

10 Steps Toward an Incredible Edible Town



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By

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All images used courtesy of Incredible Edible Todmorden.

Six years ago, a woman in a small town called Todmorden, at the back end of a Yorkshire valley in the north of England, dug up her prize rose garden. She planted vegetables, knocked down the garden wall, and put up a sign saying "Help Yourself".

and medicinal plants.

But that's not all. There are now 50 Incredible Edible groups across the UK and around 300 in France. More are popping up all the time, from Montreal to Mali. People worldwide are making connections and changing the way they think about food.

So how can your town become Incredible Edible? Here are some steps you could take:

1. Start with what you have, not what you haven't.

Cities and neighborhoods around the world face similar problems. People struggle to find work, look after the kids, pay the bills. But they have enormous energy and resources of friends, families, skills, and connections. The cornerstone of an Incredible Edible town is its people.

2. Don't write a strategy document.

There isn't a blueprint or a magic formula, other than to get stuck in. Start first and apply for funds later. The money should be the servant of the project, not the other way around.

Incredible Edible Todmorden has attracted plenty of grant money, including half a million pounds to build a cutting-edge aquaponics center in the grounds of the town's high school. But the vision and the action came first.



3. Don't wait for permission.

As Incredible Edible Todmorden co-founder Pam Warhurst says, it takes too long and you're improving the place anyway. In Todmorden, there was a derelict health center where Britain's most prolific serial killer, Dr. Harold Shipman, once practiced. A place people used to avoid was planted with beans and brassicas, and became productive and useful.

Groups around the world are now creating edible towns, [edible campuses](#), even an [Edible Bus Stop](#). If you're not sure how to start, find one of them and ask how they did it. And if you run into opposition, take the advice of Todmorden's Nick Green: "Smother your enemies with love."

in Todmorden, they have a motto: if you eat, you're in. If your project is only for sandal-wearing vegans who hand-knit their clothes from home-grown hemp, you might not have many backers. Incredible Edible projects attract people from all political and religious persuasions, professions, and social backgrounds.

There's a serious message about fixing a broken food system and helping people to take control of their own futures in a way that sustains the planet now and for our children. But you don't need to pile political baggage on top before anyone can join in. Make it easy and fun.

5. Propaganda planting starts conversations.

You'd be amazed how much difference a "Help Yourself" sign can make. Neighbors talk to each other. Vegetables planted in unloved public places start conversations about how a town can look better. When the police station is surrounded by corn or beetroot, people chat to the cops again.

6. Make connections.

A lot of what you want is what other people want. Incredible Edible Todmorden wanted people to be able to eat fresh, healthy food picked on their doorstep. So did the doctors at the new health center — so the prickly shrubs outside it were pulled up and replaced with fruit bushes. Market traders want more customers; Incredible Edible wanted places where people could buy locally produced food. That's a shared agenda.

Bureaucrats in the local council can be friends, too. They want places that are buzzing and happy, not run-down and depressed. Ask them how you can help them do that, and suggest they hand over land they're not using.



7. Start now, but think two generations ahead.

There's much more to the Incredible Edible ethos than community growing. It's about rethinking the way we do food and creating more resilient and capable places, producing what we can ourselves to minimize waste and our dependency on industrial-scale food production and retailing.

is teaching children how to grow food and serving up local produce in its kitchen.

8. Rediscover lost skills.

Skills of food preparation that used to exist in all our communities are being lost as people become more dependent on big-store retailers and packaged meals. Our elders are often the only ones left who know how to use [every bit of a sheep](#) or a pig, what to do with vegetables like kale or chard, or how to turn leftovers into delicious soups. Use their skills to reconnect the generations.

9. Reconnect businesses with their customers.

Incredible Edible is all about building local resilience, but it isn't anti-business. Alongside community and learning, the third key strand of Incredible Edible is enterprise. In Todmorden, there's a cheesemaker and a rare breed pig farmer who are now succeeding because of Incredible Edible. There are new opportunities for market traders. There's a social enterprise, [Incredible Farm](#), which is selling fruit trees and salads and providing classes and workshops for young people.

There are business effects you might not have expected, too. The arrival of "vegetable tourists" from around the world is providing customers for hotels and guest houses, restaurants and bars.



10. Redesign your town.

When communities are having conversations, schools and colleges are putting food at the heart of learning, and businesses are discovering the value of local produce, it starts to rebuild a functioning local economy.

But you could go further still. Look at your town and imagine how it could be redesigned to support food production and encourage biodiversity. In Todmorden, a Green Route now connects a town that was divided by busy roads. You can walk by the canal, through the health centre, past the theatre and market, and up to the railway station, and find fruit, vegetables and pollinator-friendly plants wherever you go.

Once you start thinking about the town as a whole, you can identify the challenges and find new ways to address them. It takes time and there are always pitfalls. But whatever happens in the future, Incredible Edible has changed Todmorden.

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