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Cities in Nature celebrates the myriad ways in which enlightened municipalities, community groups, institutions and corporations have embraced nature and incorporated it into innovative projects in the urban landscape. Some projects are relatively straightforward and easy to implement; others are more complex and demand years of planning to realize. All are visionary and transform their communities in significant ways. Whether the focus is on planting trees or creating wetlands, growing food or greening rooftops, rehabilitating contaminated brownfields or cleaning the air, building recreational trails or sprucing up local parks, linking green spaces or spearheading community gardens, these projects are based on a vision of making our cities better, healthier places.

Just as important as the obvious physical improvements to the environment that these projects effect are the social benefits. In these efforts to green the commons, communities come together to express a common goal of caring, stewardship and shared responsibility, and this has many positive effects on how the communities perceive themselves. In project after project, organizers of and participants in green space restoration refer to the ways that their communities are transformed: how people previously isolated or disconnected from the social fabric rally together with a shared purpose; how rehabilitation of the natural environment renews community spirit and
creates a sense of place; how restoring degraded spaces provides links to the past—by teaching people about the natural and cultural history of their community and the bioregion in which it’s located.

Not surprisingly, another sphere in which these projects have a deep and abiding impact is the economic. Communities are discovering that urban greening not only affects environmental health and community solidarity, but also the bottom line. One example of this idea in action is Union Gas Ltd. which naturalized all of the lands at its Customer Centre in Brantford, Ontario. By doing so it is reaping financial benefits—saving considerable amounts compared to the cost of conventional turf-grass landscaping. This story is illustrated in Chapter 7, Linking Past and Present.

If there is one guiding lesson to be learning from the projects explored in this book, it is that everything connects. The environmental health of our cities connects with the social health of our communities, connects with the economic vitality of our communities, connects with each one of us...Each of the projects in this book contributes positively to the community in which it is based; now, imagine what the individual communities would be like if each project were not just one, but one of hundreds, creating a network of inspiring green spaces that animate the city as a place integrated with nature and natural processes. The sum is greater than the parts. And where this lesson leads is to a challenge and a potential: a challenge to see our cities in a new way—as places where nature can thrive—and a potential for all of us to embrace this new vision and help make our communities better.
LIVING ON THE EDGE: RENEWING URBAN WATERS

CHAPTER 1:
A spirit of shared responsibility infuses many of the most innovative stewardship projects on public land across Canada. Citizens are joining together in committed and energetic groups to steward land that is, in effect, owned by all. Public park land, once managed solely by government departments (whether federal, provincial or municipal), is increasingly being seen as a common inheritance to be valued, protected and restored by communities. Working in partnership with all stakeholders, community initiatives are transforming public spaces and, in the process, reminding us all that community ownership—expressed through stewardship involvement—creates an opportunity for community renewal.

Where that vision of renewal is increasingly being expressed is on landscapes surrounding water—on the edges of lakes, rivers, streams and other waterways flowing through communities. Many urban waterways have been neglected and mistreated over the years, but there is a growing movement to restore them to health through stewardship. Recognizing that the health of the surrounding landscape is crucial to the health of waterways, many communities are focusing their stewardship efforts on restoring forests, meadows and wetlands beside rivers, lakes and streams, and renewing the community’s connection with this vital resource.
Meewasin Valley Authority, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

“stewardship is not only planting and gardening; it comes in many forms. Stewards...may be finance people, engineers or conservationists. They may be senior citizens. They may be school children. They may be donors who enjoy the natural beauty of the river valley and are simply helping out financially. All are important. All have a place.”

The South Saskatchewan River is the natural feature that defines the City of Saskatoon. As architect Raymond Moriyama has written, “The forefathers of Saskatoon built their future on its banks.” And now, the present-day citizens of Saskatoon are doing much work to ensure that the future of the river valley is green and vibrant.

Meandering through the city and for 25 kilometres in both directions beyond, the river “ties the city together in a natural way—with a winding ribbon of green,” writes Moriyama. The river valley is characterized by sandy plains to the south and glacial till to the north, and the city emerges at the junction of these two diverse geological formations, a kind of “ecosystem within an ecosystem.” As Moriyama puts it, “The river, with all its subtle and

FACTS AT A GLANCE

- Key activities include: community plantings, habitat restoration projects, clean-up campaigns, public education, stewardship programs, trail development, canoe tours, special events.
- Funding: two-thirds ($2 million) government support; one-third ($1 million) from grants and donations from the private and public sectors.
- Project contact: Susan Lamb, CEO, MVA, meewasin@sk.sympatico.ca; phone: (306) 665-6887.
sometimes violent voices, speaks a unique and special language in this prairie environment. It would be wise to learn that language, and listen to it...”

