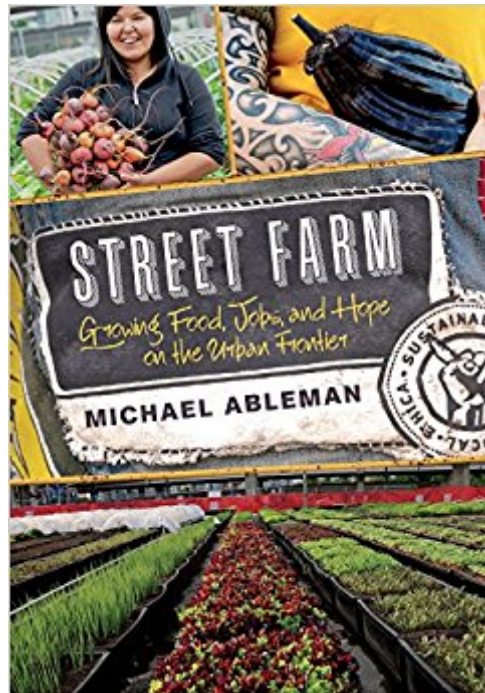




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# Street Farm: Growing Food, Jobs, And Hope On The Urban Frontier



## Synopsis

Street Farm is the inspirational account of residents in the notorious Low Track in Vancouver, British Columbia – one of the worst urban slums in North America – who joined together to create an urban farm as a means of addressing the chronic problems in their neighborhood. It is a story of recovery, of land and food, of people, and of the power of farming and nourishing others as a way to heal our world and ourselves. During the past seven years, Sole Food Street Farms is now North America's largest urban farm project – has transformed acres of vacant and contaminated urban land into street farms that grow artisan-quality fruits and vegetables. By providing jobs, agricultural training, and inclusion in a community of farmers and food lovers, the Sole Food project has empowered dozens of individuals with limited resources who are managing addiction and chronic mental health problems. Sole Food's mission is to encourage small farms in every urban neighborhood so that good food can be accessible to all, and to do so in a manner that allows everyone to participate in the process. In Street Farm, author-photographer-farmer Michael Ableman chronicles the challenges, growth, and success of this groundbreaking project and presents compelling portraits of the neighborhood residents-turned-farmers whose lives have been touched by it. Throughout, he also weaves his philosophy and insights about food and farming, as well as the fundamentals that are the underpinnings of success for both rural farms and urban farms. Street Farm will inspire individuals and communities everywhere by providing a clear vision for combining innovative farming methods with concrete social goals, all of which aim to create healthier and more resilient communities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Most of the world’s people live in cities, and *Street Farm* is a story of how to bring cities back to life, literally and emotionally. The cold, forbidding landscapes of urban life bring our hearts to a standstill. When streets, medians, abandoned land, parks, and byways are transformed by soil, bugs, microbes, pollinators, and seeds, lives bloom. Connectedness flourishes, and people become denizens once again. Local food is not a mere talisman or gesture. We localize food webs near our homes for identity, nourishment, and taste. Taste is a sense, but it is also a common sense. Local food not only addresses quality of life, economy, and food security, it changes our hearts. Michael Ableman has a finely honed sensibility. Read how he gardens society, grows well-being, weeds out despair, and sows hope in this wonderfully written testament to life.”—Paul Hawken, author of *Blessed Unrest*

“Whenever Michael Ableman sees a barrier, he runs over and kicks it in. Lucky for us, this strikingly focused anarchist writes about it too, sharing the deeply moving story of reclaiming land and building real community in the most unlikely places, from the ground up. Read this book and be amazed.”—Dan Barber, chef/co-owner, Blue Hill and Blue Hill at Stone Barns; author of *The Third Plate*

“I have known Michael Ableman for over twenty years. He is one of the pioneers of small-scale urban farming, growing quality food for urban communities. He has worked through the challenges inherent to urban farming and is a premier trainer in the industry. Michael has been and is an inspiration to myself and many urban agriculture leaders around the country and the world.”—Will Allen, founder and CEO, Growing Power

“Michael Ableman is an innovator extraordinaire whose projects have a track record of benchmarking new models of best practice. He is one of the handful of inspiring visionaries on the planet who are redefining our future food systems.”—Patrick Holden, founding director, Sustainable Food Trust

“In this inspiring book, Michael Ableman documents that generating paradise by growing vegetables amidst the urban jungle also rehabilitates lost souls, builds community, and creates genuine economic value. *Street Farm* is a great antidote to pessimism, illustrating how even seemingly broken people can contribute to themselves, to society, and to our shared ecology.”—Gabor Maté, MD, author of *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*

“*Street Farm* tells it like it is on a gritty urban farm, introducing us to rough but real people who learn to live again through growing food and nurturing the soil. Michael Ableman shows us that we can amend distressed soils and distressed communities alike.”—Novella Carpenter, author of *Farm City*

“Michael Ableman

recognises that urban growing is not just about producing lovely, healthy, local food. It's about creating meaningful work that pays a decent living and showing that the cities where most of us now live can play a vital role in building a better, more resilient food system. In *Street Farm*, Michael Ableman writes about many of the issues that we also grapple with as we strive to build a better food system in London. *Sole Food Street Farms* is an uplifting demonstration of how communities really can change the world: inspiration for all those who feel they might be too small or powerless to make a difference.

