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Case Study. Community Gardening in the City.

Permaculture emphasizes change from the bottom up. It's more about doing things for ourselves than about telling the powers that be what they ought to be doing on our behalf. There's nowhere where this approach is more important than in urban food production: there's little point in telling the authorities about the value of allotments when so many of them lie unused.

Taking on an allotment on your own can be a daunting prospect for someone with no skills or experience, and this is where community action can be very valuable. But community action doesn't spring from nowhere. It's usually the result of dedication and hard work on the part of a few individuals, as is the case in Sheffield.

The Sheffield Organic Food Initiative (SOFI) is the creation of a few individual people who are personally committed to growing food and greening their community. Now that the initiative is up and running official bodies have started to co-operate with it. The City Council and the Health Authority both make use of the expertise it can offer and help to make grant money available. But if the people had waited for officialdom to give a helping hand to get started they would still be waiting now.

Richard Clare is one of those committed individuals. In 1988 he realised that food growing could help to solve many problems, ecological, social and personal. He had no experience of growing and there were no relevant courses available in the area, so he taught himself, partly from books and partly by learning from his own mistakes. Like most people in central Sheffield he had no garden or nearby allotment site, so he took on an allotment on the outskirts, a two mile walk away.

Bit by bit he developed both his gardening skills and his allotment, starting with a few easy-to-grow vegetables. Right from the start he recognised the central importance of organic matter, and with his friend, Darrell Maryon, started collecting unwanted organic materials and composting them. At the time Darrell worked in a wholefood shop, and the unsold vegetables were an obvious resource to start with. Soon they were collecting from six local shops – and saving the shopkeepers a lot of money in disposal charges. Straw horse manure from a local stables helped to

balance the sloppy vegetable waste, and they started making leafmould from the huge bulk of autumn leaves produced in the city.

At this point Richard compiled a report outlining the potential for composting in Sheffield, which he submitted to the council's recycling officer, but it was not acted upon.

As their skills and confidence increased, Richard and Darrell found that a single allotment was not enough for all they wanted to grow, and they started taking on more plots. They have become adepts at urban soil improvement and he's learned how to grow dozens of varieties of fruit and nuts and more than a hundred vegetable maincrops. " I treated this exercise as an experiment or research project, " says Richard. Over the years he developed a set of gardening techniques which are specially relevant to urban allotments and kept careful records of his work.

They started to encourage their friends and neighbours to grow some of their own food. People who hadn't the time to take on a whole plot could help on Richard and Darrell's established ones in return for produce, while those who were able to take a plot received help and advice to get going.

The permaculture element in their work is evident in the different design approaches taken on different allotments, according to the needs of the plot holders and the characteristics of the individual plot. Examples include: a fruit-only allotment for a busy wage-earner with little time to spare; incorporating a play area for a family with children; wide concrete paths for wheelchair users; terracing for steep slopes; and double digging plus plenty of compost for an abused soil.

Richard and Darrell are keen to explain everything they've learnt to volunteers, especially beginners. "There's a desperate need for basic, practical advice," says Richard. To help fill this gap he has written some brief, accessible guides to some of the key techniques, such as composting.

The number of people actively involved in the project has grown steadily to around a dozen people actively and regularly growing food with several dozen non-active supporters. SOFI now operates on more than twenty sites in and around Sheffield, cultivating four acres of intensive food crops. It also has links with other groups doing similar work in the area.

One of these is Beansies Wholefood Co-op, an indirect organic vegetable box scheme. (See p291). The Co-op is an important supplier of vegetable waste to SOFI's composting operation. They would like to sell locally grown vegetables rather than the ones they buy from the other side of the country at present, and SOFI is building up the skill base among local people which can make this possible.

Another is the Ponderosa Environment Group (PEG), a community group dedicated to improving a six hectare urban open space. SOFI members have been at the core of the group from the start, and the work has included establishing a community orchard and planting thousands of native trees. PEG has been invited by the City Council to take part in a major refurbishment programme involving 2,500 council homes. They have also been commissioned by Hallam University to undertake an environmental assessment of north-west inner-city Sheffield.

The Allotmenters is a scheme operated by SOFI to introduce people to the basic methods of organic crop production. They meet once a week to work on renovating derelict allotments and maintaining those already in production. In return for their work the volunteers get instruction, camaraderie and a share in the produce. "Working with a wide range of people has given us realistic expectations about the levels of skill and understanding you can expect today," Richard reflects. "Few people have the commitment to grow food in the face of so many other priorities. Anyone who manages to grow some of their own food organically deserves to be celebrated."

In 1995 SOFI members initiated a project to restore a large antique kitchen garden and orchard at Unstone Grange, five miles south of Sheffield. The gardens are owned by a charitable trust, which operates a conference centre on the site, and are let to SOFI in exchange for maintenance and a share of the produce. In a few years the gardens have been transformed from their moribund state and now form a large part of SOFI's total growing area. Peaches, apricots and other tender fruits have been planted along a south-facing wall and a huge polytunnel has been installed.

Over the past three years Unstone gardens have welcomed thousands of visitors to their organic open days and hosted the annual conferences of various national gardening organisations. It has recently been certified organic by the Soil Association.

SOFI now runs the kind of courses which Richard found so woefully lacking in his early days. It also publishes documents on composting and urban growing and acts as a consultant to other community groups which want to develop these activities. As it has grown in size, expertise and local renown it has increasingly been invited to participate in officially-sponsored bodies. An example is Sheffield Healthy Gardening Group, which seeks to encourage gardening for its combined benefits of nutrition, exercise and wellbeing.

SOFI's links are not confined to voluntary and official bodies. One private business which has become intimately involved with the project is the Ecology Company, a shop specialising in books and magazines relevant to permaculture and organics and a range of green products. It acts as a drop-off point for compostable materials and a distribution point for free seaweed fertiliser, made available through PEG and the Healthy Gardening Group to help budding organic gardeners. The shop acts as a focus for many people involved in organics and other green activities.

SOFI is now a registered charity. With official recognition has come some funding, at first on a very small scale but now growing. This includes help with the costs of printing, putting on courses and paying key people for the work they have done for so long for free. Until recently, SOFI was run on a completely voluntary basis by people who are either unemployed or full-time carers. Now after a decade of unpaid work, Richard has been earning a living organically for the past five years. Darrell, in addition to his teaching work, is employed part-time to manage Heeley City farm's food growing project.

The lack of official support in its early years is the proof of SOFI's strength, and its relevance. It has succeeded simply because a small group of people wanted it to and had the commitment and perseverance to make it happen. Although it has expanded into the fields of education, consultancy and municipal activities, it remains firmly rooted in the soil. The central activity is still the growing of food in the city.