Moriyama’s call to listen to the “quiet voice of the 10,000-year-old, but still-young river” has been embraced by the City of Saskatoon through the Meewasin Valley Authority (MVA). Created by an Act of the provincial legislature in 1979, the MVA was formed with the support of three partners: the City of Saskatoon, the Province of Saskatchewan and the University of Saskatchewan. Its goal is to protect the natural and cultural heritage resources of the South Saskatchewan River Valley in Saskatoon and surrounding area by creating opportunities for public awareness and enjoyment, increasing understanding and ensuring a healthy and vibrant river valley. The cornerstone of that vision, which guides all planning, development and conservation activities, is the 100-Year Conceptual Master Plan developed by Raymond Moriyama Architects and Planners in 1979.

In 1979, the Province of Saskatchewan and the City of Saskatoon commissioned Raymond Moriyama Architects and Planners to develop a 100-Year Conceptual Master Plan for the Meewasin Valley. The report outlines an elegant and concise vision:

- The intent is enrichment of life.
- The spine is the river.
- The base is the natural system.
- The broad concept is health and fit.
• The principle is access to and along the river.
• The theme is linkage.
• The operational model is one of links and nodes.
• The parts are the dreams and realities passed down by the pioneers and the forefathers, the perceived and stated needs of the people today and the observed needs and experiences of the project team.
• The key is balance.
• The process links the creativity of people and the dynamics of time to the long-range potentials and options.

According to Gwen Charman, Director of Operations for the Meewasin Valley Authority, “Our whole project is really all about environmental education. We believe that the only way to protect the river valley is to help people value it. So our stewardship activities, which have real on-the-ground results, are really about instilling conservation values.”

*The Mission Statement of the Meewasin Valley Authority is:*

To ensure a healthy and vibrant river valley, with a balance between human use and conservation by:

• providing leadership in the management of its resources;
• promoting understanding, conservation and beneficial use of the valley; and
• undertaking programs and projects in river valley development and conservation for the benefit of present and future generations.
One of the main ways the MVA achieves this is by creating as many access points to the river as possible, creating a continuous corridor of natural and landscaped green spaces—the ribbon of green envisioned by Moriyama. The Meewasin Valley Trail, for example, begun in 1982 and the MVA project with the highest profile and highest public use, provides year-round access to the valley through 18 kilometres of trails. It is used by more than 900,000 people a year, and there are plans to further develop another 27 kilometres of trails. Volunteer Trail Ambassadors are recruited annually from the community, and they promote safety and courtesy among trail users; as well, they provide feedback to the MVA about river valley conditions.

Along with promoting recreational use of the valley, the MVA also promotes education. The Meewasin Valley Centre, for example, is a downtown interpretive facility with displays and events related to the city’s natural and cultural history; regular slide shows and interactive displays tell the history of Saskatoon and explore the story of the South Saskatchewan River Valley.
Other educational sites managed by the MVA include the Beaver Creek Conservation Area, an interpretive centre in a protected area with one of the few remaining uncultivated short-grass prairies in Saskatchewan, and the Wanuskewin Heritage Park, an international heritage site depicting the 6,000-year history of First Nations people in the Northern Plains.

Along with access and educational initiatives, the MVA promotes community involvement in stewardship activities. More than 30,000 volunteers participate in annual clean-ups of the valley, and the Meewasin River Stewardship Program has 300 volunteers who restore areas in the valley by planting trees. In 1999-2000, volunteers donated more than 1,600 hours of labour to tree planting and stewardship activities in the valley. Over the years, MVA volunteers have planted more than 150,000 trees and shrubs. One of the MVA’s greatest successes in terms of stewardship and renewal is the transformation of Gabriel Dumont Park. Originally a landfill site just south of the downtown core, it is the newest addition to Saskatoon’s riverbank parks, with three distinct areas: a traditional park for recreation, a transition zone that combines activity areas with naturalized habitat for wildlife, and a natural zone dedicated to enhancing wildlife habitat. All of the plantings in the park have been done by more than 1,000 volunteers.

