

“His Fig Tree Came in the Mail”:

Growing an Italian Garden in Toronto

By: Cristina Pietropaolo

Seeds are something we carry with us. They are agriculture; they are part of our human heritage... Seeds are intimately bound to our existence, [and] so long as people have been migrating, seeds have been migrating with them. Food is very intimately tied to our own identity and who we are. So when we move to a new place, we want to find the things we are familiar with. (Stimac 2012)

Last summer, my mother telephoned to ask me if I would like any of the vegetables she and my father grew in their Toronto backyard garden. Would I like some fava beans? Tomatoes? What about eggplants and peppers? A few hours later, returning to Ottawa from a weekend visit to our parents, my sister arrived, bearing plastic shopping bags full of garden vegetables from our parents' backyard. I used them in my cooking for the next week, often preparing dishes my grandmothers had made for me as a child. As I cooked, I thought about the legacy of not only recipes, but of the backyard vegetables themselves, and what a vital part of my family's life they are. In the summer of 2012, I decided to interview members of my family to find out more about their relationships with their backyard gardens. I spoke to a great aunt and uncle, and to my mother about her parents' gardening, because I wanted to know mainly about that generation of Italians and what gardening meant to them.

My grandparents, great uncles, and great aunts were among the thousands of predominantly southern Italians who immigrated to Toronto during the 1950s and 1960s. After the Second World War, Italy, like much of Europe, was devastated. Many began looking further and further afield for work, including many southern Italians. By and large, the majority of those Italian immigrants were *contadini*, a word that loosely translates as peasant, although it is more accurate to say “subsistence farmer,” in that they made their living off the land. My own family - grandparents, great uncles and great aunts—were *contadini*. My mother and her parents came from a region of Italy called Molise, where their hometown sat on a plateau at the base of a mountain. They lived in a hamlet surrounded by countryside, where the soil was moist and rich because of the rivers that flowed above and underground. My paternal great uncle and great aunt came from Calabria, further south. They had a small house in the village, still there today, and walked to the land they worked every day, a distance measured by the time it took, according to my great uncle Raffaele, to smoke one cigarette. The soil in this region was drier than further north, but mineral rich. Like many rural people, the *contadini* had a deep relationship with the land and their livelihood was agriculturally based. When they immigrated, they brought with them their rural traditions, perhaps most notably, their love of gardening. Although this activity has received little scholarly attention, for many *contadini* gardening was an integral part of their lives in Italy that survived their cross-Atlantic move to Canada. Furthermore, this early generation of Italians has begun to decline over the last ten years, and it has become important to me to try to collect the history of their Canadian gardens.

For the contadini, gardening offered several things. Literally planting seeds in the earth, l'orto, or the vegetable garden, provided a link to both the new home in which they were invested, and to the old home which was never to be forgotten. In a new urban setting, this tangible connection to the land and to home was a necessity, both economically and emotionally. Furthermore, the connection between the garden and the table is implicit, and Toronto contadini only had to go as far as their own backyards to gather fresh herbs, vegetables, fruit or even a fig. They created small paradises in their backyards, taking pride in the new country in which they worked and to which they were becoming adapted. All the while they maintained a connection to the land in their private garden retreats. Today, these backyard gardens are a part of the fabric of the multicultural city of Toronto.

Seeds – Underground, Aboveground

If everything is supposed to begin with a kernel, then I would like to humbly begin this research note by addressing seeds and the inheritance they came to represent for the contadini. Seeds were the beginnings of the connection between Italian immigrants in Canada with their homeland in Italy. Many backyard vegetable gardens were established relatively quickly -within a year or two of arriving in Canada- because all that was required was a little bit of space, and of course, seeds.

My mother Giuliana, emigrated from Molise as a child in 1956. She recalls that in Canada at that time the seeds available in stores were unknown entities of unfamiliar varieties, just as strange as the alien produce found in Canadian grocery stores. In Italy, seeds were usually shared and traded among family and neighbours, and to purchase seeds was an expensive undertaking. Continuing in this tradition, the contadini wrote home to Italy. Seeds for peppers, tomatoes, basil, parsley and beans arrived surreptitiously through the mail, carefully folded into letters. It helped that the growing season in Italy is ahead of Canada's. This made it easier and timelier to access seeds from Italy, despite the transatlantic distance. Giuliana remembers the highly anticipated arrival of these letters: "I do remember that the way they would fold the letters was really interesting. I suspect because it created a nice little pocket for things [like seeds]. And boy, you would treat those seeds as precious" (2012). Seeds were treasured because there was not an endless resource in Canada as there was in Italy (Colalillo 2012). The transplanted contadini had to create their own supply. From year to year after every harvest, seeds were carefully preserved, dried on window ledges and countertops, and stored in pill bottles, film canisters and folds of paper, to be used the following spring.

