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Final Project Report

Meet your Neighbors: Tree Square Garden Installation

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Concordia University

Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.

Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.

Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.

Never take the first. Never take the last.

Take only what you need.

Take only that which is given.

Never take more than half. Leave some for others.

Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.

Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.

Share.

Give thanks for what you have been given.

Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.

Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). Braiding sweetgrass. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Press. p.

Public Website Summary:

In collaboration with the community (of insects, plants and microorganisms), the garden installation provides a space on the street-level where people can learn about biodiversity, explore new ways of taking over space and greening the urban landscape with reclaimed materials. The garden is located on the street, in a tree square. Neighborhood kids of the local schools and residents pass by the area everyday and get a chance to read the names of each plant in the space and watch them grow as the season progresses. For insects and plants (commonly referred to as weeds and pests), this installation will provide habitat: a space to live and grow this year and in the future years among the perennial plants.

Additional Photographs



Fig 1.0 A Typical Tree Square on my street, mown by the neighbour. On the right, you can see the dusty quality of the soil littered with cigarette buds.



Fig 2.0 Top-down view of the garden square. It is chaotic, patchy and made entirely of local materials (fallen tree cuttings, rocks, tree sticks), trash (fence leftovers) and upcycled wood. The wood was essential to prevent people and dogs from walking on the garden bed. The mulch is a straw bale picked up from Mont-royal: they are used

in the winter when people are sledding down the slope near Parc avenue and donated in the spring.



Fig 3.0 A closeup at the native wildflowers direct-seeded into the garden. There is a mix of perennial and annual flowers. Seeds were bought from local farmers and a pack of mixed seeds at the dollar store.

Description

Over the last months, I created a garden in a tree square in front of my apartment. I hope that the simplicity of the installation, using the weeds already in the area, dollar-store seeds and upcycled materials will encourage other people to adopt their tree squares. With this project, I really wanted to learn more about the nonhuman life in my area and build spaces that would be safe and welcoming for them in the long-term. I was inspired by Robin Wall Kimmerer, indigenous biologist and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, and her ideas regarding the balance between human and nonhuman lifeforms. So I tried to apply her Honorable Harvest principles to my project: I introduced myself to the space, took some to grow in and listened for the answers. I aimed to never take more than I needed in terms of space and weeding and I kept volunteer grasses and vines that would spark out of the ground to fill out the garden. In return for my labour of watering and tending to the space, the plants and insects would teach me about their needs, they would beautify the street corner that I walked by every day and they would reward me with flowers.

The long-term plan for this community project is inspired by permaculture principles. The hope is to build soil and grow perennial plants that might be pleasant enough to humans so that the neighbours don't throw trash in the square or mow the plants. I think for me too this project is just the beginning of the process of learning

about permaculture as I work to create an urban permaculture zine and start a regenerative farm later.

The main challenges that came up during the realization of the project is learning to teach others and create while I am myself learning. I had to let go of perfectionism and balance my energy. I also had to learn to be content in taking things slow and not expecting immediate reward, especially when waiting for seeds to germinate and gathering materials secondhand or from trash to divert landfill waste.

The idea central to the project was for me to begin learning from nonhuman species so that I could better work with them and share that knowledge. Weeds, insects and plants that I grew from seed were invited to participate in the community space. Non-human beings helped beautify the area (thus keeping it safer from littering), creating habitat and setting a base for long-term soil health. I also welcomed human participation from family, friends, neighbours and people who have experience listening to plants (in books or YouTube). These people helped me by providing materials for the space, knowledge and encouragement that were essential in the installation of the garden. The project was inspired by permaculture design: a space maintained with little to none external input from humans (i.e weeding, watering, soil nutrients, etc) (Alonso & Guiochon, 2020). Fundamentally, this approach recognizes that human and ecological health are interconnected. In fact, humans depend on food, water, energy and shelter that all come from our natural environment. Thus, in caring for the Earth, resources and nonhuman life, we also care for the long-term sustainability of our human communities (Kimmerer, 2013).

Process and Realization:

This project began in the early spring, after the last snows had melted. I didn't know yet what the intentions would be for the space, but I was interested in creating an urban green space in the tree square that would otherwise be overgrown and mown every two weeks, leaving the soil dry and polluted by stray trash. Instead of the abandoned land, I thought a mixed garden of weeds, cultivated plants and decorative installations would provide an incentive for people to take care of the space (i.e. not throwing their trash, admiring the plant growth, letting insect and plant life grow and thrive there). In the spirit of reciprocity, as the community would care for the space, it could offer back opportunities to learn about plants and insects, track

the growth of flowers throughout the season and appreciate the aesthetic value of the mixed garden. In this sense, the project offers opportunities for the garden caretakers to engage with their community by creating and tending to the space regularly (planting, weeding, watering, fertilizing, mulching, creating signage and educational material, etc.), the space offers a community hub for plants, insects and soil that can feed and teach people who engage with the space (i.e. edible gardening, knowledge of local plants, connection to natural processes).

Sick problems addressed

- Biodiversity loss and climate change
- Disconnection from land, food and non-human lifeforms.
- Overconsumption
 - In the *Minimalism* documentary: Instead of throwing out the old and bringing in the new, I kept the vegetation in the square as long as possible before my seedlings were ready and the last frost date had passed to limit the disruption of soils and insect habitat.

References

- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and teachings of plants. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Press.
- Mars, R. (2016) The permaculture transition manual: a comprehensive guide to resilient living. Chapters 1-3
- Kimmerer, R. W. (May 19th, 2021) The Honorable Harvest. Western Washington University, WA. <https://alumni.wvu.edu/event/honorable-harvest>.

Additional sources:

- Alonso, Bernard. Cécile Guiochon. (2020). Human Permaculture: Life Design for Resilient Living. Canada, New Society Publishers, 223p.
- Hardman, M. et al. (2019) Food for all? Critically evaluating the role of the Incredible Edible movement in the UK. in *Urban gardening and the struggle for social and spatial justice*. Eds. Certomà, C. et al. Manchester University Press, Project MUSE. pp.139-153
- Leclerc, Blaise. (2017) Le grand livre de la permaculture: Les principes à connaître et les techniques à adopter pour cultiver votre jardin en vous aidant de la nature. Paris. Leduc.S Editions, 287p.