Doug Porteous, MVA’s Manager of Community Development, points out that “stewardship is not only planting and gardening; it comes in many forms. Stewards are volunteers who believe in conservation, who believe in
Meewasin and will volunteer to use whatever talents and resources they have. They may be finance people, engineers or conservationists. They may be senior citizens. They may be school children. They may be donors who enjoy the natural beauty of the river valley and are simply helping out financially. All are important. All have a place.”

According to Gwen Charman, “A lot of the projects are initiated by citizens groups. We have to ensure that the projects make sense within the overall context of the 100-Year Conceptual Master Plan and we have to ensure that volunteers have adequate resources and training, but volunteers do the stewardship work. The MVA sees itself as serving the community: we provide some central organization and keep in mind the broader plan, but the people we work with as stewards have as much ownership of the valley as we do. In some ways, we’re working for them rather than the other way around.”

**Bakelite Brownfield Site, Belleville, Ontario**

In the case of publicly owned land, the task of igniting enthusiasm for stewardship activities is relatively straightforward, in that the land is a shared inheritance, owned by all. However, when the land is privately owned and, what’s more, contaminated by decades of industrial activity, renewing the site to health takes on added urgency. This is the challenge facing the City of Belleville, Ontario, as it embarks on a project to restore a prime waterfront property and turn it into a public park.
The Bakelite Industrial Site is approximately 30 hectares of wetland habitat on the shores of the Bay of Quinte, on the outskirts of Belleville, Ontario. Bordered by a major arterial road and extensive residential development on the north, a City-owned wetland to the west, a Class 1 environmentally significant wetland, Bell Creek Swamp, to the east and Lake Ontario to the south, the site represents “one of the best opportunities to preserve a wetland complex along the waterfront and to connect with upstream wetlands and provide a wildlife corridor,” according to retired Director of Planning for the City of Belleville, Stewart Murray. A significant challenge in the way of that potential for ecological linkage, though, is the fact that the site is heavily contaminated as a result of more than 50 years of industrial activity. Solvents, PCBs and phenols have permeated both the soil and the Bay of Quinte sediment, leading to substantial contamination.

When the Bakelite Manufacturing Plant, which produced plastics for housewares, ceased operations in the early 1980s, the site was surrounded by

**FACTS AT A GLANCE**

- **Size of site:** approximately 30 ha.
- **Site condition prior to clean-up:** soil and adjacent Bay of Quinte waters contaminated with PCBs, phenols and solvents.
- **Estimated clean-up cost:** $3.5 million.
- **Project benefits:**
  - removal of pollutants;
  - public access to the waterfront;
  - new passive recreational opportunities including hiking, bird watching and wildlife viewing; and
  - restored wildlife habitat with linkages to significant ecological features that border the site.

Project contact: Stewart Murray, phone: (613) 966-7196.
a fence and basically abandoned. Union Carbide, as former owner of the site and responsible for much of the contamination prior to Bakelite's tenureship, stepped in and voluntarily undertook a clean-up operation, spending millions to inventory the extent of the contamination and begin remediation. Several hundred buried metal drums of toxic waste, some of which had rusted and burst, were uncovered. As well, the soil in contamination “hot spots” was removed for treatment and disposal, and low-level contaminated areas were capped. As Murray says, “The City’s immediate concern was that the pollution at the site be terminated.”

Along with dealing with the immediate contamination issues, the City also has a long-term vision: “One of our goals is to stop the loss of wetlands along the Bay of Quinte,” says Murray. “The City supports the retention of wetlands. Despite the contamination at the Bakelite site, it’s richly populated with wildlife, especially birds, and could, with work, make a great trail. There’s significant potential here because most other wetlands along the shore have been lost to development.”
Although Union Carbide is committed to deeding the land to the City, the legal issues are as yet unresolved. As Murray says, “The chief barrier, from the City’s point of view, is that we don’t want to get caught in a position of legal liability for contaminated property.” The Ontario Ministry of the Environment is working with both the City and Union Carbide to draft a land transfer that will be acceptable to both parties. Murray points out that for a municipality, which just doesn’t have the technical expertise to deal with complex contamination problems and the legal issues that arise from it, it’s important to take advantage of the technical expertise at the federal and provincial levels. “They’re making sure we ask the right questions,” says Murray.

