OISE Community Learning Garden

Annual Report 2016
Introduction

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto has demonstrated its commitment to Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) by embedding ESE into the educational programming, organizational practices, and set-up of our facilities. This focus, on cultivating a culture of sustainability at OISE, is a means to take an active role in addressing the environmental challenges of our times – climate change, loss of biodiversity, water and air pollution, to name only a few. It is also a way to demonstrate OISE’s belief in the role that education at all levels can play in bringing about positive social and environmental change. In this, it is a response which began eight years ago in earnest to the Ontario Ministry of Education environmental education policy (Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow, 2009), and has helped OISE to accomplish its mandate to strive for social and ecological responsibility.

One of the most visible manifestations of this work is OISE’s Community Learning Garden, thanks to funding by TD Friends of the Environment Foundation. The Learning Garden is cared for by students, staff, and faculty to support integrated learning in, about and for the environment. This report aims to capture a sense of the Garden’s successes for 2016, which has now finished its fourth growing season.

Teachers from OISE’s professional development ‘AQ’ courses learn in and from the Garden.
OISE Community Learning Garden

The Learning Garden began as a way to celebrate a variety of themes important to teaching, learning and research at OISE, including equity and diversity in education, Aboriginal Education, and environmental and sustainability education. It is comprised of six distinct gardens found in large planters across the front of the OISE building at 252 Bloor Street West; it is located near the north end of the University of Toronto’s St. George campus. It is situated in an ideal location, juxtaposed between the private spaces of the institution and the public areas that surround it, between classroom and community, acting as a connection from natural to human-made surroundings.

The Garden is visible from the OISE library’s front windows, and serves as a constant reminder to those inside to embrace a growth mindset. The Garden’s inaugural planting day in 2013 marked the beginning of a view that focused less on the concrete of the building and more on the natural components of the Garden. This eye-catching ESE initiative has established itself as a natural focal point and meeting place, drawing together students, staff, faculty and community members in engaging ways.

Each of the six gardens was created to honour foundational concepts of teaching, learning, and research at OISE: Equity and Inclusive Education, Aboriginal Education, Holistic Education, Creativity in Education, and Environmental and Sustainability Education. Each garden contains carefully selected plants to reflect its core concepts through a vivid visual representation; in all there are 35 different indigenous plant species that thrive, aiming to showcase OISE’s pedagogical and curricular approaches for the local community. Individual garden information and maps can be found at http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/ese/OISE_Learning_Garden/
Garden Highlights 2016

We welcomed visitors of all types early on in the growing season. From the outset, one furry squirrel began planting its own seeds in various gardens.

We had many helping hands preparing for the planting day in May. Each pair of volunteers worked with a garden map to plant according to companion planting.

Plants flourished early in the growing season. This made visits with the OISE Early Learning Centre extra vibrant! Young minds were able to create art using food and leaves. They were intrigued by the sights and sounds so close to their door!

The OISE Learning Garden was also the focal point of a pilot program with a class from a nearby school. They began with a visit to the worm bin to learn about vermicomposting before making their way to the Garden to learn about its plants and wildlife.

Later in the fall, harvesting seeds from the Garden brought over 20 community members together to share in the saving of seeds for the OISE Seed Library.
Supporting Our Community Garden

Many hands and supportive minds are at work in the OISE Learning Garden, but it is able to thrive through the generosity of the TD Friends of the Environment Foundation. The TDFEF grant allowed us to fund the following:

- training for 2 work-study students (fall/winter & spring/summer)
- 14 garden-based workshops and events for the OISE community (see page 7)
- new plants to replace those that didn’t survive the winter
- gardening and event supplies such as gardening gloves, trowels, seeds, compost, natural fertilizer, etc.
- website support/development and promotional materials.

In addition to the grant, support came from the OISE community members who gave:

- time and energy to assist with seeding, planting, and Garden maintenance
- enthusiasm for and dedication to attending events and workshops, writing social media posts, and creating materials for the website
- spreading their learning through lessons and volunteer hours in school gardens across the GTA in the spring and fall during their teaching practica
- new homes for the seeds that came from the Garden, spreading these native plant species far and wide.

The hot weather helped to grow abundance of milkweed, bee balm and coneflowers this summer, much appreciated by the bees and butterflies in the Garden.
Growing Beyond the Garden Borders

The Learning Garden Team witnessed the participation of a range of visitors to the Garden, whether they walked, crawled, or flew in! These visitors helped spread its ideas well beyond the Garden’s physical borders, spreading its pollen, seeds, and ideas far and wide.

More-than-human Friends

With so many plants, the garden was a perfect destination for many insects to frequent, live and thrive. We observed a lot of insect activity, from bumble bees, vespula wasps (yellow jackets), ladybugs, caterpillars, butterflies, aphids, and some unidentified bugs. Sometimes our plants were a little too popular: by October aphids were covering the milkweed plants, and we hope they won’t have a lasting effect on these into the next growing season.

