OISE Community Learning Garden

Year-End Report
TD Friends of the Environment Foundation
June 2014
Introduction

Over the last five years faculty and students at OISE have been investigating new ways of infusing environmental and sustainability education (ESE) into our programs, organizational culture and physical infrastructure in hopes of embedding and manifesting a culture of sustainability in all that we do. This grassroots movement originally responded to new policy on environmental education from Ontario’s Ministry of Education (Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow, 2009), but more recently, has also worked towards fulfilling OISE’s newly articulated goal of achieving ecological and social responsibility.

Thanks to funding provided by TD Friends of the Environment Foundation in 2013-2014, a group of students, staff and faculty created a Community Learning Garden in front of OISE’s main building to support integrated learning about ESE in our graduate and teacher education programs. OISE’s Learning Garden has just celebrated its first anniversary. Many of its goals were achieved in its first year, acting as a site for plantings, events, teaching and learning, student training, and research. This report provides an introduction to these successes in recognition of the importance of this ‘seed’ funding.

The Community Learning Garden

The OISE Community Learning Garden is prominently located at 252 Bloor Street West, at the north end of the University of Toronto campus. It is well-situated to work and grow within the spaces of concrete and green, institution and public, and classroom and community. Filled with native plants species, it is acting as a natural focal point, drawing together faculty, staff, students, and members of the public in new and exciting ways.

The Garden is found in six large concrete planters at the front of the OISE building. Each has its own theme related to the foundational concepts of OISE’s programs: Aboriginal Education, Equity and Inclusive Education, Holistic Education, Creativity in Education and Environmental and Sustainability Education. These gardens have become a symbolic and physical manifestation of collaborative learning around social and ecological learning across all of OISE’s programs, and now act as demonstration sites to inspire our students to integrate nature-based learning into their own personal and professional lives. The gardens also showcase OISE’s innovative pedagogical and curricular approaches for its neighbours, the local community and the public who frequent the spaces around OISE buildings.
The Community Learning Garden is full of locally-sourced, native and heirloom varieties of plants. With the six separate planters, each planter has an average of eight different varieties of plants, with few repetitions, translating into close to 35 different species of plants in these small gardens. We have focused on using natural methods of gardening, for example our fertilizer is harvested worm castings from our in-house vermicomposters. We also selected plants that are sun-hardy to withstand the blazing, concrete heat of our location.

For a full listing of the plants in each of the gardens, visit:  
http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/ese/OISE_Learning_Garden/index.html

In addition to the actual plantings, the grant from TD Friends also allowed us to purchase all of the tools we need to maintain the garden in three seasons, including shovels, buckets, gloves, hoses and attachments, bamboo stakes, trowels, clippers, and natural rodent repellent.
Beyond the Garden

The garden stimulated all sorts of activity, from natural to social media:

- Lots of insect activity was observed in the garden spaces. Bumble bees and other bee species were observed, as were lots of butterflies and dragon flies. Several types of bugs that have yet to be identified!

- We’re using social media (an active twitter account) to document the activities of the garden (@OISEese) where we have many individual and community followers, We also started a blog of the latest garden activities and discoveries, called the Down and Dirty Updates http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/ese/OISE_Learning_Garden/Down_Dirty_Updates.html

- During 2013-14 we had four Bachelor of Education students who spent over 600 hours working on the garden, the related website and supporting events, plus many countless hours that graduate students have put into ‘tending’ the garden physically and theoretically, including research and curriculum development.

- We were honoured to present some of our garden-based research at a session of the American Educational Research Association in Philadelphia in April 2014. We were invited to present on a panel of other garden education researchers from around the world (Chicago, British Colombia, and Cuba, for example) which was standing-room only, with over 50 people in attendance. From this presentation, we are planning to publish a journal article as well as a magazine article for broader public engagement.

- The garden facilitates community connections for both human-human and human-nature interactions. The act of nurturing is closely linked to building community. Taking responsibility of place, being accountable, and affecting change are important to
nurturing social and ecological health and well-being, as well as to building community. Individuals and places benefit through the reinforcement of validity and possibility, and thereby increase overall agency involved in environmental projects, which are important aspects of building community. Community building is an important dimension of the learning garden because collective passion and shared emotional investment helped to nurture the garden, both literally and figuratively, in a holistic manner. The garden, reciprocally, nurtures the human community as well.

- Our website http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/ese/OISE_Learning_Garden/index.html holds images, maps, curriculum activities, resources, and information about our learning garden.

Teaching and Learning Events

The goals of our Community Learning Garden went far beyond enhancing the aesthetic space in front of OISE. As an institution with a focus on teaching and learning, the garden and its inhabitants created a space where we could create conversation and learning about the positive impacts of greening urban spaces, for adults, children and the environment. It became a physical manifestation of many of the principles we speak about in OISE, such as equity, inclusion, social justice, environmental justice, creativity and holism. The Aboriginal garden became a special focal point in that it gave us a place to dialogue with and learn from our local Aboriginal community members. The list of events, below, represents a diversity of encounters that we facilitated in and through the gardens.