These seeds are now cherished with a new emphasis. Today many of the seed varieties are regarded as "heirloom seeds," which is to say that they are not commercially produced. But the significance of the word "heirloom" in this context is important. I also spoke with Roberta Stimac, Director of the Withrow Park Farmer's Market, herself a gardener, and originally from Croatia. She provided the following definition of an heirloom seed:

There are...a couple of different definitions. One...says that it's any seed variety older than fifty years. But...in its more intimate meaning...heirloom seeds are...seeds that are being handed down from generation to generation...from a grandparent to a child to a grandchild and so on and so forth, just like a quilt or your family's china or a

grandfather clock... (Stimac 2012). For the contadini in Canada, the seeds were a new type of inheritance: an emotional and cultural inheritance rather than a measurable inheritance of land or property.

The contadini sought to re-create other elements of their native land as well. Fig trees, grape vines and even oleander cuttings were typically planted several years after immigrating, when households and gardens were more established and settled. Sometimes, these cuttings were transported back to Canada through luggage: by this time, many immigrants were able to afford a trip home to visit the old country, and subterfuge was applied in order to smuggle in cuttings, though some were successfully sent through the post as well. Raffaele, who emigrated from Calabria to Canada, talked about his bush apple. "The bush apple, I brought from Italy on December 26 1974. I packed it in my shoes, inside the suitcase. I had maybe four or five cuttings, less than ten inches [each]" (2012). More difficult to conceal in the mail, it often took these larger and more elaborate elements of the garden several attempts to properly take root and flourish. Despite best efforts, some vegetables proved to be too difficult to grow in Canadian soil or climate. Tortanelle, a type of fuzzy and spiral shaped cucumber, is a fickle plant that usually requires more sun and water than a Toronto summer can provide; chickpeas never took at all.

The crowning jewel of many Toronto Italian gardens is the fig tree. Today it is more commonly found in the city than one might think despite the fact that a fig tree is not for the casual gardener. It is labour intensive and must be cared for judiciously. To survive Toronto winters it must be buried to lie dormant under burlap and garden debris before being resurrected in the spring. Diodato opted to construct a greenhouse around his fig tree; he also funneled in extra heat by putting making a connective hole between the basement and the greenhouse. Above all else, the fig tree signifies commitment and success in the garden, perhaps an appropriate analogy for the success of the contadini in Canada.

Recycling – Hockey Sticks for Tomato Stakes

My great uncle Raffaele and his wife, my great aunt Palma, emigrated from Calabria in 1966. They now live in Toronto's northwest corner on Stafford Road, where they have a medium sized backyard, the site of their third vegetable garden since arriving in Canada. They observed that gardening in Toronto differed from gardening in Italy in two major ways: Firstly, water has to be paid for in Canada, whereas in Italy, water for gardening could be freely accessed via wells, streams and brooks in the fields. In a corner opposite the vegetables, Raffaele installed three large rain barrels to cut down on the water bill, years before rain barrels could be purchased at garden centers. Two sit side by side, connected by a thin tube so that water flows to the second after the first gets too full. The third rain barrel sits by a covered woodshed, collecting rainwater from another small gutter installed along the side. His water-collecting system is perhaps more elaborate than most, but reflective of the economy contadini continue to practice, despite their successes in Canada.

The second, and more dramatic change they experienced was the reduced space in which to work. No longer surrounded by fields, contadini like Raffaele and Palma found themselves in downtown homes

faced with the new concept of a “backyard.” In order to intensely cultivate their yards with minimal expense, they began to recycle items-everything from salvaged construction materials to broken hockey sticks meant for the trash-and adapted them by finding uses for them as gardening tools and equipment. The key element was to make the most of their limited space. Raffaele and Palma’s backyard is a far cry from the land they worked in Italy, which covered hectares, but it is also much larger than their first backyard garden in a downtown Toronto home, which spanned only 6 feet by 8 feet.



Photo 1: Palma and Raffaele.

When I talked with them, they emphasized that gardens had to be planted “sensibly,” in order to maximize the available space. For instance, they do not plant potatoes, since the crop takes up too much of the space. Palma took me on a tour of their garden in which they grow a veritable cornucopia, despite the restrictions of space. The garden boasts four different varieties of tomatoes (including the all-important San Marzano, the best type for sauce-making). Each tomato plant is staked to economize on space, and Raffaele made the tomato stakes himself. Zucchini, grown for their flowers and fruit, form an arch over the doorway of a homemade shed in a corner and then grow along a skeletal arbour fashioned from metal grates meant for laying concrete floors. Raffaele was one of the many contadini who worked in construction, so when material was being discarded, he brought it home, to be repurposed for the garden. Romaine lettuce grows like a sea around two modest but thriving fig trees, taking up every inch of available space. Bean seedlings grow in re-used Styrofoam containers, ready to be planted as soon as the peas along the fence have been harvested. The bright purple flowers of eggplants shyly peek through large green leaves in re-used white plastic buckets, which once held sand