Where the City does have the expertise, though, is in envisioning how the transformed site will be used as a public trail through wetland habitat, with wildlife viewing areas, and how it will connect with the City-owned wetland to the west and the Class 1 environmentally significant wetland to the east. “This is an excellent opportunity for public education about the remediation of contaminated sites,” says Murray. For example, the trail will
need to be designed in such a way that access to the rest of the site is restricted; landscaped berms that discourage off-trail use are just one idea for ensuring public safety.

Public involvement in the development of the trails is another way to emphasize the educational message. Although at present a portion of the site is naturalizing on its own through natural regeneration, there are plans for active community involvement. As Murray says, “For the next phase, the public will play a strong role in the plan. There’s lots of support for it already. After all, we’re taking an abandoned industrial site and turning it into a waterfront recreational area.”
Measuring the health of a particular community is necessarily complex and subjective, dependent on an array of factors that defy straightforward calculation. Income levels, hospital admission rates, food-bank usage statistics, crime rates—all these may be quantified, but they don’t reveal the true pulse of community life. The more nebulous qualities—how safe people feel, how happy and satisfied they are, how connected they feel to others in their neighbourhood—these are much more difficult to gauge.

Every community, though, no matter how prosperous or troubled, has the potential to be a better place, to offer everyone more opportunities for involvement and connection. Often, these opportunities are most meaningfully expressed through projects related to green spaces and common grounds. It is here that communities can come together united by a positive focus on improving their environment and, through this process, forge a network of bonds that transforms a provisional, random grouping into a healthy community in which everyone is an active participant.

The connection between community health and individual health is likewise hard to quantify, but a growing body of research makes clear that access to green space and involvement with nature have a healing, positive effect on individuals. When people gather to do the important work of stewarding shared spaces, they are not only helping to heal damaged landscapes, they are also flourishing as engaged individuals. This is perhaps one of the best measures of community health there is.
Access to nature is not simply an amenity, it is a human necessity. We need to feel connected to the natural world around us just as we need air to breathe and food to eat. For years, social science researchers have been exploring the positive benefits that arise out of this contact with nature, but as one academic puts it, his work is “a Herculean task to prove the obvious: that plants are good for people.”

As anyone who has put a spade in the ground and cultivated a garden plot knows, the act of nurturing growth stimulates our imaginations, soothes our spirits, feeds our creativity and exercises our bodies. We are fully engaged with the world when we work to make things grow.

Rachel and Stephen Kaplan have been doing groundbreaking research on the connection between plants and people for years, and they conclude: “People often say they like nature; yet they often fail to realize they need it...Nature is not merely ‘nice.’ It is not just a matter of improving one’s mood, rather it is a vital ingredient in healthy human functioning.” Interestingly, the benefits they’re talking about as arising from contact with nature are not limited to experiences of wild expanses; they’re talking about something as simple as a view of a single tree or the presence of just one houseplant: “A garden patch, some trees nearby, and a chance to see them can all be provided at minimal cost and for enormous benefits.”
The health benefits are particularly striking and have been the subject of much research. Robert Ulrich, for example, has documented that patients recovering from surgery have faster recovery times and need fewer pain killers if their rooms have windows overlooking trees. Likewise, numerous studies show that simply looking at plants and gardens reduces stress levels; and that the physical activity of gardening reduces the risk of coronary heart disease in men and improves levels of bone density in women. One study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* found that over a four-year period, U.S. gardeners had 19 percent lower health-care expenses than non-gardeners.

Common sense tells us that the physical activity of puttering around in the garden and nurturing green spaces is good for our health, but what might not be so obvious is that simply the presence of trees and other natural features in our communities can be a strong indicator of (if not contributor to) community health. When Frances Kuo and William Sullivan looked at public housing projects in Chicago and compared treed communities to places without trees, they found that “residents...who live near trees have significantly better relations with, and stronger ties to, their neighbours. They also experience significantly less violence in their homes.” Likewise, Rachel Kaplan found that in the communities she studied, the most important factors in neighbourhood satisfaction were the availability of trees, well-landscaped grounds and places for taking walks.
The healing power of green space stewardship and interaction with nature—at both a personal and social level—can best be seen in two gardening projects, one in Vancouver and one in Toronto.

