JBNA Garden Advocate's Report, 2020 - 2021

The Garden Advocate assists those living and working in James Bay to increase food and other gardening activity in our community.

I'd first like to thank the twenty or so gardening volunteers – too many to list by name here - who have worked for many hours to make the following JBNA gardening initiatives happen through the trying and uncertain circumstances of the last year.

New projects

Despite the pandemic, we launched three new and innovative projects last year.

In April, we were contacted by Huntingdon Manor Hotel, who wanted to do something for their neighbours during the pandemic, and were considering installation of a temporary allotment garden on the grounds. The JBNA and Huntingdon signed a partnership agreement and, seven weeks later, 12 families were planting up their new plots, thanks to generous help from Growing Together, Food Eco-District, and Discovery Coffee. The partnership agreement has been renewed for another year, and we hope that the allotment will become a permanent feature. This is the first allotment garden created on the grounds of a hotel in Victoria.

At the beginning of July, we opened the Wee Free Seed Box at the corner of Michigan and Menzies. The Seed Box serves as a place for neighbours to share extra seeds and, in addition, a crew of volunteers saves, cleans, and packs (mostly) local James Bay seeds for the box. In 2020, we distributed about 1000 packets of our own James Bay seeds to the neighbourhood; demand, especially with the pandemic seed shortages and increase in gardening interest, has far exceeded our expectations. This was, to our best knowledge, the first public seed box in Victoria.

In late summer, we were asked by the City if we were interested in taking over day-to-day operation of the herb garden in Fisherman's Wharf Park. The answer was 'yes', and in February Council approved granting the JBNA a Licence of Occupation for the space for the next three years. Parks will continue to maintain the paths and trees, while a group of JBNA gardening volunteers has started to garden the area. Our plan is to maintain the existing plantings while increasing the variety and quantity of culinary herbs grown. We have received a My Great Neighbourhood grant to make some gentle improvements to the garden over the next year. .

Ongoing projects

The Seed Box Garden at Michigan and Menzies continued to be well-tended, although we had to switch from work parties to each gardener working alone on a one-week rotation due to the pandemic.

The ten neighbourhood food trees also continued to be well-tended and are flourishing. All the apples but one set fruit last year, so they are now entering their productive years. We added bulbs under the Charles Redfern apples to provide some spring cheer.

Ten gardening columns appeared in the Beacon, as usual.

Unexpected pandemic developments

Due to the pandemic, we had to cancel both the spring and fall plant swaps/sales in 2020. We have now received a My Great Neighbourhood grant to enable us address the greater demand for plants due to the pandemic: it will allow us to bring back and 'grow' the swap/sale in 2021 (health orders permitting) and to increase the neighbourhood seed saving and distribution program.

We had planned to hold several workshops and/or tours in 2020, but those were all cancelled due to the pandemic. James Bay garden projects were, however, featured as part of two City zoomed 'Lunch and Learn' programs - the food trees in the urban forest session and the Wee Free Seed Box and surrounding garden in the program on growing in the city.

Work on two projects, the Berry Patch and the food bed at Lewis Park, had to be postponed, as we instead focused on the unexpected opportunities that arose at Huntingdon Manor and Fisherman's Wharf.

The Pandemic Effect

The pandemic has led to a worldwide increase of interest in gardening and an increased demand for more, and more richly planted, urban green spaces. How much of this will remain post-pandemic is yet to be seen, but it is both a challenge and an opportunity for James Bay gardeners in the year(s) ahead.

Kathryn Pankowski, JBNA Garden Advocate

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