

URBAN FOOD, FRONT AND CENTRE

Food Up Front, London



Seb Mayfield, right, and friends planting in a front garden (Source: London Permaculture)

Food is becoming more expensive. The need for a sustainable way of producing what we eat is more urgent than ever. And more and more of us are concerned about the quality of our food and where it comes from. The need for a combined solution to these challenges led a student and an office manager to start a social enterprise with the aim of helping people to grow food in their own gardens.

Food Up Front was set up in May 2007 by student Sebastian Mayfield, 28, and Zoë Lujic, 37, an office manager, to encourage Londoners to start growing fruit and vegetables in gardens and on balconies. The pair met while studying for a course in Permaculture, an ecological 'design system' which aims to help people live off the land in a sustainable way. After brainstorming some ideas, they started Food Up Front with a grant from social enterprise support group UnLtd.

At the heart of their project is the realisation that urban front gardens and balconies are usually wasted space, unused by householders. But with a bit of work, these can be converted into plots for growing vegetables, fruit and herbs.

Sebastian and Zoë wanted to encourage people take responsibility, both individually and at a community level, for the food they eat. Growing your own vegetables avoids the rising prices in the shops, and contributes to a healthy, nutritious diet. It also helps the environment: supermarkets emit harmful greenhouse gases when they transport our food across the world from the farm to their shelves. We emit still more when we drive home from the shop to put the food on our plate.

These gases are contributing towards climate change. Many environmentalists speak of watching our 'food miles', making sure we buy locally whenever possible. But when you're growing your own food in your backyard, food miles are reduced to food inches!

There's something undeniably empowering about sitting down to eat a meal that you've prepared, right from the soil to your mouth! And without unnecessary packaging or plastic bags, the amount of waste involved in our food consumption is dramatically reduced.

Growing your own food can also contribute to the life of your community. When Zoë and Sebastian started up their scheme in Wandsworth in southwest London, they found that by bringing people out into their gardens, bonds between neighbours were strengthened.

Community members have started watering each other's gardens when one of them is away on holiday. They've also been swapping seeds and produce. Zoë and Sebastian have organised frequent Food Up Front gatherings, where members can meet each other and exchange tips and recipes.

“Anybody can grow anything even in very small places, just give a try!”

Zoë Lujic, Project Coordinator

In their first year, Zoë and Sebastian attracted nearly fifty people to the project, just from the small area around Wandsworth. With such success behind them, they are now planning to expand the scheme to North London in the coming months. To advertise the scheme, Zoë and Sebastian are organising promotional events and offering membership packages to potential donors.

And why has Food Up Front been so successful? Perhaps because it takes a 'hand-holding' approach to the task at hand, by not assuming that anyone has any prior expertise. Lots of us nowadays lack some of the practical skills which our grandparents had, simply because we've never had to use them. But that doesn't mean we aren't willing to learn!

Food Up Front provides everything that people might need to start up their own garden. This includes free containers, surplus recycling boxes from nearby Lambeth council, anti-pest copper lining, and compost from an organisation that creates it from local waste.

Participants are also given a *Green Garden Guide*, which includes the crucial dates for plant and harvesting your vegetables. And Zoë and Sebastian are always on site to watch the first seeds of the season being planted. With such dedication to their cause, there's little doubt that the seeds of change sown by Food Up Front will be sprouting up again and again in the years to come.

Facts and Information

- Even if you have very little space, you can still grow a lot of food. Food Up Front suggests tomatoes, peppers, peas, beans, courgettes, aubergines and cucumbers. You can also grow fruit like strawberries and blueberries.
- Organic compost is made of recycled garden and kitchen waste, and can also include paper products. It is used to feed and condition the soil and in making potting mixes. Around 40 per cent of the average dustbin contents are suitable for home-composting, so it also helps cut down on landfill too.
- According to environmentalist and author Ken Worpole, front gardens in London are quickly becoming a thing of the past. As people pave over their gardens for car parking spaces, children are deprived of a place to play, and conversation between neighbours becomes more infrequent.
- Gardening can help boost your immune system and improve your mood. Friendly bacteria living in dirt and soil can boost levels of serotonin in the brain, making you feel happier. *(Source: BBC News)*

Further Resources

- To find out more about Food Up Front, visit their website at www.foodupfront.org.
- Permaculture is about creating sustainable human habitats by following nature's patterns. It's an ecological design system that inspires and empowers us to create our own solutions to local and global problems. Find out more at www.permaculture.org.uk.

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