

Troy-Bilt, Troy Grown

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The legacy of the little rototiller that could has had a multigenerational impact on Troy's bustling urban agriculture

I don't get enough chances to sing the song of a certain piece of Troy's history: Garden Way and the Troy-Bilt Rototiller. I'm not a big gearhead, but this little machine left a legacy on my city, and the whole region, that I love.

Garden Way began manufacturing tillers in North Troy in the early 1960s, and the popularity of the Troy-Bilt increased with interest in food self-sufficiency into the late 1970s. A lot of social factors converged to make people want to garden or skip society entirely and go back to the land. Think of Rachel Carson's indictment of chemicals in the environment: *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. In 1971, Frances Moore Lappe's *Diet for a Small Planet* came out, feeding a broad band of Americans the concept of a vegetarian diet. The oil embargo of 1973 sent food prices through the roof, and drove people to dig up their lawns and tend plants that could feed them. Around this time too, a number of food-safety scares made people more curious about taking their meals into their own hands.

These elements combined to make rototillers a very hot commodity, and by the late '70s, Garden Way was making 90,000 tillers a year. In 1975, the company started Capital District Community Gardens as a community-service project, purchasing vacant land on the corner of 11th and Eagle streets in Troy, and establishing their first community garden. The Ball Canning Corporation also served the public's interest in feeding themselves, starting community canning centers around the country, one of them in Albany. The canning center was short-lived, but Capital District Community Gardens is going strong.

Forty-nine community gardens span the area, with locations in Rensselaer, Albany, Schenectady and Saratoga counties. People apply for plots and have access to land, water, seeds and lessons in growing food. Some of these lessons are shoulder to shoulder, as older gardeners offer advice to novices. Others are scheduled and led by garden educators. The organization tallies 4,000 families using these garden plots. I sit in a little moat of them, downhill from the first garden and above the large garden on 8th Street.

I love how you can see the gardens from the Collar City Bridge as you sail into the city, and the adjacent high tunnels of the Produce Project, the youth powered farm. (I teach a class at Russell Sage College and my students work with the Produce Project, so I am a little partial in my feelings for this farm, which is a way, way better neighbor than the new McDonalds.) The first high tunnel stands like a metal skeleton, its plastic skin whipped off by high winds, next to the one that is still wrapped and growing early vegetables. Season extension is the job of these structures, and the controlled climates they offer allow the Troy High students to work the farm nearly year-round. They sell their produce to chefs, the Veggie Mobile, and at the Delmar Farmers Market. Come June, I can visit the sidewalk stand Tuesday afternoons and get flowers and peas.

Community Gardens started a farmers market downtown when the hole that is the Uncle Sam Mall sat empty for most of the 1970s. An entire block was hollow except for the Frear Building, which was too fierce for the wrecking ball. Framed only by chain-link fencing, the hole was improved by a small farmers market that drew produce into the city. This midday, midweek market ran itself after a while, lasting into the early 2000s, when the success of the Troy Waterfront Farmers Market eclipsed it.

Street trees throughout the area are the product of Capital District Community Gardens, too. I'm a fan of them, especially the lindens in June, perfuming downtown—try to hit a night when they are nectaring the city and you'll feel like Ulysses strapped to the mast—but I'm a bigger fan of the Veggie Mobile. This produce aisle on wheels, and its mini-cousin, the Sprout, bring fresh food to places where people don't have good access.

People love the green cube truck, muraled with vegetables, and their weekly visits. The volunteers and staff who work the Veggie Mobile offer more than vegetables for sale, and information about how to use them. Healthy Places Program Coordinator EJ Krans spells that out quite nicely:

"The difference between throwing knowledge and info at people and throwing friends out there, people with a smile and a handshake, and a friendly manner around healthy eating," he says, is tremendous, and the secret to the Veggie Mobile's success. I think it's similar to the love affairs we have at farmers markets, where food with a face tastes great, not just because it is great, but because it comes to you through very personal connections.

So revel with me, won't you, in this bounty we have in the legacy of the Troy-Bilt. We're in the thick of a whole other social movement toward good food—people are canning like crazy again and hatching chicks for their backyards, starting seedlings under grow lights and joining CSAs to supplement the stuff they can't grow themselves. While this round of food self-sufficiency differs from the last, particularly in the sense that people are staying in cities to go back to the land this time, a piece of Troy stitches that round to this. The little tiller that could is still coulding for loads of people around here, as the Capital District Community Gardens tackles issues of food access in a variety of beautiful, delicious, and friendly ways.