

A REPORT ON

# TRAINING IN FOOD GROWING

For the Information & Education Department, HDRA, Ryton Gardens, Coventry CV8 3LG

Mark Fisher, May 2000

## INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps appropriate that this report is being written during the national Adult Education Week (22-26 May) since it seeks to identify the current thrust of adult training initiatives, and to provide the Henry Doubleday Research Association (HDRA) with some indication of where it may contribute.

Last year, HDRA drew up proposals to develop an organic gardening and cooking course for unemployed/disadvantaged people. The course of one day a week for a period of eight weeks, would be run at Ryton Gardens, making use of facilities created and dedicated to the course. The experience of running the course would be turned into a manual and training materials, which could subsequently be used by other trainers. It was intended that short courses could be run for these trainers. The target market for the manual and short courses included local authorities, Groundwork trusts and others involved in community education.

The proposals attracted insufficient funds from the original source (Lloyds/TSB) but have since benefited from a much larger sum from another source. As has been recognised, this much larger sum of money is more than required to carry out the original proposals and begs the question of what more could be done.

**IT WILL BE MY CONTENTION** that this larger sum of money creates the opportunity for HDRA to determine whether it wishes to become a **TRAINING ORGANISATION**. The implications of this are that HDRA needs to have an understanding of the market for food growing training and of the specific milieu in which much adult learning takes place, before it will be in a position to develop any work program.

## BACKGROUND

The original proposals reflect one part of the current agenda of using food growing as a means of addressing various social, economic and environmental issues. The agenda has been embraced by some local authorities that have created opportunity through their Local Agenda 21 processes. It is probably now taken for granted that this primarily urban phenomenon is characterised by the use of natural growing methods, which does not necessarily reflect some overarching zeal. It is more likely to be a disinclination to add to any further contamination and thus it is contributing to a more sustainable urban environment. Initiatives have usually been funding of one-off projects that are community based and there is little organised training.

Area renewal projects such as neighbourhood regeneration through Single

Regeneration Bids (SRB) have also seen gardening and sometimes food growing as a reinforcement of the other measures carried out to improve the physical fabric of estates and its quality of life. It is recognised that the largely publicly owned housing in regeneration areas has reasonable garden space and some SRB companies are employing extension workers to promote the use of this space for food growing.

Housing Associations are increasingly adopting a role in community development with their tenants. This has included the encouragement of tenants to use common areas for leisure gardening and food growing. One Housing Association had proposals for a new development of 60 units that provided a three-tier level of pre-built garden that could be used for food growing. The intention was to seek tenants who wished to make use of the gardens, and they would receive food-growing training in support.

Social services centres have used food growing as a beneficial activity for clients with learning difficulties. Allotment projects predominate, but there are examples where clients are integrated into general horticultural centres and some city farms. A recent innovation saw Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and European Social Fund (ESF) money through the Workers Education Association (WEA) for a course entitled FROM TABLE TO FIELD, carried out at a community horticultural centre.

More recently, food growing and healthy eating have become integral to Health Improvement Plans and more particularly to areas that have been designated Health Action Zones (HAZ). The partnership between local authorities and health authorities has seen HAZ money channelled into a number of Community Food Initiatives ranging from nutrition education, community cafes, bulk buying food co-ops and food growing projects. This builds on earlier initiatives funded by Health Promotion services in various Districts where communities under particular health risk (normally coronary) were targeted. The new Healthy Living Centre initiative has also been seized upon by promoters of food growing, seeing an opportunity either for the centre to incorporate growing in its grounds, or for it to be an enabler for initiatives in its surrounding community.