**Woodland Park, Vancouver, B.C.**

Grandview-Woodlands is a culturally rich, diverse neighbourhood in Vancouver’s east side. But in straightforward statistical terms, it might sound like a community in trouble: more than a third of its residents have low incomes and the population is highly transient. There is a higher percentage of single-parent families and more rented dwellings than in the rest of Vancouver. The area has also experienced high rates of crime and vandalism. In terms of accessible park space, there is just 0.4 hectares per 1,000 people, compared to the city’s average of 1.12 hectares.

Such statistics tell only part of the story, though. In this diverse neighbourhood, where a large number of Aboriginal residents live and where many different languages are spoken, the community has come together to celebrate its diversity—and to transform a once neglected and barren park space into a vibrant centre of community life.

Woodland Park is a small neighbourhood green space, measuring only 1.58 hectares. Five years ago, it was the kind of place you might walk by without even noticing. Bordered by approximately 20 mature trees (scant homage to its woodland
moniker), the park consisted of a wet, swampy, grassed area, a caretaker’s field house, a small wading pool for kids and a few grassy knolls. Warehouses and shipping companies surround half the park.

In 1997, residents of the Grandview-Woodlands community, in partnership with Britannia Community Services Centre, began to organize public meetings where residents could voice their hopes and dreams for the local green space. They met with a landscape designer and together identified the changes they would like to see. According to Jenyfer Neumann of Evergreen, an organization that became involved in the restoration of the park in 2000, “We wanted to bring the community together around the park itself.” Ideas that resulted from this community-driven process included a native plant garden, a new drinking fountain (for people and dogs), a community food-growing garden, a new playground for children and an art installation. All these ideas were intended to make the park a better place and encourage people to spend more time there.

Facts at a Glance

Site area: Woodland Park is 1.58 ha., the garden is 290 m².
Key features: Eagle Bear totem pole, tree sculpture, Pokemon sculpture, Native Plant Circle Garden.
Project milestones:
1997 - community comes together to plan the reclamation of Woodland Park;
Fall 2000 - first community meeting to plan the planting project;
December 2000 – mapping and design workshop is held;
April 21 2001 – totem pole raising ceremony and symbolic plantings are held—the following week, the first community planting event takes place.
Approximate number of volunteers involved to date: 100.
Number of plants planted to date: approximately 500 representing 20 different native species.
Project contact: Evergreen, infocbc@evergreen; phone: (604) 689-0766.
Given the strong Aboriginal presence in the community, many of the features chosen for the park relate to First Nations themes, rituals and cultural practices. For example, one of the first projects undertaken was the “Talking Poles Community Art Project.” Begun in the summer of 1999, the goal was to involve neighbours of all ages in the telling of stories through visual symbols—specifically, through the carving of a totem pole and the design of two sculptures. It was hoped that these shared stories and symbols would create a bridge and heal divisions between the urban and natural world, the contemporary and the traditional. A First Nations artist, Mike Dangeli, was commissioned to carve the “Eagle Bear” pole, and community members were involved in designing and carving two other sculptures: a tree and a Pokemon figure. The community also drew on First Nations symbolism of the medicine wheel to create a Native Plant Circle Garden.

**The Symbol of the Circle**

The circle, a universal symbol used by most indigenous cultures of the world, represents the interdependence of all things in the natural world, and the medicine wheel is an ancient symbol of these holistic teachings. Close to 500 plants, representing more than 20 different species native to British Columbia, many of which were used by Aboriginal people for food, medicine and other ritual purposes, were planted by people from the community. The Circle Garden at once provides a link to the natural history of the area, to its cultural heritage, and provides opportunities for residents and visitors to learn about habitat restoration, wildlife and ethnobotany.
The community’s involvement with the park extends beyond design and installation to on-going maintenance and stewardship. For example, residents adopt the park for a week over the summer, watering, weeding and monitoring. There’s also a children’s group that does some of the watering and a children’s summer camp that holds activities in the garden. As one volunteer reflects in the garden’s journal, “It feels good to see the local faces and enjoy neighbourly fun together.” Another volunteer, artist Katherine Dickinson, sees participation as something that helps forge community bonds: “I’d recently moved to the area and it was a really good stepping stone for meeting people who live here. It was one way to feel comfortable in a new environment.” As well, it was a way to learn about Native traditions: “The park is a place to share ideas, to chat with people who are interested in keeping some of the traditions of this land alive.”

