 30 to 40 years, our relationship with food has changed. Most of the food in today's diet is bought from the store. Food from the store comes in cans and packages or is wrapped in plastic, and it costs a lot of money. It arrives on trucks or airplanes from places far away. It is not apparent how this food was grown. I call this "ghost" food. The consumption of fast food is on the rise and becoming "normal". For most people in many northern communities, pre-packaged, processed food makes up more than half of the total amount of food in an average household.

"Real" food is food that is hunted, fished, gathered on the land or grown in local gardens or on small farms in the immediate area. With real food there is a more respectful and positive relationship between the food and the consumer. For example, the use of traditional tobacco as a way to thank the land and the animals for its abundance is a more spiritual and heart-centered way of being in harmony with nature. Compost for the soil is also a way to keep the garden and the plants healthy, and is a system where there is an equal amount of give and take.

Traditional ways and the skills needed for feeding a community are being lost to a greater extent. As well, food from the land is threatened by pollution and climate change. The weather is changing. The water is changing. Their ways of life have been changing at a high speed. Looking at the latest Community Health Surveys, it shows that on average, less people in the Northwest Territories hunt, fish and gather than in the past. The good news is that more attention is paid now to local food security and food sovereignty issues. More and more, people are growing food in community gardens, school gardens, and at home, as well as supporting community and individual hunters and fishers.

Hunters, fishers, gatherers and food growers have a hard time making a living from their trade. In many cases, programming and funding are bound by policies that do not effectively support land-based and growing programs. It can be a challenge to plan for the long term and be consistent with the natural cycles of growing and harvesting. The fiscal year and the cycles of funding (i.e. April 1-March 31) do not match the timing of nature when it comes to planning and gardening. Program and financial support that aligns with the calendar year (January 1-December 31) would be more effective for growing and harvesting programs.



Successes

With respect to growing local food, 2014 was a year where the community of Ndilo really moved forward. A better relationship between the Yellowknives Dene First Nation and the Government of the Northwest Territories-Department of Industry, Trade & Investment (ITI) was built. Chief Ernest Betsina was instrumental in making this happen. Not only did he decide to try out gardening for himself with his children and grandchildren, he encouraged the Minister of ITI to keep his promises of support to the YKDFN gardening programs, and insisted that YKDFN can make their own decisions about how to grow local foods. Ndilo wanted to hire a professional contractor with North of 60 local food skills to be their mentor in this process.

The gardening programs complement each other, and sometimes participants in the school gardening, or the youth and children's programs get to be a part of the adult gardening or the Elders gardening programs as well. Some of these children and youth now have many skills and much knowledge about soil health, plants, plant care, harvesting, and preparing the food they have grown or picked. It is in working with the whole community from young to old, from school to community garden to at home, that the interest, the participation, and ultimately the skills in a larger number of YKDFN members are quickly growing. It can be estimated that ten to fifteen percent of Ndilo residents having gained local food growing skills.

Benefits of Successive Programs With a Skilled Mentor

Learning how to grow your own food in a northern climate is a big job. There are many things to remember. There are already many people with strong on-the-land skills in the North, so enhancing food skills makes the work much easier.

Learning the skills to become a good food grower takes time, sometimes several years. Becoming a good food grower can be compared to becoming a good mechanic, a good hunter or a carpenter – there is more to it than buying a few tools and reading about it on the Internet. How often have we had self-proclaimed “experts” from other places who come North to “save” us with their crazy ideas? Communities hiring and working with skilled garden mentors with a long history of growing gardens in the North, is a stronger approach to make the most out of the short growing season. Just as having the skilled Dene hunters teach the younger generation how to hunt is a good way for early successes. Having people in communities with the skills to grow a good garden could mean a better local economy and better health. It could also mean survival in the future.



In the Northwest Territories, there is a dependency on the South to have food transported. If a disaster were to happen, the communities would be vulnerable. If the road closes, if the airplanes cannot fly, we would be out of food in three days in the Yellowknife area! In just THREE DAYS we would begin to panic and hoard whatever is left on the shelves in the stores. In some of the more remote communities, there are more skilled hunters, fishers and gatherers and these communities would be a lot stronger. When there are many good hunters, fishers, gatherers and gardeners with skills, the community stronger and are taking positive steps towards becoming locally sustainable food sovereign communities. Learning together as the gardeners have in Ndilo, they may be able to feed themselves within a short number of years (5 to 10 years).

Components That Make the Programs Work

Learning the skills of how to grow food takes time. It is a commitment. Doing gardening programs that work closely together with other programs, schools and Elders in an entire community works great. Over a year or two, almost everyone in a small community will have a connection to the gardening activities.

Most people living in Ndilo have now participated in some way in gardening, either by visiting the gardens or by receiving a gift of fresh peas or carrots. Some of the Elders have participated in pickling beets workshops and taste testing of garden produce. Many times, while we work in the community garden in Ndilo, community members stop by to see how the plants are growing. New gardeners want the guidance to get started once they see what is possible.

