

# THE LATEST DIRT

SPRING  
2004

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GREATER VICTORIA COMPOST EDUCATION CENTRE

## FUNKY CHICKENS FOR SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

By Geoff Johnson, Site Educator

As awareness grows around the social and environmental problems of our modern corporate food system, so does a movement towards sustainable home-scale food production. It seems that while many of us may envision this as back yard fruit trees and veggie beds, less often do we think of animals. In fact, there seems to be a common misconception that animals automatically compromise the ecological sustainability of an agricultural system. Although industrial agriculture's use of both animals and plants has proven disastrous on many fronts (ecological, ethical, disease epidemics like avian flu and BSE, etc...), animals can be appropriately integrated into well-designed agricultural systems to actually improve their sustainability. To provide an example of how this can be true at the home-scale, I would like to offer a personal account of how integrating chickens into my urban gardening has helped me to reduce my ecological footprint.

For the last 9 years I've been using intensive soil building and veggie production methods to produce a significant amount of my own food. I strive to do it thoughtfully, but it's still a lot of work, and all too often requires importing materials such as organic fertilizer from off-site. This year, I've got some serious help. I now look after a small back yard flock of 11 chickens, and they help to look after me.



I make sure my hens are happy by providing them with all the things they could possibly want (except roosters, which are illegal in the city -despite the widespread acceptance of car-alarms!). These include: a healthy, balanced diet, adequate shelter, water, protection from predators, lots of room to run around, access to grit for digestion, access to dust to bathe in, and special care when one of them gets sick. In turn, they supply me with pest control (especially apple codling moth larvae), weed control, surface tillage, fertilization, composting and worm production services, and the richest eggs I've ever tasted. Being aware of everything they need as well as everything they have to offer allows me to set up a symbiotic relationship instead of treating them as single-yield industrial units, cut off from the web of life.

What's more, our new relationship is growing as I continue to draw on permaculture design ideas I've seen work successfully on various farms I've visited. This year I plan on developing my yard to simultaneously improve their quality of life and harness their awesome chicken power! Soon my dimwitted yet endearing accomplices will find themselves spending time in the back of my greenhouse. In exchange for the extra heat and carbon dioxide they generate for the seedlings, they will have a warmer place to spend nights and cold rainy days. When their new coop heats up on nice days they will have access to a large area planted with nutritious perennial greens, seed producing shrubs, and mulberry trees that will supplement their summer diets. Eventually I may even occasionally supplement my diet with one of them (but I'll probably wait until we know each other a bit better...).

For the moment my chickens spend their days scratching for yummy slugs and pill bugs in the area where this year's vegetable garden will be. They've been busy destroying unsightly lawn and weeds, and building rich soil in the process. Last month I dumped bags of okara and leaf mould on this area and have watched as the chickens rake out, mix together, and scratch these amendments (along with their own nitrogen rich "fertilizer") into the surface of the soil. In six winter weeks, this natural behaviour has developed a rich, loose loam for spring veggie production, freeing up my time and energy for other tasks.

CONTINUED PAGE 3...



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THE LATEST DIRT**

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**ALEX ZIMMERMAN TO SPEAK ABOUT GREEN BUILDINGS AT AGM**

The Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre (Victoria Compost and Conservation Education Society) will be holding its Annual General Meeting on Wednesday March 24, from 7pm-9pm at the Fernwood Community Association (1923 Fernwood Road). Doors open at 6:30, with the meeting portion commencing at 7:00. Refreshments will be provided.

At 8:00, guest speaker Alex Zimmerman will present "In Conversation . . . about Green Buildings". Alex Zimmerman is President of the Canada Green Building Council (CaGBC), and has led the Canadian team on the International Green Building Challenge during the last couple of years. He will leave time for your green building questions. Non-members are welcome!

If you have been a Compost Club member for a month or longer, you are eligible to vote for the Board of Directors. If you would like to nominate someone for the Board, please contact Lynn at 386-9676. Nominations will also be accepted from the floor.

Lynn Marie  
Coordinator

**VOLUNTEER UPDATE**

The first Compost Educator Volunteer Training Program of 2004 was held Feb 27-29. Ten eager participants (and future Master Composters), were introduced to the wonders of worm composting, backyard composting options, hot composting, public outreach techniques and more. If you missed this training opportunity, don't worry! There will be another training session held Sept 24-26. Call 386-WORM if you would like to be placed on an interest list

If you would like to become involved as a volunteer in other areas of the Centre, call Louise at 386-WORM or see the volunteer opportunity below.