and gravel for mixing concrete. Hot peppers, still young, grow steadily, though they won't be ready until they are a bright red colour. Herbs including basil, parsley, sage and rosemary grow quietly by the foundations of the house in small patches where the warmth of the concrete and brick will ensure that they survive beyond the first autumn frost. Spreading crops, like potatoes, are generally not suited to these backyard gardens because they require too much space. Instead, every effort is made to encourage the garden to grow "up," to save space. In corners of the backyard are potted flowers, brightening the garden in pinks and purples.



Photo 2: Tomatoes.



Photo 3: Stakes.



Photo 4: Shed.



Photo 5: Young fig, close up.



Photo 6: Beans.

My grandfather Diodato immigrated to Canada in 1953 at the age of 31. His wife Concetta, and their two daughters joined him three years later. Diodato has more grapevines in his backyard than the average contadino, but it took several years to reach that point. When the Toronto Transit Commission expropriated their house in 1958, Diodato relocated his family to a bungalow in Toronto's northwest end on Romar Crescent. Although the house was significantly smaller than the space to which they had been accustomed, the selling point for him was the house's huge backyard. He transformed more than half of it into a vegetable garden which included a shed built from salvaged sheet metal. Diodato used his creativity and engineering know-how to construct other ingenuities for his garden. Old rubber tires were turned into decorative planters for herbs and annuals, or were moulded into wedding cake-like tiers to hold strawberry plants. His daughter, Giuliana recalls:

He made these circle trellises [with recycled materials] for pole beans to conserve space. Two metal hoops with a long pole in the middle connecting the two. You put the beans in the ground, and then tie string from the top hoop to the bottom hoop for the beans to climb on. I don't know where he got the idea, but...they eventually sold that kind of contraption in magazines, and I showed it to him once, and he said, 'Huh, they copied my idea' (Colalillo 2012).

Diodato's grapevines grow along the low fences between his property and that of his neighbours. When the old lead water pipes in the house were replaced with copper, Diodato re-used the old pipes (and others collected from curbside garbage) to construct a trellis for some of his grapes. Even today, over fifty years later, these grapevines grow along the back wall of the house over large patio stones creating a shady arbour in the summertime. They still produce grapes that ripen in late summer, ready for making wine in the autumn. Rebar, old glass windows, roof shingles, discarded wood, anything that might be useful: these are the things that contadini claimed in order to build their gardens.

The Backyard - An Extension of the Home

Typically, the contadini were accustomed to walking to their land every day in order to work it. Because of the way land inheritance developed in Italy, plots of land were often scattered around the village for miles in different spots, rather than being in one central area. Although the contadini lived close to the land, the garden was separate from the home. In Toronto however, gardens are just out the back door, easily accessible, and easy to survey from windows facing the backyard. The garden is an extension of the home: for several months of the year it represents one more room in the house.

In the house on Romar Crescent, Concetta's kitchen has a large picture window installed by Diodato after they moved into the bungalow. Grapevines grow just below the window, and over the tops of the leaves, the garden can be easily seen. In the summer, when the house is too warm for socializing, informal entertaining is taken outside, to the back of the house, underneath the grapevines, where coffee and conversation are enjoyed. Over the years the grassy part of the garden acted as a park for grandchildren who splashed in inflatable pools, or played badminton over the laundry line that was permanently installed in the yard. The garden was also where Concetta and Diodato enlisted the help of their grandchildren in planting and picking the vegetables. If one arrived for a visit, and no one appeared to be indoors, then it was a safe bet that they were in the garden. During the summer and fall months, the garden was also like having another refrigerator or cellar; one only had to go as far as the backyard for herbs and vegetables necessary to prepare lunch and dinner.

When I arrived at Palma and Raffaele's home in July 2012 for our interview, Palma immediately offered delicious freshly fried zucchini flowers, picked from her own backyard garden that morning. Palma and Raffaele have two kitchens in their home but the upstairs kitchen remains largely unused and is showroom pristine. They spend most of their time in their finished basement, which includes a second kitchen, living room, the laundry room and the cantina, or cellar. Palma noted that she prefers her basement kitchen because everything is within an arm's reach, and that "from the window, I keep an eye on the garden" (2012). In this sense, for Palma, the garden becomes an object of visual pleasure, always in her line of sight, like a photograph on a wall. It is important to note that Palma and Raffaele's house also has a small covered patio, built adjacent to the living room upstairs. In the summer, it is occupied by plastic patio furniture, but in the winter, this patio is converted into a greenhouse as flowers, plants and lemon and olive trees are hauled inside for the season. By early spring, seedlings are grown in an assortment of containers, in the safe, warm environment of the temporary greenhouse.

