

City Sprouts Farm: Bringing Community to the Birchwood Neighborhood

By Lorraine Wilde, July 31, 2019, Whatcom Talk

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Community is built—growing from a fellowship between neighbors, businesses and organizations. Thanks to a unique partnership between Ellie Duncan and Annah Young of City Sprouts Farm and Kulshan Community Land Trust (KulshanCLT), community in the Birchwood neighborhood is being built every day, literally, from the ground up.

In 2017, KulshanCLT purchased three acres of land near Birchwood Elementary, holding it in trust for permanently affordable housing and other community needs. “Since the closure of the Albertson’s grocery in 2017, Birchwood neighbors have been living in what’s called a ‘food desert’,” says KulshanCLT Executive Director Dean Fearing, “where it’s difficult to buy affordable, quality fresh food.”

The Birchwood Food Desert Fighters are working to change the non-compete clause of the shopping center on a policy level. “In addition to our 20 existing affordable homes in the Birchwood area,” Fearing says, “KulshanCLT has been working with the community to bring food production back into their area.”

It All Started With an Idea.

Duncan and Young met four years ago at North Cascades Institute where they discovered their shared passion for urban farming.

“I come from a background of small-scale farming, volunteering and working on farms for ten years now,” says Duncan.

“And I worked on a few farms right out of college,” says Young, who initially moved to Bellingham to pursue a graduate degree in environmental education from Western. “I also worked with a non-profit that did school gardening education in the Bay Area. It was a powerful experience, thinking about urban food systems and utilizing growing spaces within urban settings. The plan from the beginning was that we wanted to connect community to food.”

City Sprouts started from scratch in early 2018 on the KulshanCLT lot overrun with blackberries and poison hemlock. Photo courtesy: City Sprouts

Together they began searching for space to start their own urban farm. They learned about the KulshanCLT property in the fall of 2017.

A Mission Based in Gratitude.

“This is traditional homeland of many of the Salish Tribes and we are visitors here,” Duncan says. “When you start farming and seeing the generosity of the people working with you and the generosity of the land you’re working on, of course you want to give back.”

“You take from the soil. You give back to the soil. You’re growing something your neighbors will eat and nourish themselves with,” says Young.

When it was acquired, the property was overrun with blackberries and poison hemlock. Building a small-scale farm there appeared daunting to everyone at first.

But since early 2018, City Sprouts has been practicing sustainable urban farming on a half acre. “We rely heavily on cover crops and compost to improve soil fertility,” says Young. For two years in a row, they’ve received a grant from the Community Food Co-op’s Farm Fund.

Now in their second year at the site, the pair has built a shed, hoop house, and cooler, improved the fence and installed drip irrigation. “We also have a contract with the Bellingham Food Bank to grow 800 pounds of beets and 200 pounds of tomatillos,” says Duncan. Seven CSA shareholders—many who live in the neighborhood—pick up at the farm.

“We’re super grateful that KulshanCLT has allowed us to work this property. It’s allowed us to further all of our projects,” says Young. “They didn’t even know what we were going to do. They just said go for it. So we did. The Birchwood Farmers Market came out that.”

Duncan and Young started a weekly outdoor market stand in the shopping center of the now absent local grocery store (near the corner of Birchwood and Northwest Avenues, Sundays, June through October, 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.).

Their single stand offers the heart and soul of emerging Whatcom County farmers, most in their first five years of production, and several from the Birchwood area. In addition to City Sprouts organically grown fruit and vegetables, you’ll find Wildrye cut flowers, Owl Eye eggs, Raven Breads, BeeWorks honey, Cooperativa Tierra y Libertad berries, and additional produce from Whatcom County farms—Pollen Folly, Rabble & Roost, Slanted Sun, Silver Creek and Vertical Fog.

“We’re trying to keep the food as accessible as possible to the community by keeping our prices really low,” Duncan says. “We also accept EBT and Fresh Bucks.”

Locally grown food has significant health, environmental, economic and community benefits for Birchwood neighbors. “That’s the most rewarding thing,” says Young. “Being at the stand on Sunday and seeing a customer that has sort of become your friend come back and say thank you. It’s such a good way to get to know your neighborhood.”

City Sprouts produce can also be found on Wednesdays at the Barkley Bellingham Farmers Market and their kale is on the menu at Bellingham Cider Company.

An Eye to the Future.

Duncan and Young are currently looking for another half acre to farm next year, hopefully in the Birchwood area.

KulshanCLT also has big plans. “With community collaboration, our goal is to eventually build 12 to 16 affordable homes on the site,” Fearing says. “And spaces that support the gathering and building of community, like a farm stand and coffee shop.”

Both City Sprouts and KulshanCLT are looking forward to a productive partnership that will continue to benefit the community long-term. “We’re super excited about collaborating with KulshanCLT when there is housing on the site,” adds Young. “And seeing how this project can change and connect with even more of the community.”