The transformation of this park has changed the ways that people interact with each other and with the park itself. As one local resident says, “I watched the empty ‘playground’ fill up as the community-designed play...
equipment moved in. Then I watched Flyn and Kris and Shane and Eli carve Pokémon into the pole alongside some elderly neighbours. It was so moving to see the community gathered to watch the raising of the Eagle Bear pole in the centre of the Circle Garden...and to see the plants flourish along with our community.”

Having the park well cared for and maintained by the community also has a positive impact on safety, according to Neumann: “The park is used in a lot of different ways, but every time I visit it, someone is there. Now it is always clean which makes it a place where people feel comfortable. There are now fewer reports of theft and vandalism.”

Neumann’s advice to others contemplating similar projects is to create as many partnerships as possible: “The more people who want to see the project through, the more momentum you build.” Also, it’s crucial to maintain good relationships with these stakeholder groups, especially the City and the Parks Board. Compromises may need to be made as a result, but in the long run, they’ll lead to a more successful project.

The process of working together on the stewardship of Woodland Park has strengthened community bonds and set in place a solid foundation
for further neighbourhood initiatives. For a number of residents, the project has led outwards to people’s own homes, and they are looking at ways to create wildlife habitat and native plant gardens in their backyards. But more than this, the park can be a springboard for social change. As Neumann points out, “The park is a powerful place for people to start coming together around other issues that affect them—food security and transportation, for instance. There’s the potential—it’s still early days, but having those connections between people is a great place to start.”

The pathways and plantings of the native plant garden in Woodland Park have given the city-bound children of the neighbourhood an opportunity for day-to-day connection with the non-urban world. A chance, however small, at their doorstep, to be in nature. A landscape they usually only glimpse in the distant horizon framed between the gantry cranes of the port. The upright of the carved pole sculptures rising from the garden create a distinctive profile that encourages passers-by to stop and linger while giving the park its unique character and identity that encourages the community to continue involvement caring for the plants and watching them grow.

- Helen Lambourne, Woodland Park committee member and area resident

Spiral Garden, Toronto, Ontario

Picture this impossibility: A forest of maple and beech trees on a steep slope that drops more than a hundred feet down to a creek bed. At the bottom of this cliff is a 600-pound rock. The goal is to move this rock up the hill using people power.
Picture this possibility: Eighteen children, three adults, a rope and two days. They did it.

Nothing encapsulates the spirit and creative energy of the Spiral Garden better than this rock-moving exercise. Using an abundance of talent, finely honed problem-solving skills, the enthusiasm of children and the safety-conscious oversight of involved caregivers, a seemingly insurmountable challenge was overcome.

The Spiral Garden is an integrated outdoor art garden play program that has grown organically over the past 18 years. It’s an innovative program of the Bloorview MacMillan Children’s Centre, a Toronto rehabilitation facility for children with special needs. Developed by local artists and educators the project is designed, through gardening, the arts and play, to collectively explore and express ways to reconnect with each other, ourselves and the earth. The Artists’ Circle, a non-profit charitable group composed of artists, designs materials and workshops to share information about the Spiral Garden process and to initiate and support new projects in other communities locally and internationally.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

Date started: 1983.
Key features: spiral garden, cosmic bird feeder, raised bed gardens, meditation path, tepee/bone-house, spherical composter, totem pole, bread oven.
Play activities include: drumming, woodworking, gardening, drama, storytelling, ceramics, sculpture, candle making and puppetry.
Number of staff: 17 plus five to 10 volunteers per session.
Approximate number of program participants: 1,365 per year.
Project contact: Program Director, Spiral Garden, phone: (416) 425-6220 ext. 3317.
Children from the community, both with and without special needs, join children from the centre, along with staff, volunteers and facilitators, at the Garden. “One of the driving forces behind the creation of the Spiral Garden was the desire to create a place where children who had special needs and had to be cared for in a pediatric institution could interact with children from the local community,” says the 1999 Annual Report. Children with special needs, many of whom are wheelchair users with conditions such as spina bifida and cerebral palsy, comprise approximately 35 per cent of the camp’s population.

