

# Growing Up, Growing Food: A Teenage Farmer to Watch

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By [Darcy Smit](#)



Sara Dent

Think you don't regret all those high school afternoons wasted at the mall or the skate park? Just wait till you meet Sophia Vartanian, a Vancouver, B.C.-based urban farmer. At 16 years old, her resume is already more impressive than some twice her age. On the day we spoke, she was busy wrestling a solar panel project into fruition, laying the groundwork for a farm at her high school, and gearing up to deliver a [TEDxKids B.C.](#) talk titled "Don't Eat Your Farmer."

Vartanian gave me a tour of her high school — or rather, her high school lawn, which currently houses a few sparsely planted raised beds. The sunflowers and radishes had gone to seed, and although it was a valiant effort at community gardening, it was also a far cry from the full-

fledged farm she has planned. She envisions a closed-loop system complete with compost, grey water reclamation, and rainwater collection — and, of course, lots of vegetables. “We want chickens and goats too; that’s the ideal,” she adds.

Vartanian intends that the farm become “a part of the school’s fabric, something that grows along with the whole community,” an educational tool as well as a source of healthy food for the cafeteria. She admits she’s been known to starve when she forgets her lunch because she’s uncomfortable with where the cafeteria food comes from. This young farmer’s idea of a closed loop doesn’t stop at compost. She’d like to see biology students learning hands-on at the farm, and home-ec students putting their talents to the test on freshly harvested veggies, creating a different sort of school lunch — one she would actually eat.

Born to Soviet expats, much of Vartanian’s unconventional childhood was spent outside, exploring the forest. “I just love nature. And I got it into my head that I wouldn’t have that if we kept polluting the planet. It’s kind of a clichéd way of getting to sustainability, but it got me there.”

Vartanian has been volunteering every free moment at the [University of British Columbia’s Centre for Sustainable Food Systems Farm](#) weeding, harvesting, working the farmers market — and soaking up knowledge from Vancouver’s growing community of urban farmers.

She also works with [Young Agrarians](#), a network of green-thumbed young farmers, foodies, and nature-philes dedicated to growing the ecological agriculture movement in British Columbia. Inspired by [the Greenhorns](#) in the U.S., they hope to go national next year. Sara Dent, coordinator for the project, calls Vartanian “a brilliant young agrarian. She’s using her voice as a food advocate for change, and she’s one of the small but growing number of incredible young people who are stepping up to farm.”

The stats in Canada are dismal, and Vartanian knows them by heart. The average age of a Canadian farmer is 55 (not much different than the U.S., where it’s 56), and for her that’s too old. “We have amazing people growing our food right now,” she adds. “But they’ll be moving into retirement soon.”

Vartanian will be focusing her energy on the next generation of growers, profiling young farmers for the Young Agrarians’ digital resource map project, which will gather people, places, and projects into a user-friendly online hub. She’s also building her own community in the process, meeting mentors and, in turn, inspiring others. She loves the outreach process “because you get exposed to so many different life stories that all end up in the same place: urban farming.”

Vartanian will be sharing some of these stories in her TEDxKids presentation, where she won’t have much trouble convincing the crowd that ecological agriculture is the answer. She’s thrilled to have a forum — she discovered the opportunity just before the deadline, and rather than push it back a year, decided to apply anyway.

“I have this philosophy that you should always do what you’re not really ready for and you’ll learn,” she tells me. She’s looking to mobilize a generation, to create awareness at the local level.

“I think sustainability has to start on the citizen scale. It’s a lifestyle that you can sustain and feel good about where all the threads come back to you. All the resources can be traced back to you; there are only a few steps between you and what you’re using.”

If today’s young adults belong to Generation Y (more fondly known as the Peter Pan generation), Vartanian — motivated and mature — will undoubtedly be at the vanguard of Generation *How*, picking up the pieces of sustainability after decades of environmental and cultural neglect. Sorry, kids — thanks for cleaning up the mess.”

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