

**Organizational Profile: FED Urban Farm**

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## **THE ISSUE**

FED Urban Agriculture is a charity headed by the Synergy Foundation which is a registered nonprofit and a branch of Synergy Enterprises (Synergy Foundation, 2025). FED works to increase access to urban agriculture and develop sustainable food systems within the city of Victoria (FED, 2025). The issues that FED is working to address are numerous: food insecurity is faced by many due to the rising cost of living (Hook, 2023; John Lo, 2023); the majority of people in our society do not know how to or have the resources to grow their own food (FED, 2025); and there is an excess of unused space in the urban setting that could be used in ways that benefit both the community and the environment (FED, 2025). FED's work addresses each of these issues head-on. To begin, one of FED's projects is a program that provides garden starter kits that contain the supplies and educational information needed to begin growing food in one's own backyard, allowing people to begin growing their own produce at no cost (FED, 2025). FED also creates opportunities to engage with the local food system and connect with food that is being grown, harvested, and consumed through the creation of urban food demonstration and production gardens throughout the city. These urban learning gardens act as a means of education about primarily native food plants, and also provide food for local pollinators such as bees and hummingbirds (FED, 2025). The land-use issue is addressed through their urban farm, located in Vic West and is placed on land that would be otherwise unusable due to historical industry impacts and is built upon a buried waste deposit. The organization has the unique opportunity to use the land in a creative way by growing produce within grow-bags, which is an above-ground method of agriculture. FED also manages two rooftop gardens atop both Our Place Society and the Songhees Wellness Centre (FED, 2025).

As has been clear in many recent headlines, the rising cost of living is becoming a significant issue for many, both locally and nationally (Bell, 2024; Judd, 2025; Victoria Foundation, 2024), and food insecurity is becoming more of a pressing issue (Hook, 2023; John Lo, 2023). The looming threats of tariffs from the United States do not help matters, with some experts predicting that the introduction of these trade fees will make food exponentially more expensive (Brehaut, 2025). "Canada imports roughly 50% of vegetables and 80% of fruit" (Brehaut, 2025), and with 70% of participants for the Victoria Foundation's Vital Signs 2024

report responding that the cost of living was an issue for them (Victoria Foundation, 2024), this increase in cost for produce would be a devastating hit to many in Victoria.

Food security is an especially important social issue when taking into consideration social determinants of health. This is a term used in sociology to describe the indirect variables that impact individuals' and communities' health (Adler et al., 2016; Short & Mollborn, 2015). For example, communities of colour have historically, and continue to, experienced harmful infrastructure physically situated in proximity to their communities, such as landfills, oil refineries, or busy highways as a function of the devaluing of racialized bodies (Pulido, 2016). This is the kind of infrastructure that would be far less likely to be placed in proximity to wealthy white neighborhoods (Pulido, 2016), and for a reason. Being in the vicinity of something such as an oil refinery can have detrimental effects on health, with reduced air quality and toxins seeping into the land and nearby water systems. This is relevant to FED because the social determinants of health can be positive as well (Leonard et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2016). Community infrastructure that aims at providing a place of gathering, sustainable agriculture infrastructure, and access to fresh, healthy produce can be a major factor in boosting the community's overall health (Taylor et al., 2016). Studies have shown that simply being around greenery has a positive impact on people's mental wellbeing (Gu et al., 2022), and access to a balanced and fresh diet is vital in maintaining a healthy lifestyle (Leonard et al., 2018). Through adding 18,400 sq ft of urban garden space to the city and creating 52,000 lbs of food growing capacity (FED, 2025) among their numerous other endeavors, FED is positively contributing to the social determinants of health within the Greater Victoria area.

Of course, there are other sectors that are working to address the food security issue, such as the BC agricultural sector, which advocates for BC farmers and supports local agriculture (BCAC, 2025). Federal food policy initiatives also exist to strengthen community food security, such as the Local Food Infrastructure Fund (LFIF), which goes towards organizations in an effort to "increase the availability and accessibility of local, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food through food production-focused activity" (Government of Canada, 2024a). However, the nonprofit sector plays a major role in supporting communities in food security and agricultural issues. There are a number of food security focused organizations in the local area that are doing important work, such as Sandown Farm, whose vision is "a region where people of all ages and abilities are involved in regenerative agriculture and stewardship" (Sandown Farm 2021). There

is also Iye Creative, who participate in Community Supported Agriculture and work towards connecting diverse communities with local food systems, and the UVic community garden which rents out urban garden space for campus and community members and “promotes local organic food production, education, and community building”(UVic CCG, 2024), similar to FED. Each and every one of these organizations plays a role in cultivating positive social determinants of health, from reducing barriers to connecting with land and food, to cultivating community, to providing education for people to be able to provide for themselves.

