

# Why hasn't the gardening industry been disrupted yet?

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Nicolas Cadilhac's website, [PlantCatching.com](http://PlantCatching.com), attracted plenty of local and international media attention after the Montreal resident launched it in 2011. The site, which allows gardeners to share seeds, plants, soil and other surplus gardening materials, was even mentioned in the Los Angeles Times.

News organizations called it "the Airbnb of gardening" – a reasonable comparison, at least functionally speaking. Similar to the peer-to-peer accommodation rental site, PlantCatching was designed to be used anywhere in the world. It allows individuals to post items they want to give away, and their offerings show up on a map. Interested u



In spite of the buzz it generated, PlantCatching never reached Airbnb's status. Across Quebec, and in Cadilhac's native France, it was enthusiastically embraced by amateur gardeners and professional horticulturalists alike. At one point, Cadilhac even heard of plant lovers using it as far away as Afghanistan and Japan. But PlantCatching failed to catch on as a mainstream gardening hub.

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A mild-mannered software- and web-developer who finds serenity in tending to his leafy, green yard, Cadilhac says he never intended for PlantCatching to be a commercial enterprise. It was always meant to be a free platform to support sharing among his fellow gardeners. Thus, after failing to find a business model that could cover its costs without compromising his vision, he decided to take a step back from the project about two years ago. The website remains active, but Cadilhac is no longer as invested as he once was in its growth.

"I love the idea, but I have no time," he says.

PlantCatching's trajectory is not unique in the world of gardening startups. Although entrepreneurial ventures have disrupted many other facets of our lives over the past decade, the way we garden has largely remained unchanged. Uber, for instance, has transformed public transportation. Airbnb has altered the way we vacation. The meal-kit delivery service Chefs Plate has changed the way we cook and shop for groceries. And businesses such as Rent The Chicken have even shaped the way we keep backyard hens. But no major player has done the same for gardening – at least, not yet.

This has not been for lack of creativity. In 2009, the non-profit LifeCycles Project Society in Victoria, started a website called SharingBackyards.com, where individuals with space to spare could connect with people looking for plots to garden. The project attracted hundreds of users across the country, as far as the Maritimes, says Matthew Kemshaw, executive director of LifeCycles. But, as with other free, charity-run gardening operations, SharingBackyards relied

Kemshaw suggests one reason gardening has not yet been disrupted is a hesitancy among gardeners to monetize activities related to growing and backyard food production.

“There’s this perception that it should be a community initiative and done for free and in the spirit of sharing. And it’s hard to build an Uber or Airbnb without that kind of currency,” he says.

As a result, he adds, such ventures have largely been the domain of non-profits, and have tended to be neighbourhood-based or regional in scope. Kemshaw says his organization has been grappling with this reluctance to charge users, as it works to develop a new online application called the Gleaning Hub. The tool connects property owners who have fruit trees with volunteers willing to maintain and harvest them.

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A potential solution may be to offer the Gleaning Hub technology to other urban fruit tree projects across North America on a fee-for-service basis, Kemsshaw says. He hopes this could generate at least enough revenue to maintain the application and ensure that it remains sustainable.

Another possible obstacle is that gardening is fundamentally a hands-on activity, says Lorraine Johnson, the Toronto-based author of *City Farmer: Adventures in Urban Food Growing*.

Landscaping companies have traditionally served homeowners who desire nice gardens but don't actually want or have time to tend to them. But those interested in doing their own gardening typically do it for pleasure, so are unlikely to outsource that work, Johnson says. "I speculate that that's one of the reasons why there haven't been so many startups or unusual new [business] models."

While there are numerous gardening apps that do such things as calculate the amount of fertilizer you need or let you record when you water your plants, they tend to serve a niche market. Johnson says she can see how these apps may be useful, but they aren't likely to change the way she gardens.

After all, she says, one of the oldest pieces of advice in gardening is to spend a lot of time getting to know your own space – to pay attention to the soil conditions, to observe the light and shade and to consider how much rain has fallen.

"I don't think anything can replace that experiential connection that gardening is about," she says.

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In Santa Rosa, Calif., gardening entrepreneurs Amanda Dunker and Jeremy Nusser say they altered their business model after they realized their clients weren't so interested in having their company do all the work for them. Instead, customers wanted to learn how to be better gardeners themselves.

Dunker and Nusser launched their company Avalow in 2016. They offer a subscription service that includes garden beds, along with all the plants and materials needed to grow an edible garden. For a



Initially, Dunker says, Avalow offered a “concierge” service, where the company would do all the garden maintenance and harvesting. But over the past year, they’ve changed it to an “assist” service, where the company’s gardeners act as mentors.

“We’re still visiting their gardens once a week ... but this time around, we’re educating,” she says. “We’re teaching people why we’re doing things, when we’re doing things, and we’re engaging with our clients so that they’re actually in their gardens as well.”

Dunker and Nusser have ambitious plans to expand their company beyond Sonoma county and the neighbouring area, where they currently have around 150 garden beds installed in backyards, on condominium decks, in businesses and schools. They plan to start shipping their proprietary garden beds internationally as early as this fall, and to offer remote support via a mobile app.

If gardening hasn’t been disrupted yet, the couple says they see an opportunity to do it now, at a time when consumers are interested in eating more vegetables, sharing photos of their gardens on social media and knowing where their food comes from.

“We want to go worldwide,” Nusser says. “This is something we think ... really hasn’t been done and definitely hasn’t been done very well in a lot of different formats. And there’s definitely a need to help people learn how to garden.”

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