

News / Insight**Thieves rake community orchard clean: Porter**

Community garden vandals are symptoms of a deeper social rot — they are like people who pretend to sleep on the subway, so they don't have to give up their seats for pregnant women, writes columnist Catherine Porter.



CATHERINE PORTER / TORONTO STAR

Parkview Neighbourhood Garden's lead volunteer Lynne Kozina rests in the garden beside her eggplant crop. Vegetable thieves recently raided the crop.

By: [Catherine Porter](#) Columnist, Published on Thu Jul 11 2013

Ben Nobleman Park is the city's [first community](#) orchard.

This month was to be the park's first harvest: cherries.

Sweet cherries from three trees, planted by neighbours in the park at the foot of Allen Rd. at Eglinton Ave. four years ago, when the orchard went in. Since then, those trees have been watered, mulched, tenderly inspected for signs of hope and concern.

The same neighbours transformed a nearby hemlock grove into a stunning garden to draw pollinating bees and appreciative passersby alike.

They raised money for a giant harvest table, made from century-old reclaimed wood, where they could sit together at the end of a long day of pruning or mulching, and one day, juicy eating.

The fruits of their labour are many: new lights in the park, a new path, new playground equipment, new movie nights in the park, new friendships.

They were still waiting for the first fruit.

Fruit trees, they've learned, are like toddlers: they need constant supervision and some luck to mature. They take a few years to bear fruit.

The pear trees got rust from the removed hemlock. One plum tree got a deadly case of black knot. The apples were killed off by the frost, and the cherries came down with a wicked case of leaf spot last summer, which broke everyone's heart, they were so bedraggled and miserable.

Not this year. This year the cherries were looking perfect — rosy and plump.

They planned to pick them together — finally! — last Sunday.

But a thief robbed them of that chance. One morning last week, orchard creator Susan Poizner arrived to the park to find all but four cherries gone.

“We were walking around the tree, wondering, ‘Oh my God what happened?’ ” she says.

A hungry person takes two handfuls. A thief strips the trees bare.

A week earlier, her fellow volunteer Lynn Nicholas had caught a woman hacking at the winter savory and stuffing it into bags.

They are not the only bereft gardeners: A few kilometres away in Willowdale, the Parkview Neighbourhood Gardiners are brooding over another recent midnight heist.

Their garden, dug in beside the [historic John McKenzie house](#), is the city's [first community farmgate](#).

Local volunteers have planted one acre here, and twice a week they wheel out their candy cane beets and purple kale to the sidewalk in an old-fashioned wooden cart to sell to neighbours.

It's whimsical and nutritious and genius: The profits pay for next year's seeds; the rest goes to a local food bank.

Last month, chief volunteer weeder Lynne Kozina arrived one Sunday to find two patches of eggplants decimated. The vegetables hadn't been taken, because they hadn't grown yet. The plants had been snipped, so no eggplant would ever grow.

The patch of parsley had been “clear-cut to the bottom.” The mint was all gone. The chives were dug up. And the once billowy dill? All but a few anemic strands, gone.

“It's human nature to pick a strawberry,” says Kozima. “But this is beyond human nature. This is vandalism. It's rampant destruction.”

As though to emphasize her point, a robin flew by with a raspberry in its beak.

These are sad times in our hot, rainy city.

Of course, there are more pressing issues to consider. But community garden vandals are

symptoms of a deeper social rot. They are like people who pretend to sleep on the subway, so they don't have to give up their seats for pregnant women.

Our country was once a vast commons. But in our greed, every last piece was carved up and privatized. These gardens are an attempt to rekindle what was lost: courtesy, humbleness, partnership, generosity.

"The age of innocence is over," Poizner says. She's just finished a How-to guide for [aspiring urban](#) fruit growers and is planning on including a "Preventing Theft" chapter, right after "Preventing Pests and Disease."

There are many suggested remedies, each more severe than the next.

Fairview already has some homemade "stop thief" signs posted — to no avail. They've also put up some netting to prevent a casual walk-by swipe.

A Leaside Community Gardener suggested dusting the crops with flour and posting "beware fungus" signs — but that would ruin sales and the beauty, and then what's the point?

The police have been notified. They are increasing foot patrols and have suggested security cameras, "violators will be prosecuted" signs and gates that can be locked at night.

I hope they won't lock up the commons, so recently rebuilt.

In her research, Poizner visited a 20-year-old community orchard in Boston. There, a volunteer told her the antidote to theft is simple: Plant more fruit trees.

Catherine Porter's column usually appears on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. She can be reached at cporter@thestar.ca