In some local authority areas, whole-area strategies are beginning to be put together, pulling in funding from as many sources as possible such as HAZ, various European funds, community planning and SRB. These strategies are not necessarily driven by local authorities alone as the forming of partnerships with stakeholders and agencies is key to attracting the funds. In Doncaster, this will be used to promote low-cost, locally grown healthy food and a more socially inclusive and sustainable local food economy. In Luton it is to develop a community supported agriculture scheme that is initially based on urban community food growing schemes. In Sandwell, it again has an urban agriculture focus linked to improvements in nutrition and health. In Halifax, the Healthy Communities Focus Group has a Feed Good program that combines information on healthy diets with promotion of food growing. In Haliwell (Bolton) community schemes for food growing, catering and composting have been promoted. Sheffield has the Healthy Gardening Group and Bradford has the Healthy Food Program, both promoting good nutrition through celebration of food events, food growing training, cook and taste sessions and nutritional advice.

Perhaps we should not overlook those areas that have embarked on a Food Futures program since at some point the talking has to stop and action has to

take its place. Certainly, to my knowledge, at least half those areas had a history of promoting urban food growing (or wished to start) before they began their Food Futures program.

All the above examples have needed elements of food growing training. This is speculation, but probably the major part of food growing knowledge is learnt while project workers do the job, often making use of a personal enthusiasm. They then pass it on to other participants. There might be the possible involvement of staff from Further Education colleges, but again there is little evidence that a service is operated widely. These colleges are still tied by the constraints of funding regimes that require them to use only accredited training schemes that do not yet encompass elementary urban food growing using natural methods. Some enthusiasts may provide local evening classes (such as through the WEA) but they are unsupported, usually having to devise their own course syllabus.

Some non-governmental organisations have dipped their toe into food growing training, but it is mostly very local initiatives without there necessarily being any strategy. The Bolton Wildlife Trust has run some food growing training this year as a series of sessions that combine theory with practice. The sessions have attracted between 30 to 40 people showing the demand, but also showing the payoff from the Trusts community development role in an area of regeneration (see earlier). A British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) centre in Leeds gave space and facilities to a community food grower who had a Natural Pioneer award. A demonstration food garden was built and used for training. I am lead to believe that Community Service Volunteers (CSV) in Birmingham has employed someone to promote back garden food growing, and presumably organise training for that. Nottinghamshire Technical Aid is providing support for allotment bands. The Co-operative College has an interest in self-help food initiatives.

The diversity exhibited by the foregoing examples can be misleading if it suggests that there is some co-ordinated movement towards an increase in local food growing. It is generally regarded that no one organisation is synonymous with food growing training. There is no one means through which disparate entities discover the information they need, and useable training resources are a market that has yet to be met. Against this probably accurate snapshot of the present, there has to be some considerable thought given to how training programs can meet this burgeoning need. Is a program designed for unemployed people too restrictive, can a set program satisfy the diversity in communities, does HDRA have the commitment to become a training organisation with all the understanding of adult learning that that implies?

## ALLOTMENTS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Allotments are still probably the main opportunity for access to growing land for ordinary citizens. Local authorities, in the main, regard allotments as a problem rather than an opportunity. The poor occupancy of inner city sites reflects not just the lack of interest, but also a vicious cycle of theft and vandalism that can demotivate existing tenants and deter new entrants. Saddled with underused land that becomes a wasteland from fly-tipping, it is no wonder that Councils risk approbation to remove the statutory protection from allotment sites so that they can be given over to other purposes.

Allotment administration is likely to be found in Property Services whose function is buildings and land management and rental. Budgets for Allotment Offices are miserably low as they reflect the low rental income derived by the Council. It is not part of the culture of Property Services departments to see their holdings as a social benefit. Moreover the vertical organisational structure of local authorities makes it difficult to have cross-subsidy from departments that may have a more community development role.

In the absence of any great activity by local authorities on allotments, it is not uncommon now to find the voluntary sector filling the void. Local community environmental or development organisations are employing their own allotment officers to work with allotment sites on clearance, self-management, collective purchasing and maybe some ad hoc training. What is also interesting is that these organisations are sometimes exercising a community economic development role in encouraging the production of surpluses for sale (sometimes through Local Exchange Trading Schemes) even though this contravenes the ethos and the bylaws of allotments.

It is obviously easier for these organisations to get a foothold on a site if there is some community project using sometimes a multiple of allotment plots. In fact revitalisation of an allotment site often starts when there is some collective presence or some new collective activity such as a community composting scheme. The cult of the individual that has so characterised allotments is beginning to crack, as is the predominant cult of the male – a demographic change that can only be for the best.