Key Events:

- May 23, 2013 - Inaugural Planting of the Garden – 45 people attended
- June 19, 2013 – Official launch of the OISE Community Learning Garden - over 50 people attended to learn about the Garden and share their appreciation.
- September 12, 2013 – Learning Garden Fall Open House – Encouraging and informing new and returning members of the OISE and U of T community to engage with the plants. Over 40 people came by to learn and sample food grown in the Garden.
- September 24, 2013 – Nature School Conference: Celebrating Schoolyard Greening (two learning events co-presented with Evergreen)
- October 2, 2013 – Environmental and Sustainability Education Launch: The Power and Potential of Green School Grounds (lecture by Cam Collyer)
- April 3, 2014 – Presentation of research paper based on the OISE Learning Garden at the American Educational Research Association conference, the largest international educational research conference in the world
• June 2014 – ‘Urban Au Natural’ Garden photo contest launched, with winning photos to be framed and hung inside the OISE building to celebrate the Garden year-round

Student Workshops in/about the Garden:
• July 17, 2013 – Technology Cohort Garden workshop – 22 students
• September 19, 2013 – Drawing in the Garden workshop with Grade 3 class from local school – 25 students and 3 teachers
• September 24, 2013 – Aboriginal Approaches to Learning from Nature Workshop with Aboriginal Elder Jacqueline Lavallee - 68 students and 5 instructors
• October 16, 2013 – Food Literacy Education Workshop with FoodShare, 34 students
• October 23, 2013 – A Garden in Every School Workshop with Green Thumbs Growing Kids, 28 students
• January 15, 2014 – Getting Kids Outside Workshop with Evergreen Brickworks, 33 students
• February 12, 2014 – Worming your way into Education Vermi-Composting Workshop with Dig IN! Campus Agriculture, 35 students
• April 9, 2014 - Working with Willow: Making Sculptures for the Learning Garden Workshop, 22 students

Feedback on the Learning Garden

“When I am tending the plants, I just feel so connected to life. I am reminded that I am a living thing among many other living things, and that human existence is only one way. We as humans can take responsibility of caring for that other life” OISE Doctoral student

“A lot of people are too polite to say anything, but I see them looking at the gardens and the plants. Before, there were only dead grasses. Now, people stop and look and ask questions. “What is this plant? What is that?” Some people have told me that they were thinking of adding some plants to their garden and now after seeing it growing here, they are inspired to do it and take action. If things can grow here on Bloor, they can grow anywhere! I think the garden really brings education out the community, brings it out to the world. Education goes beyond the four walls of OISE, the garden shows this.” OISE Staff member

“The OISE garden has been a wonderful way to grow plants and community simultaneously. Getting involved with the garden team has been a great way to meet others in the OISE community I wouldn’t have met otherwise. It’s also a lovely reason to leave the office for a bit to do a little watering, weeding, or just enjoy watching the plants grow.” OISE Faculty member
“This is so beautiful! What an improvement! I pass by here every day on my way to and from work and I am so pleased to enjoy these gardens and how they are growing and blooming.” - Community member passing by

“Thank you for doing this. I love stopping to smell the flowers!” – Community member passing by

“I just had to stop and thank you for this. I walk by here at least once a week and I love watching the plants growing and blooming. It’s such a highlight to my week. Thank you.” – Community member passing by

**Bringing new life to the concrete jungle**

**Next Steps**

It is difficult to show what an impact the OISE Community Learning Garden has had. We are so grateful for the funds from TDFEF that have allowed so much development to be possible in such a short time, to make the dreams of many people a reality, and to open up doors for more possibilities for greening, teaching and learning on Bloor Street. We plan to reapply for TDFEF funding to continue our garden development. As we look forward, and begin to watch the second season of growth, we are planning to add to our roster with the following activities:

- Photo contest – We are inviting members of the U of T community to capture their moments of connection to the garden through photography. We plan on offering prizes
and framed wall space for the top five images of the garden that are submitted by the end of August. The images will grace the walls of one of our most visited meeting spaces in the building, to remind people of the learning garden, especially in the depths of winter.

- **Work-study students** – we would like to hire and train two work-study students to manage the maintenance and growth of the learning garden, facilitate workshops, and further develop the website. By doing this two more ‘experts’ on educational gardens will be prepared to do this work on other sites in future.

- **Building community** - We intend to increase the visibility and the reach of the learning garden by deepening partnerships with both at OISE, across campus, and with other community garden organizations, adding more outreach events and activities, and better utilizing social media to get the message across.