

Urban food knowledge: does yoghurt grow on trees in cities?

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Where does it all come from? Wendy Copley

2012 is the Australian Year of the Farmer. This initiative aims to increase knowledge and understanding of the role Australian agribusiness plays in food security, technological innovation and the nation's economy. According to its manifesto it will also "remind city folk of the importance of our farmers, fostering greater connection and understanding, encouraging all of us to look for, to purchase and to appreciate Australian produce".

Attempts to achieve this seem to be warranted given that the source of basic foods remains a mystery to some young Australians. Recent research found 27% of year 6 students think yoghurt is a plant product. One-third believe cheese can only be made from cows' milk. The authors of the study, produced by the Australian Council for Education Research, claim that this knowledge gap is partly fuelled by a widening divide between our nation's urban and rural communities.

The disconnection from our food has only strengthened as people around the globe have moved from the countryside to the city. Since 2008, more of us have lived in cities than in rural areas. These shifts in population mean that fewer people around the globe are actually involved in food production.

Urban sprawl has been gobbling up fertile land around the world, including in the Sydney food bowl. Easily accessible cheap food in cities, primarily provided through supermarkets (interestingly, Woolworths is one of the foundation partners supporting the Australian Year of the Farmer), has freed people from the constraints of their own food production.

In other countries, city dwellers are closer to the source of their food. AAP/EPA/Mak Remissa

Of course, there are benefits to not spending all day in the field; but we may have gone too far the other way. Carolyn Steele argues in *Hungry City* that our disconnection from food production has made city dwellers overly reliant on food trucked or shipped increasingly vast distances. Julian Cribb points to the unsustainability of these practices. He asks whether cities will be able to feed themselves if transportation, or the oil supply it relies on, is disrupted due to natural disaster or political instability.

To avoid the “coming famine”, Cribb calls for more efficient urban agriculture initiatives. So, in the Year of the Farmer, perhaps we should be focusing on the innovative ways in which farming can be incorporated into city life.

Children could be an important part of building that knowledge. If we want our children to know where their food comes from; if we want them to be motivated to care about the lives and livelihoods of farmers; if we want them to take seriously the environmental impacts of their food choices; and if we want them to know more about how their health is affected by the way food is made, perhaps we need to rethink the place of food production and provisioning in cities.

Urban food production where city dwellers are daily involved in, or directly confronted with, the food system may be the key to a more secure food future. Rather than seeing food as a product of our “rural cousins”, by getting involved in food production and processing, city dwellers could more effectively engage with the food system as a means of protecting our future food security.

We could improve the knowledge of our cities’ young people through direct involvement in food growing and cooking. This may include keeping goats in school farms, setting up more city farms (where animals are kept) and getting communities more actively engaged with these.

Growing veggies is a good start, but kids should know even more about where food comes from. travelskerricks/Flickr

This is not as simple as growing vegetables. Half of the year 6 students surveyed had been involved in a school vegetable garden. When asked directly about fruit and vegetable products, their knowledge was quite reasonable.

However, the report only refers to two questions on this issue: 95% knew potato chips were from plant products; 55% recognised that banana, cheese and bread in their lunch boxes were from farms (but 24% did not identify the bread as a farm product).

School kitchen garden programs come in many shapes and sizes, and it is unclear from the ACER research which specific school kitchen garden programs the children were involved in. For example, the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation program has been found to increase children's knowledge of the relationship between food and its production. We don't want to criticise the hard work of those involved in such programs, but it's possible not all kitchen garden programs have such a rigorous plan.

Perhaps children's food production education would be more effective if it was better supported by the surrounding community, or if it also got kids involved in producing animal foods, such as cheese, yoghurt and even meat. Vegetable gardens make an important contribution, but until kids are involved in processing foods, they're not likely to know where processed foods come from.

But many city dwellers lack the knowledge and capacity to engage in farming and processing enterprise. This knowledge has been lost since we all became so reliant on the industrial agriculture system; we should talk to the experts - the farmers - so we can get it back. We don't just need more urban agricultural initiatives, including food-producing back, front and median-strip gardens, school kitchen gardens, community gardens and city farms. We also need a transfer of knowledge from rural farmers. We need Australia's farmers to be intimately involved in the development of innovative and efficient urban agricultural practices to assure our future food security.