

All photographs courtesy of the Bayshore Park Community Garden & Oven Facebook page.

Bayshore community has one of the most diverse urban gardens in the city, as well as its only outdoor community oven. Not long ago, though, Bayshore was considered a food desert.

In 2006, Bayshore's only grocery store, Market Fresh, closed. Other stores within the neighbourhood offered convenience items, but very little fresh produce. During the bimonthly Hand in Hand meetings, facilitated by Health Promoters from Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre (PQCHC), residents discussed how they could address this food security issue. They had amidst their residences the beautiful, expansive



Bayshore Park, and they had the means to apply for funding. The idea of the Bayshore Park Community Garden was born.

In July of 2012, approximately 30 volunteers—members of the community, as well as their friends and colleagues—pitched in to build the first 20 of the 31 garden beds on what would turn out to be the two hottest days that year. The remaining 11 beds were built the next year, with the help of many community organizations. The Community Garden Development Fund grant was managed by Just Food for the City of Ottawa. PQCHC staff devoted many hours to planning



Councillor Mark Taylor's office paid for the signage board. meetings, logistics, and working on build day.

One of the garden beds is maintained by the community, for the community and non-members can pick from it. Another has been used within school gardening programs. The bulk of the beds, however, are managed by one household each. Participants pay a small fee, and are responsible for maintaining their bed and cleaning it out at the end of the season.

There's always a waiting list. Bayshore Park is one of the best used parks in Ottawa, says Cheryl Andrew, the president of Bayshore Park Community Garden and Oven (BPCGO). The only issue with the garden is that it is too small to fill the need, and making it larger is costly.



The garden is enjoyed by novices and experts alike. Many of Bayshore Park's residents were gardeners or full-fledged farmers in the countries from which they emigrated. In the BPCGO gardens, the residents see how their favourite plants adapt to growing in Ottawa. The variety of plants is astonishingly diverse and delicious. Malabar spinach (both red- and green-stalked), bottle gourds, daikon radishes, fenugreek, and Middle Eastern and South Asian varieties of purslane and mustard greens are just some of the plants that flourish within the garden. Last year, edible flowers were added along the fence, both to beautify and nourish.



Community leaders, such as Greta from Greta's Organic Gardens (who provided information on seed-saving), help residents expand their gardening skills. A common interest—and technology—bridge language barriers that might otherwise prevent members from communicating, says Mete Pamir, the Treasurer and Oven Coordinator for BPCGO. He and a neighbour use Google to translate their gardening discussions.

Growing and preparing food go hand in hand.

As participants learn about each other's plants, they also learn how to prepare new and delicious dishes. That's why a community oven was always part of the plan.

In 2014, the outdoor oven was realized through a grant from the Better Neighbourhoods program. It's the only one in Ottawa, although there are several in Toronto, and one in Dartmouth, NS. Other urban gardens are looking at BPCGO as an example of how to create a successful oven and meeting space, and a venue for experiential learning.



The oven is used to bake pizzas, breads, desserts, and many other delicious items, but its main focus is to bring people together.

Community bakes are hosted every two weeks, during which gardeners may, for example, roast the vegetables they have grown, or add fresh herbs to their pizzas. The highlight of the year is the Pizzapalooza, during which chefs of all ages are invited to put their best offerings forward. Their recipes are often replicated at home.

The oven is an investment that helps sustain the entire effort. It can be booked for public and private parties, for a donation of \$20 to \$150. There is a sliding scale for organizations; for-profits pay the highest rate, to sustain community use. During the pizza bakes, large batches of dough are made, then divided and made available to participating community bakers for a suggested donation amount. The dough is available for free to children and youth at youth bakes. In 2017, 220 children and youth baked their own pizzas!

These donations are used to maintain and improve the BPCGO. The garden provides food for the oven, the oven finances the garden, and the experiences enrich the community. "It's a viable symbiosis," says Mr. Pamir. An added bonus of the oven was that it legislated the need for a hand-washing station, which gardeners can now use to fill the rain barrels, rather than working in teams to roll hoses across the field to the garden.



As with many projects, once the community proved that the BPCGO was sustainable, more local businesses began to offer their support. In the fall of 2013, a community landlord installed a large garden shed; the landlord has also listed the garden as a feature to attract interested renters. The Community Health Centre, the City of Ottawa, Just Food, and other public and private organizations provide ongoing support.



The program continues to grow. The Street Foods Collective (SFC) started in January 2017 with a Spark grant from the United Way. SFC received a second Spark grant for 2018. This initiative enables women to gain entrepreneurial skills through the marketing of global street foods. Accora Youth camps use the garden and the oven in their environmentally themed programs.

On an informal basis, for every few hours that participants spend in their gardens, they might field questions from 20 or 30 passersby. The garden is a natural conversation piece; it facilitates education and enhances community connections. Why not stop by next time you are in the Bayshore Park area?

For more information on BPCGO, please visit their Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/bayshoregardenandoven/>

