



*The Alex Wilson Community Garden*

A PRESENTATION TO THE  
ONTARIO MUNICIPAL BOARD  
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**T**he Alex Wilson Community Garden was initiated as a memorial to the life and work of Alex Wilson, a landscape designer, writer and community activist who died in 1993. Through his pioneering work in the field of ecological restoration (the practice of healing damaged landscapes by recreating native plant habitats such as meadows, prairies and woodlands) and through his ground breaking book *The Culture of Nature*, Alex had an enormous influence on many people and communities.

Following his death, a group of volunteers decided that one of the most appropriate ways to honour Alex's memory would be to create a community garden in his name—a place where people could come together to grow food, tend native plant habitat gardens, and connect with nature in the city.



Although the group originally attempted to purchase land on which Alex had started the Stafford Street community garden in his neighbourhood, the land was sold to a developer. However, at the same time, fortuitously, we were contacted by two individuals who were interested in creating a community garden on a vacant lot they owned next door to their live/work studio on Richmond Street. In an act of extraordinary generosity, Dianne Croteau and Richard Brault decided to donate their land in order to create a permanent community garden in Alex's name. In order to ensure that the land would be used as a community garden in perpetuity, Dianne and Richard donated the property to the city with a conservation easement attached to the land title—an easement that would protect the integrity of this community garden as a place where community members could grow food and tend native plant habitats. As far as we know, this represents a first—the only community garden easement in Toronto's history—and it was an arrangement embraced by the city's Parks Department as a visionary partnership between the private and public sectors. The city was given the generous gift of a new public park/community garden, and the community took on the responsibility of building and maintaining the park/community garden.

### *The Design Competition*

Once we had a permanent site, the group decided to hold a competition for the design of the garden. We held a design charette in which we



shared our dreams, visions and goals for the garden, and we created a competition brief in which these ideas were articulated. With the assistance of the Design Exchange, the design competition generated an enormous amount of interest and enthusiasm from landscape designers across Canada and the U.S. We received more than 60 proposals for the competition.

One of our goals through the competition—and, indeed, through the whole AWCG project—has been to encourage the creation of community gardens in Toronto. (This goal is written right into the founding bylaws of the AWCG Corporation.) We see our project as one role model that can be used by other groups and provide guidance, assistance and inspiration to other groups interested in furthering the development of community gardens. It was extremely gratifying to us that, through the competition, more than 60 design teams were devoting their creative energies to thinking about community gardens, and we're certain that this has had ripple effects well beyond our particular garden. When all those design teams visited the garden site, pre-construction, for example, we know that they were looking at the urban environment as a place of potential for greening—they were seeing not a vacant lot but a place of vibrant social and natural interaction. Who knows how many of those design teams were inspired to devote their energies to other vacant lots in other places...

When we saw the quality of those 60-plus proposals and models for the garden, we decided that yet another way to inspire more people to think about community gardens would be to hold an



exhibition of all entries to the design competition. The Design Exchange offered to host the exhibition, and it was one of their most popular, well-attended exhibits, running for 6 months. The opening event alone attracted more than 500 people; Mayor Barbara Hall gave a welcoming address.

From those 60-plus entries to the competition, a jury of experts and technical advisors evaluated the proposals, met with five short listed teams and chose the winning design, which was created by the Kent Ford Design Group.



### *The Construction*

Once the design was chosen, the community group put out a tender soliciting construction bids. The community group was responsible for raising all the funds for building the garden and for overseeing the entire construction process. The city was a major contributor. Terry McGlade of Perennial Gardens, was chosen as the contractor for the garden and he and his crew did the major construction work, while community volunteers did most of the plantings (except for the large trees).

Finally, in June 1998, construction was complete and we were ready for the grand opening of the garden.

The winning design of the garden packs a lot of punch into this tiny space—a space of just 10.7 metres by 34 metres that has to cope with the constraints and challenges of the urban environment—limited sunlight, compromised soil, human impacts...

The design tells a story—a story of human settlement in the region—and it honours one of the central tenets of Alex Wilson's work: that only through active engagement with the earth, through doing things such as food growing and habitat restoration, will we be able to connect with the earth and begin the process of meaningfully healing damaged landscapes.