For the gardeners it has been helpful to have a gardening program that is consistent. Working for three years with the same, skilled local gardening mentor has given gardeners a solid set of skills. The gardeners feel they have a mentor who they can trust in for continuous guidance. Learning together from the tough things (such as the very poor soil conditions in the beginning) and sticking with the process over time has resulted in some great relationships built upon mutual respect.

Much humour and many joyful moments of accomplishments have been shared in the garden. We make “deals” such as “I will teach you how to grow potatoes and you can teach me how to pluck a duck”. One of the gardeners comes to the garden wearing his tool belt to fix up some of the raised beds while chuckling and saying: “I am Caribou Dundee turned Farmer Fred!”



Program Benefits

- Teamwork, collaboration, networking, creativity, physical activity, healthy eating habits, newfound sense of wonder and respect for life, making a difference, becoming Keepers of the Earth.
- Enhancing essential life skills, confidence, healing emotional wounds from residential school, learning new ways, learning respect, sharing knowledge and participating in the circle of life in alignment with the principles of nature.
- Pride in self-reliance. Sharing abundance, practicing generosity, coming into balance with giving and receiving.
- Increased work ethics and new abilities.
- Renewed relationships to the Earth/land and all living things.
- Enjoying and sharing the fruits of hard labour.
- Making new friends, increasing a sense of sharing of healthy activities.
- Expanding diets to include more fresh vegetables (higher nutrition, better taste, more cooking skills).
- Restoring the land, restoring the community.
- Developing Dene style gardening, tying gardening with caribou (using caribou hair as soil amendment) and using vegetables in local menus.
- Learning practical skills to grow food commercially.



Conclusions

In 2014, the Yellowknives Dene First Nation in collaboration with Northern Roots made big strides forward in growing locally produced food. Starting with two programs in 2012 with 24 participants, to three programs in 2013 with 100 participants, to five programs in 2014 with 110 participants speaks to the level of interest from the communities. Despite no longer getting funded for the *Indoor School Gardening Program* and the *Spirit Garden Teachings* in 2014, the numbers still grew, especially in the youth programming.

After several years of attempting to build a professional and well-functioning relationship with the Government of Northwest Territories-Department of Industry, Tourism & Investment, we finally succeeded in gaining their respect and support in a way that makes sense. This will help the YKDFN to start producing skilled gardeners that will feed themselves, their families, and neighbours, and they will have the skills to start up commercial food growing projects in the near future. In 2014, other funders also supported programming, which allowed us to follow the flow of hosting the Fall Harvest Fair and to test out the Elder's Garden project. Both of these activities were not planned, but came about as the community became more serious about gardening and saw for themselves how many healthy things were coming out of the gardening programs.

It seems clear that when First Nation communities are involved, consulted, given the correct information, and are able to make their own decisions about how they would like to learn, it really works, and the enthusiasm spreads quickly. I understand that the Yellowknives Dene First Nation is ready to take on a greenhouse, and build a second one in Dettah. As well, they may be ready to start their own market garden and grow food commercially that can be sold at either the Yellowknife Farmers Market or in their own Dene market in the near future. The Yellowknives Dene First Nation has taken the lead in developing and managing their own gardening and local food sovereignty programs and projects. This could be used as a template or model for other communities across in the Northwest Territories and perhaps in the Yukon and other northern regions too.



Next Steps

Consistency is essential when it comes to being serious about feeding ourselves in the North. Without consistent funding, small businesses that are working on the ground in local food skills education cannot survive. If small businesses have to spend most of the time working without guarantee of earning a wage they simply cannot keep going. Skilled people with hands-on experience in growing vegetables on a small-scale in a northern climate, are far and few between. It is becoming a lost art. As well, not many people have the ability to teach, nor the cultural sensitivity, networking, and relationship-building skills that are needed.

Working together on a consistent basis, and working through the hard times together is the true key. Without consistent and professional gardening mentorship, many small communities will struggle more than necessary, to enhance their skills to feed themselves. The four actions needed for this are: **Hunt, Fish, Gather, and Grow**. There are many people in the communities that keep the hunt, fish and gathering skills strong. They need continued support. With respect to “grow”, it is possible to grow many of the vegetables needed for an entire year, such as potatoes, carrots, beets and a few other vegetables. Honouring those that have skills to feed themselves and their communities is essential.

The next step is to just DO IT. Though discussions, meetings and agreements are important, there is a risk of time passing by and precious growing time for the garden slips away. Nature does not wait.

Planning the garden activities in the middle of winter is essential, especially for small and isolated communities. Supplies and seeds need to be ready before the spring and summer arrives and for some communities that may mean bringing it in via ice roads. Currently most funding for food skills programs are controlled by the fiscal year (April 1 to March 31). This simply does not work with the timing of nature. Instead, funding that is in place from January 1 to December 31 would be much more beneficial. Proper planning can then be done for the growing season without losing growing time. Growing time is important for getting the best yields.

It is time to be SERIOUS about enhancing the food skills in all communities.

Hunt, Fish, Gather & Grow.



This document has been reviewed and blessed by Ndilo Chief Betsina and several other community members. All persons in the photos have given their consent to have their pictures published.

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