**What’s in a Name?**

The Spiral Garden is built on a three-part philosophy that integrates the arts, the garden and play: “We celebrate our interdependence with the natural world as a context for healing our children, ourselves and the earth. Through gardening, the arts and play we collectively explore and express our understanding of our place in this world. All aspects of the person—physical, emotional, spiritual, rational and intuitive—are integrated into the process. But at the heart of the process, at the centre of the seed, is the conscious intention to bring the poetic back into our lives through the nurturing of relationships and creativity.”
There are particular challenges to gardening with children, especially children who are profoundly disabled. As garden coordinator Jane Hillary says, “We are always trying to find ways to make the garden accessible to all of the kids, so that everyone feels they are making a contribution, everyone feels productive. Raised beds are a start, but there’s lots more we can do.” One example is the unconventional idea of “lying-down gardening.” Another solution that has worked well is to grow tall plants, so that the plants in effect “come to the children.”

For safety reasons, hard edges are avoided in the garden, which has led to some unusual features: soft canvas bags, for example, filled with water, hang throughout the garden and are used by the kids for watering plants. Hillary tries to infuse all garden tasks with a sense of ritual—“it seems to make it more special, plus it’s fun”—and she finds that involving the children in garden maintenance helps build a sense of responsibility.
Indeed, the garden and a sense of responsibility to the site are woven into all activities. “The garden is the backdrop, and it’s connected to everything we do here,” says Hillary. It’s even the source of materials for play—vines become “crazy hair” for puppets and mint from the garden becomes tea for afternoon breaks. “We try to find ways to use nature and bring it to the children’s attention,” says Hillary. When a large willow branch broke off a tree during a storm, for example, it became “willow week” at the Garden, and many activities focused on this material and what could be fashioned out of it. This entwining of nature and creativity is just one example of how art is used at the garden to help children make connections between the inner world of their imaginations, the world of social interaction and the natural world.

Making use of the materials at hand has led to some ingenious improvisations in the Spiral Garden. Old oxygen tanks become a sound sculpture. Bits of old tree branches and rope are fashioned into a larger-than-life moving skeleton puppet. Dried grapevines are woven into a huge, hollow sphere, the interior of which is used for composting. When kids roll this big beach-ball-like sculpture around the garden, they’re also turning and mixing the com-
posting materials. Even the loss of materials at hand becomes animated with meaning: when two old trees had to be cut down because they were diseased, the loss became a story, the kids marking their now-gone shadow lines with small mementos, reminders of the trees’ gift of shade. Every corner of the site has intriguing artifacts full of meaning, created by children expressing their dreams, desires and imaginations.

Play activities at the garden are guided rather than directed; children are encouraged to find their own way. They are free to choose from a number of different stations that include woodworking, dress-up, gardening, painting, pottery and much more. These activities run concurrently and the children can spend as much time as they want at each. There is, however, some structure to the day—everyone comes together to share a morning music circle and an afternoon gathering circle. Likewise, the day begins with a shared ritual of storytelling and ends with shared thanks and celebration.

One of the most noticeable things about the Spiral Garden is that despite the controlled chaos (inevitable when more than 50 children are together in one place), there is remarkably little in the way of fighting or crying. The mood is consistently upbeat. As staff member Shannon Crossman explains, “We’re artists and we work with the kids as artists rather than as therapists. Sure, some things get worked through, but
therapy is not the goal. We’re just trying to give the kids as full and rich an experience as possible.” As the 1999 Annual Report puts it, “We are ever striving to reconnect to one another, the earth and ourselves through earthwork, artwork, heartwork and healing.”

**The Garden**

“The garden grounds us in the most primary equation of life; earth, air, fire, water. The garden’s cycles remind us of the continuity of life through change in form. Cooperation and co-ordination with nature is the basis of our stewardship. The garden is the inspiration where images, characters and stories emerge. The garden is a story of process, transformation, interdependence, reciprocity, responsibility, unfolding, diversity, miracles, continuity, rhythms, cycles, birth, growth, decay, death, rebirth, mystery. The garden is an analogy for understanding our own stories on three levels: Each of us is a unique garden full of diversity, potential and beauty. We cultivate our relationships within a community on common ground. The earth is a cosmic story through which we can find a deeper sense of belonging.”


**Notes:**