Social Media Pollination

The OISE Learning Garden Team maintained an active social media presence online, using Twitter (@OISEese), Facebook (@OISEESE), and Instagram (@learnOISEESE) to share photographs and garden events with many individual and community followers. We continued to add new content to our Down and Dirty garden blog to share what’s growing in the garden, and also to capture and inspire moments of educational gardening and ESE in action. Our website has become a popular destination for those wanting to learn about educational gardening.

Student Training

This year, the Learning Garden trained over a dozen OISE students who regularly spent over 400+ hours honing their skills through working with the garden, maintaining the website and blog, leading and facilitating workshops, and pursuing curriculum development related gardening in their practica. Over 500+ people attended events connected to the Garden.
Key Teaching & Learning Events

The Learning Garden team continued to use the garden as starting point for helping the OISE community learn about the positive impacts of greening urban spaces for adults, children and the environment. The garden has also been a springboard for meaningful dialogue surrounding Indigenous culture; nature-based learning; place-based learning; equity, inclusion, social justice, & environmental justice; creativity; and holistic learning.

Winter/Spring/Summer Events 2016

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OISE EcoFair</td>
<td>January 8</td>
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<td>'Bee’ the Change: Eco-Art Workshop</td>
<td>January 28</td>
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<td>Spring Planting Event</td>
<td>May 25</td>
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<td>Pollinating Partnerships</td>
<td>June 4</td>
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<td>Place-based Learning</td>
<td>July 6</td>
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<td>AQ Workshops</td>
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<td>Early Learning Years Workshop</td>
<td>July 2016</td>
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<td>Learning Garden Open House</td>
<td>July 14</td>
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Fall Events 2016

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<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pilot: Elementary Program</td>
<td>September 13</td>
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<td>Learning Garden Open House</td>
<td>September 19</td>
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<td>Planting Seeds for Change</td>
<td>October 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natural Curiosity: ESE in the Elementary Years</td>
<td>October 13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eco-Art Installation Workshop</td>
<td>October 20</td>
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<td>Food Literacy Education: A Recipe for Change!</td>
<td>October 25</td>
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Learning Garden Feedback

Last summer, a few of my cohort friends and I began working on the Learning Garden. When signing up to water the garden, I decided to partner up with a friend to water together after our summer semester classes. We bonded over collaboratively watering the plants and it became a nice break from sitting inside all day working on our coursework. And since we planted the seeds together, we became very proud to see the plants grow beautifully over the months. As someone who is new to the city, it strengthened my connection to the OISE community and deepened my friendships with other OISE students. This type of connection to the place and community through collaborative environmental initiatives is something I hope to bring into my future classrooms. For me, the Garden is now filled with memories of friendship and hard work we have all put in over the summer.

-- Learning Garden Team Member

For me, working with the OISE Learning Garden was partly about being wanting to contribute to the OISE, U of T and Toronto community, but volunteering with the garden was also largely about my own learning. As someone who is passionate about environmental initiatives but does not always get involved, this was really an opportunity for me to learn more different environmental and social issues while also actively working for the environment. I have learned a lot about the different types of plants in the gardens as well as about setting up a garden in general, which overall has been a rewarding learning experience. -- OISE Student

I’m so pleased with the OISE/UT Learning Garden. There are some very dedicated volunteers that turn it and ensure that they provide environmental education through diverse perspectives. I love walking by in the warmer months and seeing bees of all kinds floating between the flowers! -- OISE Student

I am so grateful to be able to pass the garden every day on my daily walks. It’s truly a pleasure to see and a reminder that we need to embrace nature and acknowledge all its beauty. -- OISE Staff
It has been a joy watching the OISE Learning Garden grow over the intercession and summer. I was involved mostly in the beginning, when it came to planting everything for the first time. Since then, I have watched the plants grow to surprising heights, brightening up what is the awful concrete face of our building. As a volunteer, I was also aware of exactly what was being planted and for what reasons. I made sure to share this information with my friends or whoever was with me at the time that we were passing the gardens - sometimes a random stranger would even stop by and comment or ask about a certain plant! This was the best opportunity for us to refer them to the learning garden website and share with them the significance of the project. It is always a pleasure to stop by and smell the milkweed! -- OISE Student