—Julie Brown, director, Growing Communities

“Michael Ableman examines the heart and soul of urban agriculture through the eyes, hands, and hearts of people in need of a place of civility and serenity. The passion and humility of the farmers who work at *Sole Food Street Farms* in Vancouver shines through. They are neighborhood folks, many with transgressions of addictions, who find solace in farming. Ableman strongly believes that farming must be grounded in an economy in which food has value and so do the people who grow it. From *Street Farm*, we learn that urban agriculture indeed takes a village of planners, politicians, investors, and believers to envision such an economy, with urban agriculture as the new economic engine providing jobs, feeding families, and building communities.

—Karen Washington, urban farm activist; co-founder of Black Urban Growers

“This is the most inspiring book I have read in years. I found myself trembling at the monumental challenges that Michael Ableman and his colleagues faced and overcame in creating a set of urban farms in some of the most downtrodden neighborhoods on the continent. This is a story of hope, disappointment, and hope returning, detailing the mistakes and setbacks as well as the victories and benefits of creating a large-scale food-growing program in a big city. It shows us how far we have yet to go to provide healthy food to any city's underprivileged, but inspires us with the progress that Ableman and others have made. Told in moving vignettes and full of useful tips for those who want to try to heal the urban food grid, this is an important book. It's essential reading for everyone in the urban food movement.

—Toby Hemenway, author of *The Permaculture City* and *Gaia's Garden*

“*Sole Food Street Farms* is living proof that creative social enterprises, thoughtful land use, and green jobs can combine to make cities more inclusive and resilient. Michael Ableman's work and passion helped make Vancouver a global leader in urban food systems, with happier and healthier people.

—Gregor Robertson, mayor, Vancouver, British Columbia

“In a publishing world where trivial passing thoughts are blogged into barely passable books, it is a serious pleasure to come upon a warts-and-all account of a deeply important enterprise. In *Street Farm*, long-time farmer Michael Ableman reports on the triumphs and failures of Vancouver's *Sole Food Street Farms*. The goal of this five-acre network of four

farms— begun in the poorest postal code in Canada— is to produce, from thousands of boxes of planted dirt, not just delicious food but salvaged lives. Candid about the difficulties of creating flourishing farms on hot pavements and of making reliable farm workers of dispirited locals who struggle not only with poverty but with assorted personal demons, Ableman has written an important, inspiring, and bravely honest book.—Joan Gussow, author of *Â Growing, Older* and *Â This Organic Life* —“From skid row to rows of food: Michael Ableman—s interwoven growing skills and people empowerment are beautifully illustrated here by —ground zero— spaces transformed to market gardens. His long experience of creating non-profit urban farms has borne fruit in Vancouver, BC. Sole Food Street Farms produces twenty-five tons of food every year, grown in unlikely places by drug-addicted farmers, softened in the process like the soil they tend. Ableman acknowledges it—s an imperfect endeavour, but these gardens offer hope: —Food—s the next thing, man!—Charles Dowding, no-dig organic market gardener; author of *How to Create a New Vegetable Garden* Publishers Weekly- “In this insightful, inspiring narrative, Ableman explains that he had been a farmer for 40 years when he decided to attend a meeting in an urban slum in Vancouver, British Columbia, called Low Track. That meeting and several more resulted in Sole Food Street Farms, which is currently operating four urban farms in downtown Vancouver. The produce is sold to local restaurants and at farmers— markets, in addition to stocking some of the city—s food pantries. Ableman says the organization—s goals go beyond simply supplying food. The farms are staffed by local residents— some homeless, some with substance abuse issues— and serve as community hubs. In this mix of memoir and guide, Ableman shares his experiences in farming and operating a social service organization. Navigating regulations, budgeting, wooing investors, dealing with landlords, and training employees are just some of the hurdles Ableman covers, in addition to basic farming techniques. Those interested in starting their own neighborhood or urban garden will deeply appreciate his insight into urban farming—s unique challenges and opportunities. While some might find this a cautionary tale (theft and crime are omnipresent, and an urban setting adds even more complexity to the already challenging task of farming), those serious about embarking on a similar endeavor will find a mix of inspiration and solid advice they—ll want to keep close at hand.—

Michael Ableman, the cofounder and director of Sole Food Street Farms, is one of the early visionaries of the urban agriculture movement. He has created high-profile urban farms in Watts, California; Goleta, California; and Vancouver, British Columbia. Ableman has also worked on and

advised dozens of similar projects throughout North America and the Caribbean, and he is the founder of the nonprofit Center for Urban Agriculture. He is the subject of the award-winning PBS film *Beyond Organic* narrated by Meryl Streep. His previous books include *From the Good Earth*, *On Good Land*, and *Fields of Plenty*. Ableman lives and farms at the 120-acre Foxglove Farm on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia.

