



Growing Prospects

Introduction

In a grey industrial area of Winnipeg, there is an island of green. Herbs, flowers and vegetables flourish in a hydroponic greenhouse, tended by the young employees of Growing Prospects. At first glance, this picture may not seem remarkable. A second look shows otherwise.

Established in 1998, Growing Prospects Inc. is a nonprofit corporation that is providing training and employment to individuals on income assistance, helping them develop the skills necessary to find full-time employment in the horticultural and greenhouse industries. Growing Prospects uses hydroponic equipment confiscated by the Winnipeg Police Services in drug raids – equipment that normally would be destroyed and sent to landfill – to produce pesticide-free herbs and vegetables for market. The proceeds are used in youth and community development projects.

It started with the ‘Green Team’

The seed that blossomed into Growing Prospects began at Dufferin elementary school in central Winnipeg. In 1991, teacher Dave Taylor started a horticulture project with his stu-

dents, building a garden in an outdoor courtyard to grow lettuce for a classroom cooking and nutrition program. Soon, Dave and his ‘Green Team’ of Grade 5 and 6 students were looking for a way to extend the growing season through Winnipeg’s difficult winters.

After reading about a drug bust, “we figured we could extend our growing season and produce food for the lunch program if we could get some of this valuable hydroponic equipment,” says Dave. Obtaining the equipment was easier said than done. “The process was long and political,” Dave notes. “First we were refused, but after asking some more leading questions and discovering that all this valuable gear was being smashed and disposed of in the landfill, we kept pursuing the issue.” Referred from the police and the RCMP to the federal Seized Property Directorate, the Dufferin team found itself going around in circles for a while. Finally, with assistance from a local federal politician, the school was granted permission to receive some hydroponic equipment from Seized Property.

With the assistance of a grant from the Winnipeg School Division, Dave and his ‘Green Team’ members converted one room of Dufferin’s vacant dental labs into a garden with three hydroponic systems. (The dental lab was

suitable because it was equipped with vents, water and drains.) With the new set-up, cucumbers, green peppers and tomatoes could be produced in addition to the lettuce that had been grown in the outdoor garden. Dave notes that Winnipeg police had concerns at first: “They were worried we were just teaching kids to grow pot. After a couple of years, during which we demonstrated that in our climate we could teach basic hands-on science and nutrition to inner-city kids, the police got on board.” Over time, the schoolyard garden expanded to include a community garden. Today, the ‘Green Team’ continues to deliver lettuce, peppers, cucumbers and tomatoes to the Dufferin lunch program each day.

A broader need

The gang-related shooting death of a Dufferin student in the mid-1990s led Dave Taylor to think about ways to counter the problem of increasing gang activity among students. He came up with the idea of a larger nonprofit horticultural operation – one that would generate funds for anti-gang activities, and enable students to learn marketable skills that would help them avoid the trap of poverty and hopelessness. Growing Prospects Inc. was established in January 1998 with a volunteer board which included Dave, a member of the Winnipeg Police Service, a representative of CHOICES (an anti-gang program for youth) and an individual who worked at the Forks Market historic region of Winnipeg. Over time, the board has grown to include members of Winnipeg’s Aboriginal community.

Using the business plan format and guidelines of Manitoba Agriculture’s ‘Kitchen to Market’ information pack, the fledgling business developed its plans. The Winnipeg Police Service contributed confiscated hydroponic



Rebecca Boyar, the general manager of Growing Prospects, and Dave Taylor in the greenhouse.

equipment. The Forks Market leased space in a leaking former exercise facility at the CN Railway Station. CentreVenture, a business development organization created by the City of Winnipeg to encourage economic growth in the downtown core, funded the necessary renovations of the facility. After four months of renovations, an efficient, closed recirculating system with state-of-the-art confiscated lights, pumps, flood trays, water reservoirs and drip systems was ready to go.

Every effort has been made to make the facility efficient and environmentally sustainable. A heat recovery ventilation system recovers heat and moisture: Cool air is brought in over the grow lights, increasing the temperature of the air by up to 20° C before it enters the furnace. Afterward, condensate is collected from the air as it cools, and used to water the plants. The operation is free of pesticides and herbicides, and uses ‘environmentally friendly’ integrated pest management techniques to control common greenhouse pests.

Basil was the first cash crop of Growing Prospects. Now, in addition to Thai basil and spicy globe basil, cinnamon, edible flowers and arugula are grown. In total, the facility pro-

duces about \$4,000 worth of herbs and vegetables per month, which it sells at competitive prices to local restaurants, caterers and food brokers. “We have responded to the demands of customers and have quite a niche business,” says Dave. Profits are channelled to the CHOICES program and to Youth Opportunity projects of the Community Education Development Association of Winnipeg, which create employment opportunities for inner-city youth.

The plants are tended primarily by participants in Growing Prospects’ horticultural and greenhouse training program for recipients of income assistance. Each year, up to 20 young people between the ages of 19 and 29 who are receiving income or employment assistance participate in this program, which is supported by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and Manitoba Education and Training. Youths who are particularly interested in horticulture are referred to Growing Prospects by social workers and by the staff of literacy and work preparation programs. In addition to academic upgrading, professional skill development and horticultural courses, the 16-week program includes plenty of hands-on work experience in the Growing Prospects facility.

Growing Prospects expands the young peoples’ work experience beyond the hydroponic operation. Program participants assist with maintaining plants for the Forks, looking after beds of annual and perennial plants and planters on restaurant patios and helping to tend the Forks’ Prairie Garden. All the hard work pays off: At least two-thirds of the participants find employment in the greenhouse/horticultural business or relevant retail operations at the end of their training.

A feasibility study funded by HRDC concluded that Growing Prospects could become self-sustaining in three years based upon the



Some of the luxuriant basil plants raised by Growing Prospects.

realistic expectation of expanding from the current facility size of 280 square metres to 420 square metres. The company is already expanding its systems and making better use of space; recently, ‘sun circles’ were installed to move the lights around so that they cover a greater area.

Continuing the growth

In the longer term, Growing Prospects hopes to develop a larger, stand-alone greenhouse facility at the Forks. It is hoped that this greenhouse will provide a facility for growing and presenting information about herbs and roots traditionally used by Aboriginal peoples. Administration and classroom facilities, a retail space and an ‘incubation space’ for start-up entrepreneurs are also envisaged.

Other communities have expressed interest in the Growing Prospects approach. For example, Growing Prospects is currently working with the Fox Lake First Nation in Gillam, Manitoba, which hopes to build a wellness centre that will include a hydroponic growing operation and training program. Manitoba Hydro has indicated interest in the possibility of supplying waste heat, water and power from generating stations. A number of other northern bands also

have shown interest in the prospects for growing fresh vegetables to improve community nutrition.

Better nutrition, employment opportunities for youth and a positive use for confiscated equipment – the Growing Prospects approach is a “no brainer,” according to Dave Taylor. The multifaceted partnership is an intriguing example of what can be accomplished with creativity, cooperation and champions who are not prepared to take ‘no’ for an answer.

Ann Simpson

Ann Simpson works on the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute.

For more information about Growing Prospects Inc., call (204) 957-7755, e-mail growing@mts.net, or visit the website at www.growingprospects.org

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