Allotment provision can provoke heated argument, but other viable alternatives are often overlooked. An extension worker in an SRB area was able to show that new allotment sites were unnecessary because housing tenants had ample garden space that they could utilise. In some instances, houses backing on to school grounds have been able to make use of new, mini-allotments in those grounds, the schools getting the benefit of an additional educational facility and a presence after school hours.

On the national scene, there was great excitement when the report THE FUTURE FOR ALLOTMENTS came out from the Environment, Transport & and Regional Affairs Committee, and when the government responded. Then nothing happened, even though there was enthusiasm within the Dept. of Environment Transport & Regions (DETR) and the Local Government Association (LGA). Fearing that the slump was due to a lack of ideas, the Shell Better Britain Campaign (SBBC) recently hosted an Allotments Round Table. Present were the National Association of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG), DETR, LGA and others with particular experience. There was general agreement that the biggest problem facing allotments was that communities had become disconnected from the land and that basic skills had been lost.

It was considered that it was not enough to keep allotments going when there was no effort to keep them ALIVE! More councils were encouraging self-management and recognised that they had a responsibility for providing information and training to achieve that. The changing demographic use was noted (groups, single women, special needs) and it was also recognised that there had to be diversity within allotment sites to meet changing needs. Thus communal areas for composting, kids playing space, differently sized plots and the easing on restrictions so that more flowers and fruit could be grown. This is

suggestive that allotment sites would benefit from some whole site design.

Peter Woodward of SBBC is a firm advocate of allotments, leading him to host the Round Table. I advise that HDRA ask Peter for a copy of the Round Table report as it could be a means to identify what market may exist for training on allotment growing, but also the contacts that could be made in the LGA and DETR, and where influence may be directed. For instance, would it ever be likely that local authorities through their Allotment Offices would send people on food growing courses? Whatever the outcome of this, the identification of HDRA by the LGA to its member authorities as *the* training organisation would be a considerable benefit. The same consideration would apply to the SBBC with its 25,000 network members.

## TRAINING THE DISADVANTAGED

Experience of working alongside the long-term unemployed, shows them resentful of the plethora of government schemes, and their workfare-like placements seem more to be forced labour than productive occupation. In a nightmare of logic, the placements are not seen as opportunities for training since this is supposedly provided by other services. For me, it was hard to see how a placement at a horticulture centre makes any sense if you can't train inexperienced people to do the work. What training they may receive is work-related, or to obtain work rather than in improving lifeskills.

The emphasis on the unemployed and the disadvantaged as being the target for the food growing training proposal brings with it obligations. Communities suffering disadvantage lack confidence and their capacity to learn has to be rebuilt. Orthodox schooling can leave these people unprepared for adult life, with few basic skills and a lack of interest in acquiring them. Disadvantage is often associated with poor health and poor housing conditions that depressingly seem to be geographically concentrated on large estates of public housing. The recognition of this gave rise to the area or neighbourhood renewal strategies of the last 15 years and the government's setting up in 1998 of the Social Exclusion Unit.

The National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) has produced an insightful briefing called NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL AND ADULT LEARNING which should be read in conjunction with this report. The briefing provides a critical analysis of current training initiatives, showing where they fail disadvantaged communities. It argues strongly for a very considered approach to adult learning in these circumstances, which HDRA must adopt if it is to work with disadvantaged people. Since for no better reason than I firmly believe it, I reproduce one sentence from the briefing:

**The right kind of learning opportunities must be accessible in suitable local settings and outreach workers need to be employed to engage people in them. The greater the involvement of local people in the process of managing and delivering these opportunities, the better.**

The scheme that I recently established in Bradford of community food growing training has tried to meet these aims (see accompanying report). The scheme was not necessarily directed towards disadvantaged communities, but it has

many of the elements that would figure in such a scheme. A significant conclusion from the scheme is that a standard program of training is too inflexible to meet the training needs of diverse communities. What has been a success is taking the training to the communities, and delivering it in a very practical hands-on way. In terms of outreach, it has been suggested to me that HDRA already has one network of out-centres in its Heritage Seed Library locations.