I feel connected with issues of food security as I have been involved with Community Cabbage for three years, a UVic club that reclaims food waste to provide free meals for the community. While I initially joined the club out of curiosity about alternative methods of gathering food, my appreciation for the work we do has grown exponentially as I learn more about the impacts of food waste. Through my participation in Cabbage I have come to understand the flawed systems that create inconceivable amounts of food waste and intentionally dispose of food surpluses as a means of creating and maintaining profit. In Canada, over half of all food produced is wasted every year (Greenpeace, 2020). Locally, the Capital Regional District reports that 16.7% of the overall garbage stream it receives is organic waste, with 10.6% of that being “avoidable or donatable food waste”(Tetra Tech, 2022, p. 8). At the same time, almost 60% of Canadians in 2022 had troubles feeding their families (Nikkel et al., 2022). In 2022 the emissions from landfills alone produced around 17% of Canada’s methane emissions (Government of Canada, 2024b). Our food system is seriously flawed, putting a strain both on communities that are financially struggling and on the environment. In addition to my interest in food security, gardening and farming is something I feel very drawn to and am looking forward to cultivating skills in. I appreciate the centrality of food in the creation of community, mutual aid, and connection to land. I feel extremely disconnected from the food system and dream of being able to cultivate my own food. I also feel disconnected in some respects from the land, and would like to cultivate a deeper relationship to what surrounds me, so I feel very grateful for this opportunity to be involved with FED in this way. Urban agriculture is something I find interesting and I am looking forward to learning more about it, as I appreciate that they not only provide food to communities, but cultivate connections with the community.

## **THE STRUCTURE AND MISSION**

FED's vision is to advance food security and make urban agriculture more accessible to everyone in their community (FED, 2025). Their mission statement is "to create high-impact urban food system projects that contribute to an equitable and regenerative future [...] by creating garden spaces, delivering educational programs, and advocating for urban agriculture without our community" (FED, 2025). FED has been in operation since 2013 and functions as a mixture of both the "service" and "expressive" categories (Hilperts, 2025), delivering both direct services (fresh, local food to families and restaurants) and avenues for expression of cultural, social values, and community through providing education on native plant species. It connects with a multitude of communities, but some of the most prominent are Our Place Society (an organization that "offers Greater Victoria's most vulnerable systems a place to call their own, where [they] live, share, and grow together"(Our Place Society, 2025)) and the Songhees Wellness Centre (a building housing several amenities and governance departments for the Songhees nation (Songhees Nation, 2014)), both of which have FED-managed rooftop gardens that supplement meals for the organizations. In addition to these, the My FED Farm project connected with thirteen community partners in 2023, from the Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness to the YWCA Young Moms Program (FED, 2023). In terms of where FED falls on the "Third sector, the state, and the market" (Hilperts, 2025) diagram, I would place it somewhere in the middle on the private/formal/nonprofit side, but closer to the community side of the diagram than to the private or government sides.

Volunteers are integral to FED's mission, helping with everything from the My FED Farm project to the urban farm (FED, 2025). The number of paid staff is relatively small (but mighty), but FED is currently hiring for three paid summer farm positions (Synergy Foundation, 2025). There are six paid positions within FED at the moment: manager of special projects and engagement (Alistair); program manager (Brianna); program and farm operations manager (Ashley); project coordinator (Madisen); manager of communications and strategic initiatives (Emily); and marketing communications coordinator (Mariana) (FED, 2025). There are fifteen people on the Synergy foundation's team, including FED employees (Synergy Foundation, 2025), and the board of directors for the Synergy foundation consists of five people; a board chair, a vice chair, a treasurer, a secretary, and a director at large.

FED receives funding from many different sources. They have a number of sponsors such as the City of Victoria, Thrifty Foods, and Big Wheel Community Foundation (FED, 2025).

