“I’ve been told by my kids that this [Eco Camp] is the only camp they want to do next summer”
~ Mom of 2 Junior Eco Campers
A Birthday Wish Come True!

Gardens can flourish anywhere and urban forest is not an oxymoron!

It may seem hard to believe today but 15 years ago the City of Toronto took a big chance when turning an old, unsafe parking lot into an organic garden pilot project. The crew that built the Children’s Garden constructed raised beds over small cut-outs in the asphalt to allow for drainage. All of this made it easy to dismantle and repave if the “experiment” failed to produce results. Fortunately, after hundreds of programs, with thousands of participants, we feel it’s safe to say the experiment was a grand success!

The Children’s Garden was built at the south end of High Park which includes one of the most endangered habitats in North America, the Black Oak Savanah. This rare urban forest is also one of many parks and green spaces used for programming by the original Children’s Garden and Exploring Toronto Programs.

Toronto’s gardens and urban forests are the perfect setting for our amazing environmental education programs but after 15 years of typing out such a long title plus the construction of a new Children’s Teaching Kitchen, it was determined that a name change was long overdue. This year The Children’s Garden and Exploring Toronto Programs officially became the Children’s Eco Programs. This change reflects how the programs have outgrown their old name and metamorphosed into something new.

Organic gardening and urban nature exploration are still the foundation of our programs. We now combine this with new opportunities such as cooking with fresh vegetables from the garden and learning how our photovoltaic panels help keep the lights on.

Year round programs, cooking yummy, healthy food with our participants and a birthday party in our own Kitchen with friends, family and Double Chocolate Zucchini Cake. These are just a few of the ingredients that make up the recipe for an amazing year at the Children’s Eco Programs! Add to it children and youth cooking healthy, organic and tasty food grown in our very own garden and you have the best birthday present anyone could ever ask for!
Children’s Eco Program
2013 Numbers At A Glance

74 Programs for schools, day-camps, Scout & Guide groups with a total of 1418 children participating

Delivered 9 Family Nature Drop-in Programs attended by 291 children and parents

Worked with 93 volunteers, contributing over 1500 hours to the Programs

Supported the completion of a new children’s garden and programming at Curran Hall CC and continued to support an additional 13 sites offering children’s garden programming

Worked with 29 community partners to support program delivery and development

8 weeks of Eco Camp, 8 weeks of Eco Sprouts & 5 weeks of Youth Eco Camp = 352 registrants

Hosted work placement students/interns who contributed a total of 110 hours

Provided Staff Training for Community Recreation Programs including a 2.5 day intensive nature and garden training, 6 workshops for part-time staff and a new full day workshop for Community Recreation Programmers reaching a total of over 110 staff

Delivered 8 Cooking with Veggies Programs for Caregivers and Tots, Children, Youth and Adults

Hosted 21 Birthday Parties with Garden, Nature or Healthy Cooking themes with 214 children in attendance
School Programs
Curiosity and Nature Go Hand In Hand

Experiential based learning is an impressive and efficient way to say digging in the soil, hiking on the trails and cooking in the kitchen. At the Children’s Eco Programs participants get their hands dirty, they smell the flowers, watch and listen for birds and taste the tart sweetness of currents straight from the bush. For students sitting in classrooms day after day these experiences are invaluable. The opportunity to see what they’ve studied in action, either planting seeds, touching worms or looking up tree species, helps them to connect with their studies on a completely different level.

For the first time in 15 years, after yet another fully booked spring session, we had the opportunity to provide fall and winter school programs in the High Park Children’s Garden and along many of Toronto’s Discovery Walk Trails. We were also excited to start our new cooking and nutrition programs in Fall 2013 (we even snuck in a little math, baking is the best and tastiest way to teach fractions).

2013 was also the year we connected with a local home school resource group. Our Program Instructors developed weekly programs for children and youth throughout the spring, fall and winter. The opportunity to create an ongoing program where students see the changes in the garden and the park throughout the seasons is a treat for staff and participants alike.

All School programming is grade appropriate and linked to the Ontario Elementary and Secondary Curriculums.
Eco Camp
Fresh Air, Friends and Fun

Simply put Eco Camp is the best! It combines all the best aspects of gardening, hiking and cooking plus campers get to go swimming too! Another Eco Camp delight, taking offsite trips to other amazing Toronto parks and green spaces.

