



Rediscovering urban food trees



- ✓ Our cities host a great number of fruit and nuts trees, with potentially interesting implications for food security
- ✓ Urban food trees are very rarely integrated into policies, their benefits and limits are sparsely documented
- ✓ Taking care of urban food trees requires skills, time and community support

Our cities host a great number of fruit and nuts trees, with potentially interesting implications for food security. Somehow, however, they fell off the radar of both local authorities and urban food advocates. A recent paper from researchers at the University of Toronto (Canada) confirms that urban food trees are not a priority in Canadian cities, and that not much is known about them.

A good reason to keep investigating and to learn from the few cities that have rediscovered urban food trees.

Food trees do not really fit in urban forest management

What can local authorities do about food trees? The first idea researchers had was to look at local policy documents that deal with urban trees. In Canada, these are called *Urban Forest Management Plans*. They were developed in the 2000's, in the wake of renewed interest for urban trees and associated ecological services. They can cover trees on both public and private property.

The researchers reviewed 47 Canadian urban forest management plans to see whether food trees were discussed in these. Only 14 explicitly dealt with food trees, and even in these, except from a few exceptions, food was not a high concern. When integrated, the main actions are: planting in public space, streetscapes, schoolyards and encouraging tree planting on private property.

How can we account for that? According to Janina Kowalski, who is currently carrying out her PhD work on the topic, **urban forest management plans are primarily concerned with maximising tree's contribution to local ecosystem services, such as climate mitigation and carbon sequestration**. This translates into increasing canopy cover, tree size and diversity. The focus is therefore not so much on goods, but rather on the services trees can provide.

Such plans are also extremely careful about balancing risks and benefits. **Food trees on public land can be a liability for local authorities** if fruit, for instance, fall and create damage to someone's property.

The potential contribution of food trees to urban food security is still to be investigated

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The researchers also reviewed existing literature on the benefits of food trees. They found that scientific evidence about the benefits (and limits) of urban food trees is patchy. **Potential benefits include food, of course, but also climate change mitigation, cultural services, community cohesion...** But research still needs to document the extent to which these potential benefits actually happen. It also needs to more carefully balance these benefits with potential health hazards coming, from instance, from urban contaminants.

Even less is known about trees that are located on private land. Are tree owners really following public guidelines regarding how to take care of their trees?

In a nutshell, much research needs to be done to clear the way for fruit and nut trees in urban food policies.

Introducing the specifics of trees in urban agriculture policies

Notwithstanding, some Canadian cities have started to integrate urban food trees in their food plans. In Seattle, for instance, fruit gleaning organisations were instrumental in making the city introduce considerations about food in its [Urban Forest Stewardship Plan](#). In Vancouver, food trees feature in the [Food Strategy](#) - but not in its urban forest management plan -, with support given to community fruit tree orchards and edible landscaping. One of its goals is to *"increase the planting of food-bearing trees when planting new trees in parks and on other civic lands, and encourage community stewardship of those trees"*. In Victoria as well, preference is given to planting food trees (especially nut trees) over non-edible species in streets.

What these experiences show is that it is necessary to combine three elements:

- **Skills:** tree care requires specific skills that local technicians do not always have. Pruning, for instance, is very important yet very technical. Any action towards providing fruit trees needs to ensure that people, whether they are citizens, local NGOs or public technicians, will be there to take care of the tree.
- **Community support:** it is one thing to grow fruits and nuts, and another to have people ready to come and pick the fruit. Trees can become messy if food is not properly taken care of by citizens or gleaning organisations. Examples of such organisations include [Not far from the tree](#), in Toronto or [Life Cycles](#) in Victoria, that pick the fruit in private gardens and share it between the homeowners, the volunteers and the local food banks.
- **Time:** trees are not like any urban agriculture activity, they need time to grow before they can yield fruits.

Consequently, food trees do require specific management and human labour, and cannot be dealt with like any other kind of foraging ([see our article on urban food foraging](#)). It is important that local authorities keep this in mind when they rediscover the benefits of food trees.



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Urban Food Futures would like to thank [Janina Kowalski](#) for her inputs and comments.

Source : [Kowalski, J., et al \(2018\). Branching out: The inclusion of urban food trees in Canadian urban forest management plans, Urban Forestry & Urban Greening](#)

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