



Common Roots Grow Deep

by **EMMA DRUDGE** /// EAC Volunteer

It's early in the season at Common Roots Urban Farm. Feathery white row covers blanket the raised beds of the market garden, protecting newly planted seeds from birds and weeds.

This year it's been a slow start with low temperatures and little rain. Farmers wander through their rows, taking turns with a tangle of hoses to water the rows where the first tender sprouts are pressing through the soil.

With the whirr of the Robie Street bus and the buzz of traffic on Bell Road, the farm doesn't quite have the ring of rural life. Spend a little time there, though, and you'll feel a sense of connection often lost in city life. Common Roots is a rare part of town where nature's every change—the sun, the rain, the high and low temperatures—dictates daily decisions and activities.

It's Wednesday, and the eight farmers in the Deep Roots program are all tending to their plots. Deep Roots is a partnership between Common Roots and Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS). Starting this spring, the program has been set up as a farm incubator. Each participant gets their own "tiny farm:" a 250 foot row of garden bed to prepare, plant and tend. They'll take some of their produce home to their families and friends, and the

rest will be available at the Common Roots market stand located on-site each Wednesday starting with the first harvest in mid-June.

The Deep Roots tiny farms make up a quarter of an acre of Common Roots. The rest is a mixture of private garden plots and common areas filled with flowers, fruits trees, and vegetable plants, tended by volunteers and available to anyone who strolls through to snack on.

Everyone who's spent time at Common Roots says some version of the same thing; meeting new people, spending time together, learning and connecting in a community are what this place is about. Even with all the benefits of urban farming—nourishing food, regenerative land stewardship, and a heartening step toward food security in a changing climate—the agriculture itself feels more like a means for building a vibrant community than the end goal.

One stroll through the farm and it's clear that Common Roots is growing a whole lot more than food.

Nowhere is this more true than in the Deep Roots program. Participants are cultivating a sense of belonging, building a community, and growing networks of support, all while adapting what they know of farming to the Nova Scotia climate. Here, some of the Deep Roots farmers share what they gain from their time at Common Roots:



Muhannad Alghajar

When Alghajar moved to Canada in 2016, there was no question in his mind that he'd continue farming as he had in Syria. "It's just what I do," he says. At first this took him to the Annapolis Valley, and though he learned a lot about farming in this climate during his time there, there were significant downsides to the job. With his wife, parents and two brothers living in Halifax, plus the inconvenience and expense of getting around in a rural area without a car, Alghajar is grateful to join the Deep Roots program this year. Common Roots removes the barriers of farming in a rural area, allowing him to continue his craft and be close to his family at the same time.



Chandra Bahadur Pradhan

"When I was spending all my time at home, I was lonely. When I come here I know I'll see Sara (the farm coordinator) and we'll start to talk. Data Ram will join us, and then more people will come over and we'll all be together. There's always someone to talk to here."



Data Ram Humagai

Humagai has been involved at Common Roots since 2014 and is a fixture on the farm. He greets new gardeners with a smile, telling them which of the sprouts in their garden are weeds, and which are worth saving. By early May he's harvesting cilantro and mustard he planted last October in a raised bed, protected all winter by a greenhouse-style cover he built. "I thought about how cold it gets, and adapted what I knew about farming to work better here," he says. Humagai was a Bhutanese refugee in Nepal for more than 20 years before moving to Canada in 2010. For the first few years he was here, Humagai was so focused on meeting basic needs that the thought of returning to farming didn't even cross his mind. "I was just thinking that I wanted to go back to Nepal," he says. Now, though, he's happy. He says the farm is a place where he knows he can come and see familiar faces, to know people and be known in his community. He's well known for helping new participants across all areas of Common Roots and for making everyone that passes through feel welcome on the farm.



Common Roots Urban Farm has one more growing season at its current interim Halifax location at Bell and Robie, and then it has to move. The community is now asking "Where Can Our Garden Grow?" and is actively searching for a new home! If you have ideas please contact farm coordinator Sara Burgess through commonrootsurbanfarm.ca.



Sharaf Alrashed

"This is my first opportunity to farm in Canada. I like it so much. The soil and plants are completely different than in Syria, and I'm learning so much."



Ahmad Alnasaan & Maysoun Alatrash



New to Common Roots this year, Alnasaan and his wife Alatrash are learning to farm from the other Deep Roots participants. Both are from farming families in Syria, but had never worked in agriculture themselves. Alnasaan says, "I like to meet new people, help them in their plots, and have them help me in mine." The couple have six children between the ages of one and 16. "I'll be taking what I grow home to my family,"

Alatrash says. "I brought all my kids here, and they loved running around the farm. They weren't very helpful in the plot, though," she adds with a laugh. "That was the first and last time I bring them all at once!"



Mohamad Al Jaber

"I am happy when I grow vegetables for my family. My kids are happy to come here—they tell me every day to take them to Common Roots."



Dorcas Nkobwa

Nkobwa moved to Canada from Burundi four years ago. She loves that she can grow and harvest what she likes at Common Roots, including bean leaves, a cultural food unavailable in grocery stores here. You never see Nkobwa without Imelde at her side.

They help in each other's plots and laugh together through the hard work of preparing their raised garden beds for planting.



Imelde Nduwimana

"I liked working on a farm in Tanzania, so when I came here I already knew how to do it. Being on the farm is good exercise, and I like taking food home to family and friends."