When you have finished reading this book, you will feel a strong sense of hope. Michael Ableman is a gifted storyteller--in words and photos. The story of the human connection with the land and the life-sustaining magic of the soil is one that Ableman has told so well in previous books, so much so that they remain as the seminal tomes that have inspired those fueling the revival of local, intensive, human-scale agriculture. *Street Farm* goes beyond by describing, in an extremely touching way, an almost unbelievable case study of an urban farming venture Ableman launched in the heart of Vancouver's downtown, employing those society has left behind. Ableman's story reveals the power of this experience for him, having learned much about those who are far less privileged than most and, for those who benefited from having a purpose in life that connected them to nature's most basic wonders that are revealed in farming.

In *Street Farm*, Michael Ableman narrates the gritty tale of getting land and growing food in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, "home of the term skid row", the notorious hell realm of hungry ghosts. The background conversation of *Sole Food* farms was about a way to provide jobs for the most unlikely, the ones without hope, and as Ableman shares, the ones who need a reason to get out of bed each day, "a choice to make something that is life-giving". *Street Farm* introduces us to characters many of us would never meet so intimately; the homeless addicts we fear will rob us or worse *ÀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ â œ* reveal to us life's unfair cruelties. Besides the bigger picture of healing a community with good food and meaningful work, Ableman gets us to look at local food in a new way; just how local is that Nicose salad served in February? Local food in Vancouver has become a trend and *Sole Food* is at the helm, thanks to forward-thinking chefs & restaurants supporting where and who is involved with their *ÀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ â œ* our *ÀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ â œ* food. More than a book, *Street Farm* is a portal into the heart & soul of the once vacant lands of lost souls *ÀfÂçÃ â ÑÃ â œ* proving anything is possible.

This book reveals the deep connection we all have to nature and to meaningful work and the power of both to redeem our lives. It reads almost like a mystery, keeping us in suspense as Ableman and

his fellow farmers encounter never ending challenges that many times appear to be insurmountable. Told with engaging prose and evocative photographs Ableman's story is one of recovering the undying beauty and dignity of humanity in a place where all hope was lost.

I've toured their farm on Pacific Boulevard months before this book was published as part of a Food and Theology course I took. It's amazing what sort of production and variety they get out of their farms and with zero wastage and a man-made marsh to deal with any potential run-off from their farm. So cool! The book was such an inspiring read and gives hope for not only successful urban farm production but hope for transforming the lives of those we often ignore or forget about. Michael gives examples of human successes but not without giving a good dose of reality in going against the grain, working and engaging with the addicted and the marginalized. Social justice, food justice, earth justice is woven into this beautiful book and its encouraging stories. Thank you Michael and your farmers for renewing the landscape of Vancouver.

“The care of the Earth is our most ancient and most worthy, and after all our most pleasing responsibility. To cherish what remains of it and to foster its renewal is our only hope.”

Wendell Berry

Even before I finished reading Street Farm I began to reread, to revisit whole chapters, to encounter anew the raw truth and the refinement revealed by this exceptional story teller. From the opening portrayals of contradiction and compromise playing out in the city's back alleys, all the way through to the precise descriptions of how to set up an irresistible produce stand at the farmers' market, every chapter is brilliant and provocative. Within the context of Sole Food, a large scale experiment in urban agriculture and job creation, Michael Ableman has recounted a tale of gutsy innovation and courageous connections, of unanticipated synergy and surprise in unlikely relationships. The story shows us the subtle lessons that result from mindfulness in leadership. It demonstrates the challenging path this non-profit team is forging through an urban frontier, one that at times requires trial and error methods to get past or go around an array of threats and setbacks. Michael bears witness to powerful emotion stirring in the hearts and bodies of skid row residents-turned-farmers as they experience the glorious beauty of fruits and vegetables responding to their care and attention. He uncovers hope and meaning within confusion and pain. He acknowledges those who help on occasion, both individual benefactors and also companies and city government. Inasmuch as Street Farm reveals communion and community developed through visioning, trust and

perseverance, at the same time it underscores the cycles and insecurities of change and impermanence that make us wonder about the future of the Sole Food project. Michael Ableman has written about food and family with an honest, graphic, non-judgemental and intelligent language. Are there social workers, city planners or adult educators on your gift list? How about aspiring writers and storytellers? Or farmers, urban or otherwise? This is a good book for them. I consider this compelling story to be an excellent resource and a stunning inspiration for all of us who long to better understand food and community ties in complex urban settings. In *Street Farm, Growing Food, Jobs, and Hope on the Urban Frontier*, the communication is dynamic, beautiful and successful, and devoid of artifice. Pamela Rose

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