**Volunteers Needed: Garden Tour**

On Sat May 1st, the Wild Garden Party will be hosting a tour of fourteen gardens in the Greater Victoria Area (see pg 4 in this newsletter for more info). We are looking for volunteers to assist at various garden sites with collecting tickets, giving basic directions and instructions to tour groups and assisting with parking. Gardening knowledge is an asset but not necessary.

Benefits: For a 3-hour shift in the morning or afternoon, you will have receive a free ticket to tour the gardens and are invited to participate in the wrap up at Swan Lake/Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary (refreshments provided!). Call Lynn at 386-WORM to sign up.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR DONATIONS**

We wish to extend our sincere thanks to the following individuals for their generosity in donating to the Centre.

P. Brennan	C. Loader	D. Cosway	W. Meyer zu Erpen
C. Cunow	E. Noel	S. Elliott	M. Stockdale
E. Hogan	L. Wicks	Pro-Tech Exterior Products	

We gratefully acknowledge the core funding support that we receive from the CRD and the City of Victoria. Additional support is provided by the Fernwood Community Association and through the generosity of our Compost Club Members and the residents of Greater Victoria.

## FUNKY CHICKENS (continued from page 1)

In a smaller, caged in area of the yard my fine-feathered friends perform the same feat, but in a more intensive way. It is here that I dump daily buckets of kitchen waste from a local restaurant. The birds get their fill of gourmet greens and leftover nachos; diverting organics from the waste stream and building humus while creating perfect conditions for thousands of red wiggler worms. Leftovers are raked up and buried, and worms are sold to high-rise vermicomposting enthusiasts, confirming the permaculture maxim that wherever an energy cycle is created, so is potential for a yield.

But all this talk of heat transfer and waste diversion really leaves something out. Chickens are just really nice beings to have around. Aside from all their useful contributions to a sustainable lifestyle, I like the cute sounds they make, and watching them get funky in their dust bath (if you haven't seen this, it beats watching TV or surfing the net any day). As for eating them, my hesitation, for now, is personal, not ecological. When I think about the material/energy inputs, pollution, social justice issues, and monoculture associated with industrial legume production, processing and transportation (including distant "organic" operations), the choice for me is clear. I think that supporting local farmers who produce free-run, organic chickens and eggs is a much safer bet for satisfying our limited protein needs in an ecologically sustainable way. Better still, we can "bring the chickens home", letting them convert our kitchen waste, pests, and weeds into compost, quality eggs, and a range of garden services. Viva la chicken!

Recommended reading: (first two available at the GVCEC library)

- pages 28 – 30 in the Permaculture Designer's Manual (Pyramids, Food Webs, Growth, and Vegetarianism) by Bill Mollison
- Chickens in Your Back Yard: a Beginner's Guide by Rick and Gail Luttmann
- Chicken Tractor: the Permaculture Guide to Happy Hens and Healthy Soil by Andy Lee, Pat Foreman, and Patricia L. Foreman

## SEEDS FOR SALE SOON!



In mid to late March, keep an eye out for veggie seeds being sold at the Compost Education Centre. These seeds will be for sale at the Centre from 10-4 Wed-Sat, provided by Carolyn Herriot, owner and operator of the Garden Path Organic Nursery. Call 386-WORM for more information

## 2<sup>ND</sup> ANNUAL YARD & PLANT SALE

This year's yard and plant sale will be held on Saturday May 15, from 10am-4pm.

Gently used household items, veggie starts and perennials will be offered for sale as a fundraiser for the Centre's educational programs.

If you would like to support this fundraiser, here are some ways to assist the Centre:

- Donate (in good condition) small household items. Donations can be dropped off at the Centre the week leading up to the sale.
- Donate (with labels) rooted cuttings or potted divisions from herbaceous perennials. We are looking for plants that can be used for attracting beneficial insects or wildlife, provide food, or have medical or other value (example: native plants, echinacea, yarrow) Donations can be dropped off at the Centre the week leading up to the sale.

For more information, call Lynn at 386-WORM

## SEEDS OF PROGRESS – Community Garden and Education Program

by Jackie Robson

We at Seeds of Progress, Community Organic Garden may be the only one of our kind in the Western Communities. If we get our wish, this will be our 7th year of operation. Founded as a project of Capital Families (now Westshore Community Services), we teach people how to grow high quality produce for their families. We offer free training to new gardeners, as well as a garden plot, seeds, seedlings and the use of tools. Each year we also grow, harvest and deliver between 1,050 to 2,500 pounds of veggies to the Western Communities Food Bank.