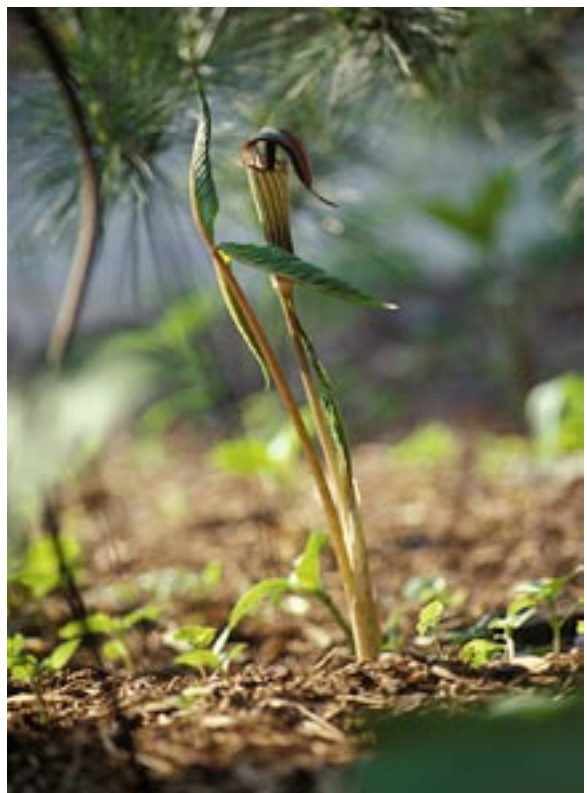


Beginning at the south end of the garden, there is a planting of grasses that recreates the feeling of lakeshore dunes—a reference to the importance of Lake Ontario to the settlement of the city. Quite simply, Toronto exists where it does because of its position on the lake, and the grass planting celebrates that fact.

As you move north in the garden, along a gently curving boardwalk, you are walking through the agricultural hedgerow section of the garden—planted with the native species one might find along the wild, sunny edges of agricultural fields.

This section of the garden refers to the important role of agriculture to the history of southern Ontario, and it also refers to how these forgotten places—the edges of fields—can be productive places in their own right...places where shrubs produce edible berries for wildlife and humans, places where flowers bloom and provide nectar for insects and butterflies...The hedgerow represents a place of intersection, where wilderness meets cultivation.

The agricultural hedgerow leads to the north end of the garden, which is planted with native trees and woodland species—a kind of telescoped wilderness that refers to the forests that once covered most of southern Ontario, with towering pines and beeches and shrubs such as witch hazel, and groundcovering wildflowers such as Jack-in-the-pulpits and trilliums.



And at the heart of the garden, the centre that brings nature and cultivation together, are the 40 food-growing allotment plots, where community members come together to grow a wide variety of vegetables and actively participate in the life of the garden. It is these food-growing plots that draw community members to the garden. People come to these plots to grow food, but they also come to forge relationships with their neighbours, and inevitably they develop strong bonds to this small park, taking an active role in looking after a public space for the benefit of the whole community.

The community response to this garden was immediate and intensely positive. Within days of construction starting, we had people showing up asking how they could become involved, asking if they could have a vegetable-growing plot in the garden.





One of the first people to show up was Brian, a local homeless fellow, who started out doing odd jobs in the garden and has had a plot in the garden ever since. He takes particular responsibility for the birds—building bird feeders from spare bits of building materials he rescues from the garbage.

The garden has been used by so many different people in so many different ways. The Centre for Spanish Speaking People had a women’s programme for recently immigrated women where they met in the garden and combined language studies, gardening and cooking.

Evangel Hall, an inner city mission of the Presbyterian Church located directly behind the garden has eight plots for their clients to grow food—in the summer of 2001 Evangel Hall hired a garden facilitator to work with their clients and develop their food-growing skills and, just as important, spend time in a safe social space.

The residents of Portland Place, a non-governmental special needs housing project next door to the garden, have been keen participants in the garden from the beginning—not only do many residents have plots in the garden (the garden is, in effect, their back yard), but everyone there provides the “eyes on the garden” that are so important to urban safety.



In early spring, gardeners start checking on emerging plants and seeing their bulbs come up. From the middle of April, when the gardeners first begin to amend the soil, to the end of October, when the vegetables are harvested and the beds mulched for winter, the garden is full of activity. People love this place and find it an oasis of calm in the heart of the city.

In so many ways, the garden is a refuge. Not only for the many people who come there to enjoy nature in the city, but for nature itself. Biologist Ken Towle monitored the birds and insects that use the garden as habitat, finding a array of creatures in this small pocket.



This garden works because it is teeming with life. The energy from the sun fuels plant life, and the productivity of the place inspires people to claim this tiny refuge as their own. Whether it's the office worker who takes a shortcut from Queen Street down to King Street every day along the garden's boardwalk, or the neighbourhood folks who bask in the afternoon sun on the stone benches, or the plot-holder who stops by every morning to do a bit of weeding, or even the commuter driving along the rushing corridor of Richmond Street who is surprised to suddenly see the swaying grasses and a flowering hawthorn tree...each person sees a place and contributes to a place that is unique and special in the life of the city—a place where people come together to nurture growth, to cultivate food, and to create a neighbourhood jewel.



*Text by Lorraine Johnson.*

*Photos from the Alex Wilson Community Garden archives.*

*June 14, 2004*

*The garden is located at 552 Richmond St. West,  
Toronto ON, Canada.*