Over the past 15 years Eco Camp has grown from 1 week of camp to 8 weeks of Sprouts, 8 weeks of Juniors, 5 weeks of Youth and an Eco Leader In Training course all based out of High Park.

Every March our original Eco Camp for 6 to 12 year olds would fill up within hours of the 7 am registration start. We often had waiting lists totalling 10 or more children with parents eagerly taking any spots they could get.

In 2013, the first full summer of Eco Sprouts for our 4 and 5 year old campers, the available spaces filled up within minutes of the 7 am registration start and many of the waitlists grew to include 20 or more children. We love having our wee little Sprouts running around learning about healthy food, organic gardening and cool nature facts. They get along great with our older campers, many of which are their older siblings. Plus our little Sprouts are ridiculously cute when covered in dirt after an amazing day at Eco Camp!

Our philosophy is to start them young and get their little fingers in the soil, little feet on the trail and little tummies in the kitchen!
The smell of the Children’s Teaching Kitchen after one of our veggie cooking classes is guaranteed to make you hungry! Our Specialty Program Instructors created and modified recipes to include vegetables in a variety of different and unexpected ways. A few of the tasty examples include beets in chocolate muffins, white beans in chocolate chip cookies and burgers and fries Children’s Eco Program style (sweet and sour lentil burgers with sweet potato fries!).

In 2013 we offered programs for caregivers and tots, children 8 to 12 and youth 13 to 16. We also held a program for adults focusing on tips and tricks to help put fresh, healthy, home-cooked meals on the table every night of the week.

Judging by how eagerly participants packed up any leftovers to take home, our programs were a big hit!
Family Drop-In
Watch Me Grow

Each summer we offer the community a free drop-in program on Thursday mornings at the Children’s Garden. We provide this as a thank you for all the support they’ve given us throughout the years. Every year families come back to dig in the garden, make nature crafts, play games and listen to stories. Bean and cherry tomato tastings are also an essential part of our weekly program. We are fortunate to see these children explore, learn and grow each season.

In 2013 many of our returning children were still quite young but this year we had our first graduate! A regular participant for many seasons, Calvin has become our first participant to graduate to a volunteer position with the drop-in program. He and his mother Lisa travel every Thursday throughout the summer, from Yonge and Eglinton to High Park to help us out. Our program wouldn’t be the same without them!

In truth, while we provide this program for the community, we also benefit from it ourselves. Seeing families come back year after year, learning and growing, having parents tell us that their children couldn’t wait to get back to the Children’s Garden each summer and getting out of the office once a week are just a few of the personal rewards.

Many of our Watch Me Grow Drop-In families have used the program as a stepping stone for our other programs. Children are signed up for camp once they come of age, many birthday parties are booked after attending a few drop-in sessions and cooking programs are attended by Caregivers and Tots after they enjoy our pesto parties in the Garden.
Programs On The Rise
It’s Your Birthday Come Party with Us!

Two of the programs that have taken us a bit by surprise are our Birthday Party and Guide/Scout Programs. The popularity of these programs makes it an interesting challenge to fit them in around scheduled cooking classes at the Kitchen. Children that have participated in many of our other programs, especially Eco Camp, often ask their parents to have their parties at the Children’s Garden. As of 2013 we’ve also had our first repeat birthday party customers.

Many a toad abode and garden fairy dwelling have been decorated and carefully positioned throughout the garden during the Birthday Party Programs. In fact our toad population is rather robust, although not so much in the top of the A garden beds were the garter snakes live (no confirmation on the Garden Fairy Population as of the time this report was published). Crafts are just one of the activities that participants can choose from when putting together their party activities. Other party themes include Critters and Crawlies and a popular youth theme Edible Cosmetics.

Our Guide and Scout programs are based on badge and challenge requirements. The programs we have developed can help Guides and Scouts earn badges with a nature, gardening and/or healthy eating and cooking focus. You should see how quickly a group of Sparks can finish off a bowl of Kale Chips they made themselves!
Special Events
Gather ‘Round And Enjoy a Free Harvest Lunch

On Sunday, June the 2nd, 2013 we threw ourselves (and the community!) a big old Birthday Party Bash. We wanted to celebrate 15 years of Eco Programs from planting tomatoes to making Litres of pesto to doing the bee dance to unravelling Captain Compost’s Eco Adventures.