It seems that for some contadini, the meanings of the garden has changed over time. These meanings are complex to unpack because for the contadini I spoke with and know, the garden has always been as much a thing of pleasure as it is work. During the early years of immigration, the garden had an economic function, and although the scale of the garden may have been much smaller than what they knew in Italy, preserves were still made and stored. Less produce was purchased at the store because of what the garden provided. However, as the Italian community grew more settled in Toronto, and Little Italy emerged along College Street, the economic need for a garden decreased. The garden's role shifted towards a form of entertainment. Raffaele explained, "The garden is recreational. Some prefer to go to the social club and play billiards. I like to spend time in the garden. For us, it's the tradition, but more than that." Palma continued, "It is what we grew up with, it is what we know how to do" (2012). For Raffaele and Palma, as for many contadini, it is unimaginable not to have a garden. Not to have one would mean to disconnect from the land. For them, the desire to maintain a link to the land is essential.

A Tavola – At the Table & Beyond

The vegetable garden is the soul of the home, but the kitchen is the heart. The Sunday lunch table is the culmination of all of the work and effort put into the garden, especially in the summertime. For many Italians, Sunday lunch is the most important meal of the week, and extra time is taken in preparing it, in the knowledge that this meal is one in which the whole family gathers. The food is displayed, eaten, digested, and that little bit of heritage, culture and connection is shared and consumed—often with a glass or two of homemade wine.

Certainly, a number of ingredients on the typical Italian-Canadian table are store-bought; ingredients like cheese, bread and pasta are time consuming, and made from scratch only for special occasions, if at all. However, the vegetables are more often than not from the backyard garden: peppers, lettuce, eggplants, tomatoes, beans, onions, garlic and leafy greens all freshly picked just hours before, or retrieved from cool cantinas in the basement. There is pride taken by both the gardeners and the cooks in the amount of food that was prepared for the table, and there is pride too, in the fact that much of the produce came from the backyard garden. And even more than the pride, is what the produce symbolizes: a link with the past to pass onto Canadian grandchildren. An Italian garden is presented on a Canadian lunch table. For Italians like my grandparents and my great aunts and uncles, it is a cultural expression, a symbol of success and survival in Canada.

In Vancouver, my cousin has transformed his tiny urban backyard into a vegetable garden, mimicking those early Italian gardens in Toronto. Every year in downtown Ottawa, my sister faithfully grows tomato plants in large pots on her balcony, accompanied by flowers and herbs. My mother and father make a point of setting aside time to do the garden in their backyard each year, with a new dedication in an effort to uphold the tradition and heritage of their parents. In the late summer and fall, we gather to help make the tomatoes and wine. These are the efforts of different generations; perhaps less time and space is devoted to the garden, but to these efforts of labours of love.

In Italy, there were stories about the Cuccagna, or the Land of Plenty. The Cuccagna is a paradise where no one ever goes wanting, and rich foods like cheese and meat are plentiful, and rivers of wine flow through the land (Del Giudice 2001). A correlation between the Cuccagna and Canada is easily made after considering what the new country represented to those Italian immigrants. Canada was not a “gastronomic utopia” (Del Giudice 2001), to borrow a phrase, but it represented a land of economic opportunity, where the streets were allegedly paved with gold. And it was through the evolution of the backyard garden that the contadini managed to turn their adopted land into a closer version of the Cuccagna, one in which the tastes and smells of their beloved foods come alive from the garden to the table.

The grapevine might provide a representative analogy for the immigrant and garden experiences of contadini like Palma and Raffaele, and my grandparents. If Italian grapevines were planted straight into the Canadian soil, they often froze, and perished. In order for the Italian grapevine to adapt, it had to be grafted onto the Ontario concord, a hardier vine indigenous to the region. Perhaps a parallel can be drawn between the literal growing of roots in a garden and the metaphorical immigrant language of transplantation.

Contadini created an Italian-Canadian paradise in the backyard, through a combination of tradition, nostalgia and memory. By consuming the produce when it was ready to be harvested, that connection was literally taken into oneself. Furthermore, gardening perhaps provided a way for contadini to wrest some control over their lives, particularly in those early and more tumultuous years of immigration. Finally, the vegetable garden allowed the contadini a continuance of culture and tradition, to potentially be transmitted to subsequent generations. While it remains to be seen if the backyard garden of the contadini survives into succeeding generations, it remains important to many older Italians in Toronto because it recreates vestiges of the “old country,” and echoes a way of life fundamental to their being.

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