Over these 6 years, many people have lovingly created and improved this special garden, increasing the health & fertility of the soil. Besides being a very productive garden, it has become a kind of sanctuary, offering a place of peace, beauty and just plain fun. Each new gardener gets the benefit of all that care, creativity and hard work. Since provincial funding cuts, 2 yrs ago, we decided to see if we could continue on a shoestring budget and have been doing our own community fund raising. So far, we've survived and even thrived due to the enthusiasm of our small volunteer force. However, we are always seeking new ways to continue to raise funds for this special project.

If you are interested in volunteering with this project, learning more about gardening or would like to assist with fundraising, call Jackie at 361-9446.

Seeds of Progress is located on 3319 Painter Rd. behind Pilgrim United Church in Colwood

# NATIVE PLANT GARDENING SALE



The Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary presents the 9th annual Gardening for Wildlife: **A Native Plant Gardening Sale and Demonstration**

Saturday and Sunday,  
April 24 and 25, 2004  
10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Sale: Over 100 species of Native Plants, Seeds, Books, Bird Feeders, and Nesting Boxes.

Presentations on gardening with native plants will include Attracting Beneficial Insects, Native Plant Garden Tours and much more.

Admission: \$3/day, \$5/weekend pass  
(price includes admission to all workshops & presentations)

Free to 'Friends of the Sanctuary'

Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary  
3873 Swan Lake Road

Plant list and presentation schedule available at:  
[www.swanlake.bc.ca](http://www.swanlake.bc.ca) or 479-0211

## ORGANIC TURF MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP

This one-day introduction to Organic Turf Management will include:

- The workings of the food web
- Organic soil management practices
- Organic vs. chemical fertilizers and soil amendments
- Landscape health management vs. plant health care vs. integrated pest management
- Turf management practices that support turf health

Saturday, March 20

9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. Cedar Hill Golf Course

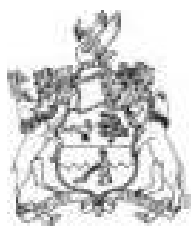
1400 Derby Road

Cost: \$50.00  
includes lunch

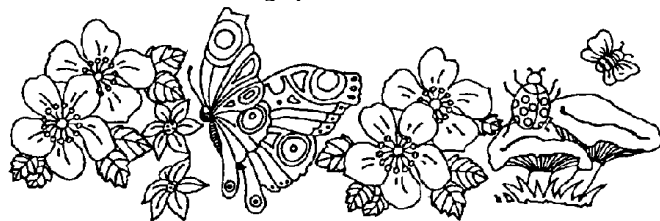
To register, or for more information, call Josh at City Green:  
(250) – 381-9995

Presented by:

 **Gaia College Inc.**



SAVE THE DATE! The Wild Garden Party presents...



## The Wild Garden Party Garden Tour!

Join us for a tour of fourteen gorgeous gardens. This tour showcases gardens which incorporate native plants, water conservation, food production, organic methods and composting, creating beautiful, healthy havens for humans and wildlife alike!

**May 1, 2004 10:00 am to 4:00 pm**

The gardens are located throughout Greater Victoria, and exemplify many different features and styles – a map is provided upon purchase of ticket.

Homeowners will be available to answer questions and point out our unique features.

Tickets are \$10.00 per person (includes prize draw)

Tickets will be available for sale starting April 1, 2004 and can be purchased at the Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre, Habitat Acquisition Trust, City Green, LifeCycles, Swan Lake/Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, and Dig This (downtown location)

For more information, contact:

Habitat Acquisition Trust, 995-2428 or Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre, 386-9676

The Wild Garden Party is collaboration between the Greater Victoria Compost Education Centre, Habitat Acquisition Trust, City Green, Lifecycles Project Society, the Native Plant Study Group, the Native Plant Society of BC and Naturescape BC. Together we act as a catalyst for individuals, neighbourhoods and communities to create ecologically sustainable landscapes. We promote the conservation of wildlife habitat, organic gardening and landscaping, home and local food production, thoughtful use of our water resources, composting, and the inclusion of native plants in our landscapes.

**THE LATEST DIRT** is published quarterly. The deadline for submissions for the summer issue is May 15, 2004. Submissions to the newsletter can be sent to the Compost Education Centre. Unless otherwise noted, articles appearing in this newsletter may be reprinted only in other not-for-profit publications, with the credit given to the author (when named) and **THE LATEST DIRT**.