## LIFELONG LEARNING

While government may continue to make mistakes with unemployment schemes, they show better sense when it comes to building capacity through a learning society. In response to the Kennedy Report, government produced the Learning Age, a consultation document on lifelong learning. The Government committed itself to the establishment of a learning society in which all people have opportunities to succeed. Increasing access to learning and providing opportunities for success and progression are fundamental to the strategy.

To deliver this strategy, the DfEE is supporting Lifelong Learning Partnerships, for example by providing funding to help them develop local learning plans and targets, undertake local research and meet their objectives through a variety of collaborative projects. Learning Partnerships are now established throughout England to improve the planning and coherence of local post-16 learning. They are supporting action to widen participation in learning, increase attainment, improve standards and meet the skills challenge, and are contributing to the Government's social inclusion and regeneration agendas. Specifically they are developing local learning targets linked to the new National Learning Targets. They are co-ordinating local action in such a way as to create a more coherent, effective and accessible set of local arrangements for lifelong learning, careers advice and guidance, and student support, linking in with the social inclusion agenda in schools.

The Partnerships include further education colleges, careers service companies, Training and Enterprise Councils, local authorities and schools, and a wide range of other local organisations and employers. My recommendation would be that HDRA makes contact with the local partnership and see where it may be of benefit. This would be the Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Partnership, the contact details of which are in the box.

Lifelong learning provides a context for the food growing training proposed by HDRA. Links with lifelong learning partners will enable HDRA to understand how to approach the training of disadvantaged people. There is also an opportunity to multiply the current funding by applying for a grant from the Adult and Community Learning Fund (see the accompanying prospectus). The Fund of £20 million supports activities that take learning into sectors of the community not reached by traditional educational organisations, providing opportunities that are relevant to the people involved and delivering them in ways that will interest and attract those who are hardest to reach. Round 5 bids (the last round) are due by 30 September this year for projects to start in April 2001 and be completed in 18

<p>Rachael Lewis - Bell, Training and Education Development Manager Address: Coventry and Warwickshire CCTE Oak Tree Court Binley Business Park Harry Weston Road Coventry CV3 2UN Tel: 01203 654321</p>
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months. A trawl of the projects funded in Round 4 show the applicability of this fund. The first four examples show the funding of local initiatives, whereas the last shows a national initiative:

- ❖ **North Essex Health Promotion** (NHS Trust, £58,554) - seeks to build on work undertaken with a planning grant. Using trained health and community workers they will provide a range of practical basic skills courses including Healthy Eating, Getting the best from the Health Service, Accident Prevention in health centres, young peoples' information centre and community projects
- ❖ **Cat 'n' Fiddle Community Workshop** (Community Group, Norwich, £9,980) - this group of residents has engaged the help of Healthy Norfolk and local colleges to help them set up courses in their community centre in Cooking on a Budget, Growing Your own Vegetables and Change your Room.
- ❖ **Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group, Bristol** (£70,900) – the project sets out to develop the skills and knowledge of local residents on the health and environmental benefits of growing and using fresh foods, involving gardening skills and an understanding health food cooking, and co-operative production. (Contact Susan Walker 0117 946 5285)
- ❖ **Wessex Foundation, Winsham, Somerset** (£76,000) –based in an organic farm and residential education centre, the project will offer a flexible programme in which young people will explore and develop land-based skills whilst also developing personal and social skills.
- ❖ **Thrive** (Voluntary Group, £90,000) - wishes to use results of their planning grant to develop training for staff and learning opportunities for adults with learning difficulties involved in horticultural schemes and projects across the country.