I was so excited this year to learn about the seed bank that is housed in the OISE library. Although, I am not studying to be a teacher, I feel that I play a vital role in the education of my three young children and of the children in our community. As such, over the last two years, we have created our own children’s community garden in our neighbourhood. In the spring of last year, I collected seeds from the OISE Seed Bank and the children planted them in our garden. By watching the seeds grow and being able to cultivate the fruits and veggies from those seeds, the children in our community are continually reminded about and have learned to truly appreciate where our food comes from. It’s also a great opportunity to teach them about their role in keeping our earth sustainable. I am truly grateful that we have the OISE Learning Garden as it inspires me every day to teach what I can to the kids (and sometimes adults) in my own community. -- OISE Staff
I have family that is so involved in all of this. I am able to showcase my pride and say that my institution makes the environment a priority! -- Community Member

I didn’t know that you had so much information about the plants online! Now I can share information with my friends and colleagues. -- OISE Student

I think your work in the Garden is so fantastic. I love trying to pick out different plant species. When I can’t, it reminds me that I have so much to learn, yet I’m still able to enjoy the view. -- Community Member

As property manager of OISE, I spend a lot of time on sites and viewing building grounds. When we look at the Bloor streetscape, all we see is concrete, buildings, cars and some trees trying to survive within the allotted earth exposed on the sidewalks. It is refreshing to view some greenery when walking, driving or cycling. I have noticed people walking and stopping for a minute in front of OISE looking at the various planting materials – nature does have a calming effect on us all. I always praise the individuals who look after the plants during the summer – watering, pruning and maintaining the grounds. And remind them of the smile they place on everyone who walks, cycles and drives by OISE after viewing the garden. In some cases, pedestrians stop in front of the garden, take a deep breath, smile, and some close their eyes for an instant, as if to connect with nature, in the midst of downtown Toronto. Great job in maintaining the garden in front of OISE, and for bringing nature to the downtown core.

-- OISE Property Manager

I really enjoyed seeing the connection between the Learning Garden and the annual environmental art installation in the garden. The bee artwork grabbed my attention through its graphic design, and helped me to learn about the challenges bees face in Ontario and beyond. I’m watching more carefully for bees as a result in the Learning Garden – happy to see we have lots!

-- OISE Faculty member

Sorting seeds at the Seed Saving Workshop

‘Bee the Change’ Eco-Artwork
I honestly don’t know what I love more: seeing all of the gardens from across the street or being nearby to be able to take in the wonderful scents. -- OISE Student

The Learning Gardens have been a wonderful addition to my learning experience at OISE. The gardens have provided a space for many for hands on activities like seed collection and plant identification. And we have also gained a better insight into how we can use Learning Gardens in our schools to create amazing teaching and learning opportunities across the curriculum. The OISE Learning Garden not only serves as a teaching tool for ESE Initiatives and Science, Art and Math-based lessons, but also demonstrates support for student well-being through team building, student involvement and adding a natural aesthetic element to the OISE campus for all to enjoy. -- OISE Student

The OISE Community Learning Garden was a positive hands-on experience that gave me the opportunity to collaborate with my peers and grow in appreciation of the earth. From planting to harvesting the seeds, I have greatly benefitted from being a member of the ESE community. -- OISE Student

Some of the members of the Learning Garden Team at the September Open House sharing the fruits of their labours
Looking Ahead

As we look back on all that we have been able to accomplish through the OISE Community Learning Garden this past year, we look forward to the events, workshops and learning that continue to flourish. We will be developing the following activities:

- **Expanding Audiences through Educational Programming and Resource Development:** We will continue to develop new content, programming and events to make the Learning Garden appeal to broader audiences. We’re aiming to offer new programming on educational gardens for local schools. We will also continue to expand the resources on our website for those who can’t visit the Learning Garden in person.

- **Forging Meaningful Relationships:** We will continue to use the Learning Garden to inspire conversations in and between OISE students, staff and faculty, as well as with teachers from the TDSB and other school boards, about educational gardens and approaches to ESE within K-12 classrooms.

- **Creating Eco-Art related to the Garden:** We will once again make sustainability prominent at OISE through the installation of an environmental artwork, created collaboratively by OISE students; this year’s theme is on the challenges faced by Ontario butterflies. It will be installed with our other eco-artworks in the main stairwell at OISE as a way to encourage the OISE community to ‘Take the Stairs’.

- **Sowing Seeds:** We will continue to support the OISE branch of the Toronto Seed Library by supplying it with seeds from the Learning Garden, and by promoting its presence on campus.

- **Building our Community via the Learning Garden:** The garden consistently acts as a catalyst for community connections between members of the OISE community and with nature. The care that is needed to tend a garden is closely tied to what it takes to build an inclusive, thriving community. The Learning Garden requires its community members to be responsible for a place, and be conscious of how their actions impact the social and ecological well-being of their surroundings.

Learning Garden Open House, September 2016
Many Thanks!

The OISE Learning Garden Team would like to express our sincere appreciation of TDFEF’s contribution to the development of our Learning Garden.

Thank you for your support in OISE’s ESE initiatives!