

EDMONTON INSIDE & OUT

by Mike Sadava

Get back in touch with the earth, group urges

A group of city residents helps people grow food, naturalize urban areas

As urban expansion eats away more good land in the name of "progress," a group of Edmontonians is trying to make areas of the city more natural and improve their lives.

With the help of a \$12,645 grant from Environment Canada and support from Alberta Ecotrust, a group called the Fireweed Institute will help 20 families convert a section of their lawns to grow food or plants native to this area.

Elizabeth Lange, a sessional lecturer at the University of Alberta's faculty of extension, is one of the founders of the institute.

This is a small start, she says, but one she hopes will plant the seeds for more naturalization of the urban area and lead to some blurring of the distinction between rural and urban.

Edmonton's farm land is rapidly disappearing. Land where canola grew two

years ago is now Summerside, with the big artificial lake. Little Mountain is being levelled and former natural areas are now the golf course and homes of Lewis Farms and the Grange.

Lange remembers making regular treks to the city from Devon and seeing a family of coyotes where Anthony Henday Drive now snakes through.

This is not a '60s-style back-to-the-land movement, but an effort to encourage people to "get outside and get dirt under their fingernails," and get back in touch with the earth and its rhythms.

"I think about my grandparents because they were totally self-reliant. They grew all their own food — there's a lot of knowledge about how to grow enough food to keep you going for the entire year."

Re-introducing native plants to your backyard is a lot of work as they take a lot of babying, but they don't have to look like weeds. Blue flax, Indian paintbrush, brown-eyed susans all have beautiful blooms. Lange has rescued all sorts of them from Little Mountain and successfully planted them in her garden.

This kind of transformation has happened in public spaces like community gardens, with varying degrees of success, but this is an effort to start developing some expertise among people — with help from experts — in their own backyards.

The Fireweed Institute, named after the plant with purple flowers that is one of the first to appear when an area regenerates after a major forest fire, has a wider agenda.

It's a notion of sustainable living, a way of life that isn't dominated by work or the pursuit of consumer products.

In the mid-'90s, Lange taught some courses about working and living. Many of her students were people who had been caught in the massive government layoffs and looking for ways to re-orient their lives.

For some of them, there were questions about their level of consumption — do they really need two cars or the latest gadget or a new kitchen? Is it worth the stress and the lack of family time?

"What we're telling people is that this is not about sacrificing quality, but try-



CANDACE ELLIOTT, THE JOURNAL

Elizabeth Lange at a garden full of native species behind St. Mary's school.

ing to attain a much higher quality of life," she says.

She has met people who have sacrificed high-powered corporate jobs to spend more time with their families. She hasn't earned more than \$30,000 annually for the past six years.

It does go against the general ethos that life is about working for that 3,000-square-foot, vinyl-sided house filled with gadgets and an SUV in the driveway.

But there is something attractive about working less, owning fewer things, being more self-reliant and having more of

the most unrenewable resource — time.

The Fireweed Institute will be offering a number of courses this fall. For more information please call 433-1830 or e-mail fireweed@telusplanet.net.

If you know of any interesting people, places or activities in the Edmonton area — from the serious to the ridiculous — we'd love to hear from you. Please send us your suggestions by phoning us at 498-5862, fax 429-5500 or e-mail msadava@thejournal.southam.ca.