## PREPARING AND COOKING HEALTHY FOOD

Some of the project examples above involve another element of the original proposal, cooking and healthy eating. Food and poverty is a big issue in health promotion, getting the greenlight from SAVING LIVES – OUR HEALTHIER NATION, the Government's public health white paper. However, this is a potential minefield for I can imagine what one of our more colourful community dieticians in Bradford would say:

**So what if he melts a Mars bar over his freshly dug and cooked potatoes – at least he's eating some vegetables!**

Community dieticians develop a pragmatic approach from being at the sharp end of a difficult and under-resourced task. To them it is not about good or bad diets. They keep it simple using cook and taste sessions, imparting simple preparation skills often lost or un-needed with packaged and processed food, which are the low waste, calorie efficient choices on a low income.

Again it comes back to sensitivity and awareness. *Experts* are not always needed – communities gain strength from sharing their skills and knowledge, and people often relate better to someone in similar circumstances. If this element is to be tackled, it has to be made fun, and spontaneous to a certain extent by, for example, using improvisation to create a meal from available produce (think along the lines of BBC's program Ready, Steady, Cook!). Making it complicated through complex information unrelated to levels of income (wholefoods, for instance, are expensive) will be ineffective. I think it unnecessary to employ a

dietician/nutritionist when HDRA would be better learning from and making use of community dieticians and health promotion services in their locality.

## VOCATIONAL TRAINING

The original proposals on food growing training could be viewed as a personal development in lifeskills. It is possible that some can translate those skills into an income from exchange or money. A few may want to go even further and develop their skills to the point of employment. Despite its burgeoning popularity, there is little movement to meet the need for more training for employment in food growing. Even in the organic food movement, it is recognised that there is a void, particularly in vocational training, which is at cataclysmic odds with the massive increase in land in conversion that will need new skills to be productive. True to its nature, it will be expecting Government to fill the void.

Fortunately for them, Government is concerned to fill the void, and specifically in response to vocational training. The new Rural Development Regulation arising from reforms of the CAP subsidy regime identifies money for vocational training in rural activities. The Government envisages the training as being part of the England Rural Development Plan (ERDP) and has allocated £22 million for it over a seven-year period. At present, MAFF have put the nature of the vocational training out for consultation, and the consultation document (that accompanies this report) identifies a number of barriers to training at present:

- the absence of a "needs based" approach to training
- inflexible delivery mechanisms
- a lack of local training centres
- a shortage of community based training facilities
- an absence of lifelong learning programmes
- the inability to use distance learning methodology to deliver practical craft skill training
- an absence of farm relief services cost of training
- an employers ability to release staff
- length of course.
- price
- transport

Many of these barriers would seem universal to adult education, irrespective of the level and target of the vocational training.

HDRA is developing unparalleled experience in commercial organic horticulture, which begs to be translated into a training opportunity. This element of the ERDP provides yet another potential funding source for HDRA to become a training organisation. It is no less an empowerment than the training of disadvantaged groups as with more people capable of producing natural food commercially, the greater availability there will be and at a more reasonable cost by direct purchase from producers.

## INTERIM CONCLUSIONS

There are some working in community development that would cringe at the idea of bussing unemployed/disadvantaged people out to Ryton for a training course in which they were being *used* in a process to develop a training scheme. This

may be a heartless description of the original training proposal, but as I have hoped to have shown, it goes against all the recent experiences and lessons of adult learning.

Far better that HDRA learn about how to put this training together by **DOING IT FOR REAL**. That means **OUTREACH** and it means **PARTNERSHIP WORKING**. It also means making an **INVESTMENT** in the aspirations of the surrounding population densities, and through that investment HDRA will have an authentic and experienced voice when it speaks to its membership, its national audience and to its target market for the training manual and short courses for trainers.

## REPORTS

Neighbourhood Renewal and Adult Learning – NIACE, April 2000

Back Garden/Common Space Growing Program – Mark Fisher, May 2000

Adult and Community Learning Fund – DfEE, updated April 2000

CONSULTATION ON ERDP: Proposals for a Training Scheme – MAFF, May 2000

Mark Fisher

[mark.fisher@self-willed-land.org.uk](mailto:mark.fisher@self-willed-land.org.uk) [www.self-willed-land.org.uk](http://www.self-willed-land.org.uk)