According to a 2023 report (FED, 2023), FED also participated in crowdfunding, partnering with other organizations such as PNW transportation and Redbrick to raise funds for certain projects (FED, 2023). A central aspect of the urban farm is the Community Supported Agriculture program in which individuals can pay an upfront fee for a subscription to a weekly delivery of fresh produce at the beginning of the season. This secures funding for the farm at the start of growing season and helps in the operation of the farm (FED, 2025). The CSA program is the closest structure FED has to membership, and it is available for anyone who is interested through a link on their website. Produce from the farm is also sold at an on-site market, as well as distributed to a number of local restaurants (FED, 2025). According to the organizational task database that FED uses, all FED employees contribute to securing funds for the organization, whether that be writing grant applications or organizing fundraising campaigns (Asana, 2025). According to annual reports, both the Synergy foundation and FED measure success by the impact that has been made on the community. This is to say that the successes highlighted each year are to do with statistics such as how many volunteers were engaged (22 in 2023); how many people directly benefited from their projects (200 people benefitted from My FED Farm in 2023); and how many planters were delivered (150 in 2023) (FED, 2023). The Synergy foundation highlights in their 2023 annual report that FED added 1,200 lbs of food growing capacity, developed relationships with ten community partners, and amassed 157 total volunteer hours (Synergy Foundation, 2023). What stands out to me about the way that success is measured is that it quantifies how many people were helped, or were able to contribute to the mission, or the material actions that were taken rather than a focus on profit or costs in the annual reports.

FED has incredible community engagement, running programs and workshops for education. To me, it seems that this community engagement and volunteer participation makes up a large part of what makes the organization so successful. The engagement FED gets seems to be the lifeblood of their mission. A quote from FED's website that stood out to me as an illustration of the strengths of the organization is that "FED Urban Farm is not just a farm. It is a community asset that serves to connect and engage people of all walks of life with our local food system, demonstrating sustainable and accessible forms of agriculture in the heart of our city" (Whelan, 2025). Another is "we believe that collectively we have the power to reshape the food growing scene in Victoria, reconnecting people with their food and giving them the resources to

supplement their diets with home grown produce”(Lavender, 2020). These quotes, to me, sum up the value that FED provides for the community of Greater Victoria.

The urban farm was run by an organization named Topsoil for many years, and 2024 was the first year that FED took over the operations of the farm (FED, 2025). The transition year was a tough one especially because possession of the farm switched from Topsoil to FED right at the beginning of planting season. Because of this, and the learning curve that comes with learning how to run a farm, the farm’s operations ran on a limited scale last season (A. Howes, personal communication, 2025). However, FED is looking to increase production and operations this year as they are more established with the farm.

COVID had an impact on FED, like it did with every other aspect of society at the time. However, one of FED’s most successful projects, My FED Farm, was actually born of the pandemic (Lavender, 2020)! In 2020, FED launched the program “when the impacts of COVID-19 on our society highlighted the systemic issues of food insecurity that so many people in our community face” (Lavender, 2020). The program allowed for over 500 homes to begin gardening their own produce. So, while it was a difficult time, FED saw the issues that the pandemic highlighted and moved in a direction aimed at providing for the community when it was at a weak point.

## **THE PLACEMENT**

My work with FED will contain a variety of tasks that I am looking forward to. At the beginning of the term, I am going through photos of past FED CSA boxes and compiling lists of core ingredients that are sent out, as well as once-in-a-while seasonal or specialty items. Ultimately I will take this information and create a recipe deck so that when CSA boxes are sent out, people receive ideas about what they can do with the food in their boxes. After I finish this task, the plan is for me to do research for and write a blog post or social media series that FED can post. During the second half of the term, I’ll have more opportunities for hands-on farm work at the urban farm, which I am most excited about.

I am not going into the placement with any preconceived ideas of specific contributions that I want to make to the organization other than hard work and filling in the roles that are helpful to them in achieving their mission. Like Tinkler et al. (2014) remind us in *Key Elements of Effective Service-Learning*, I want to keep an attitude of reciprocity and contribute to the

organization as much as they are contributing to my learning experience while being mindful of their resources and time. So far I have been glad to help them in beginning to create a recipe deck, and I think that work will ultimately be very helpful for them once I have finished. It's hard for me to say so far what my initial impressions of the organization are because I have only spent about 15 minutes in their downtown office and have not yet seen the urban farm. I have only just met two people from the organization, and the rest of the work I've conducted for FED has been remote work, completed on my own time. In the 15 minutes I spent in the FED office I had a feeling of friendly and easy-going professionalism... If that makes sense. The organization gets a lot done, has several projects going at once, and are prominent in the community. They are very accomplished. At the same time, the office space is designed in an open fashion. Employees (I'm told) often bring their dogs to work, and people were very friendly when I got the tour. It seems as if the culture is friendly and supportive while also highly productive.

FED's mission to contribute to Victoria's local food system in a sustainable, equitable, and educational way is a fantastic socially-oriented way of connecting communities in a powerful way. The organization is a key factor in boosting the social determinants of health for the Greater Victoria community through supporting food security and providing education for individuals to be able to provide fresh produce for themselves and their families. In working with them, I expect to learn about food security in a holistic way and to gain a greater appreciation of what it truly means to serve the community.



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