



Learning about urban agriculture and community initiatives to locally produce healthy food

JEAN CHEN IS A NUTRITIONAL DIETICIAN who works part-time in a home care program, and she understands the importance of healthy food. She thought working as a Community Harvest Facilitator for the Kingston Community Garden Network (KCGN) would be the perfect fit for her background and interests.

The KCGN is a partnership between Loving Spoonful and the City of Kingston's Recreation Services and consists of over 35 community gardens on municipal and private lands.



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Jean Chen harvesting parsley at a Community Harvest Garden

Jean says her six months with KCGN, from May to October 2022, provided a great opportunity to learn more about how healthy food is grown in an urban setting. “I have fond childhood memories of helping my parents tend to our background garden. I wanted to learn more about how to grow different foods and about models for community markets,” she says.

“I moved to Kingston a little more than a year ago, so this job was also a great way for me to learn about the city and region and to get more connected to the community,” she adds.

Much of Jean’s work was in support of the Community Harvest (CH) program, a member of the KCGN that operates two urban gardens within the network. The program produces regenerative fresh food for two CH Markets – affordable-access markets designed to serve vulnerable populations and to tackle food insecurity.

Jean’s hiring as a Community Harvest Facilitator was supported by funding under CPRA’s Youth Employment Experience program, which is designed to help organizations in the parks and recreation sector enhance their programs and to expand opportunities for young people to gain experience in the sector.

Her tasks included planting, weeding, watering and harvesting at the CH Gardens, and coordinating and staffing the two weekly CH Markets. Her role also included a community engagement aspect. She helped coordinate participation by local farmers and gardeners, partner organizations and garden volunteers – people eager to help grow and harvest a bounty of produce to benefit their communities.

Jean was guided by the mentorship of experienced Community Harvest Farmer Marie Bencze, who helped



Jean Chen harvesting sunflowers at a Community Harvest Garden with summer student Eliza

Jean gain skills and knowledge related to healthy food production, urban agriculture and food security initiatives, as well as learning about the “dignified access” model for community markets.

“In the dignified access model, everybody is welcome. Customers select what they want and then they pay what they can afford. Sometimes people pay nothing,” says Marie. “And everybody who comes to the market is treated with the same dignity.”

Marie also shared her knowledge about agroecological food production – practices and techniques to ensure the production of food also protects and enhances the natural environment. “We’re running our gardens in ways that don’t conflict with existing ecosystems but rather help build healthier environments,” she says. “That includes using cover crops to protect the soil, including plantings to attract beneficial insects – some that pollinate and some that act as predators to problematic insects – among other techniques for best production.”

Jean says the highlights of her experience included doing gratifying physical work outdoors and her connections with garden volunteers and the people who came to buy food at the market.

“The volunteers ranged from high school students to seniors, and I very much enjoyed interacting with different age groups. It was great to teach them some of the gardening skills that Marie had taught me, she says.

“It was also enjoyable interacting with people from all walks of life at the market. It opened my eyes to the positive impacts that flow from people joining together to produce healthy food for their families and neighbours.” 🍁