

Are you a senior interested in growing your own organic herbs, vegetables, and edible flowers using healthy soil, and no chemicals? Are you living in a senior's residence or an Ottawa Community Housing building? The Canadian Organic Growers--Ottawa St Lawrence Outaouais Chapter (COG OSO) offers a program called Senior Organic Gardeners (SOG), which may appeal to you!

SOG supports seniors who wish to grow organic produce, whether they live in their own home or in a shared senior location. The three-year support plan includes workshops on subjects such as planning, planting, and maintaining gardens, harvesting produce, and preparing gardens for winter. The focus is placed on container gardens and raised beds, which accommodate the varying physical abilities of the participants, and don't require soil testing (which can be costly). In the first year, the SOG team provides much of the seeds and seedlings, and are available to offer assistance. With their guidance, participating groups are soon well-positioned to maintain their own gardens, and fundraise to pay for their gardening supplies. In the third year, seniors are encouraged to garden autonomously, with advice as needed.

SOG started in 2012, with two pilot projects—the Unitarian House retirement home in Westboro, and the Longfield Manor long-term care facility in Barrhaven. Since then, SOG's reach has grown across the city. SOG provides services to anglophones, francophones, aboriginals and new Canadians of many languages. This year, they received a Trillium grant, which extends into 2018. It has helped them to fund the programs they oversee in the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health, Ottawa Community Housing (OCH)'s Clementine Towers, and South Nepean Muslim Centre (SNMC), among other locations.

SOG recognizes—and emphasizes—the fact that gardening is an important activity at any age. Seniors who grow their own produce consume more vegetables than non-gardeners, and engage in consistent physical activity. Gardening provides a sense of satisfaction that comes with the responsibility of caring for plants, and then reaping the rewards at harvest time. Part of SOG’s program includes celebrating the harvest, reflecting on the lessons learned, and planning the next year. In this way, its participants engage in lifelong learning. SOG staff apply the feedback that they receive to future deployments of their programs.

Participants are encouraged to reflect on the wonder of the environment, and to share their gardens, their produce, and their gardening stories with people of all generations and cultures. SOG promotes the use of fresh, local, organic produce in cooking—whether it is grown on site or purchased from a local farmer. In the off-season, they maintain the momentum by conducting horticultural learning sessions and enjoyment activities.

SOG invites seniors and seniors’ residences to partner with them to develop organic vegetable, herb, and edible flower gardening. They are always looking for opportunities to encourage seniors to grow their own organic food, and to engage volunteers from all walks of life. For more information, or to find out how you can contribute time and/or funds to this worthwhile endeavour, please visit <http://cog.ca/ottawa/our-programs/senior-organic-gardeners/>. You can reach the SOG Team at sog@cog.ca