Once again we cooked up a tasty, healthy and free Harvest Lunch for the community to enjoy. We are fortunate that over the years generous donations from the community, collected at our events, help to cover the cost of any food not grown in our own garden.

There was also birthday cake! Double Chocolate Zucchini Cake with Fudgy Date Frosting to be exact. Everyone had a great time at the party and it was a fun way to kick off yet another summer in the Garden.

The 2013 Harvest Festival, in conjunction with Colborne Lodge and The High Park Nature Centre was it’s usual success despite a little nasty weather that morning. Professor Pricklethorn was kind enough to stop by and give our attendees a great talk about how important the trees are to us in this great urban forest we call Toronto!
Our Volunteers
Their Support And Enthusiasm Keep Us Going

Over the past 15 years our volunteers have provided us with an amazing support system for our program. Garden maintenance, helping campers with crafts and setting up for programs are just a few of the tasks volunteers assist us with every day. It often seems like watering and weeding the garden is never complete. Having a volunteer come in and pick up a hose, often while helping campers water, can be a lifesaver for the garden on a hot summer’s day.

A few of our volunteers stand out for their long service to the Programs. Mike Nevins has been our compost guru right from the start. Frank Iacobucci has helped cook many a harvest lunch, served thousands of meals at our events over the years and he’s even helped with the dishes. Neil Shore has helped with School Programs and Summer Camp since the start as well. Camp wouldn’t be the same without him!

Over the past two years the Capgemini Corporation has held their community volunteer day at the Children’s Garden. It’s amazing what can be accomplished with 50 people gardening, shoveling and sweeping for 3 hours.

Many volunteers have come and gone throughout the years and we are grateful for every single one!
Expanding Across Toronto
Sowing Seeds and Spreading Ideas

One of the program’s important mandates over the past 15 years is to propagate garden and nature programs far and wide across the City. We have helped over 15 Recreation Centres develop their own Children’s Gardens and related programming. This year it was the Curran Hall Community Centre.

We provided this small but well loved Centre with staff training and resources to run their own garden programs. We also taught them how to incorporate the garden into their other programs at the Centre.

Encouraging healthy eating and exercise is important for today’s children and youth, having fun while doing so is the best type of icing on the cake!
Expanding Across Toronto
Sowing Seeds and Spreading Ideas
Children’s Teaching Kitchen
Let The Sun Shine In

Have we told you about the Children’s Teaching Kitchen yet? If you can’t tell we are a little excited about it. There were many years of crating around Kitchen equipment in a variety of Rubbermaid bins and making due with cramped kitchens in local recreation centres for our Youth Cooking Programs. Finally it was decided that we needed our own kitchen space.

We also decided that this space had to be as environmentally friendly as possible. This is why our kitchen was built with straw bales and plaster. The straw bales provide amazing insulation and the plaster provides structural support and fire resistance.

Building the Teaching Kitchen has allowed us the opportunity to expand our programming beyond the garden and trails. It provides a safe haven in the winter and a dry spot during summer rains.

In 2013 our sustainable Kitchen was finally completed with the installation of new photovoltaic (solar) panels. We are part of the Province’s Microfit program and sell our energy back to Toronto Hydro. So it’s possible our panels may have produced the energy lighting up your home right now.
Looking Forward
Little Fingers in the Soil, Little Feet on the Trail,
Little Tummies in the Kitchen

It all started with a wild idea. Create a garden and programs that will draw the community back to the south end of High Park. Get the community involved to make it a safer place to enjoy the natural beauty of a rare habitat.

With the enthusiasm, help and support of many staff, volunteers and those same community members, we have built a program where children can learn, grow and connect with nature and food. Breathing fresh air, picking raspberries and gooseberries, hiking through the forest and cooking fresh veggies are experiences all children should have the fortune to be familiar with. As we continue to expand our programming we want to focus on activities that help children understand the meaning of physical, social and environmental health.

In order to achieve this we feel an additional focus on cooking, environmental sustainability and renewable energy programs is the path to take. Together with our partners in the City and the community we can help continuing generations connect with the natural world around them and learn the importance of healthy food for all.

“Imagine our City’s future led by a generation of lifelong gardeners and naturalists.”
– Vision of the Children’s Eco Programs