

From Seed to Plate and Beyond: An In-Depth Look at the Vanier College Collective Gardens



The Collective Gardens have been a growing force at Vanier College since 2008, when a group of volunteers from the Environmental and Wildlife Management program began creating wildlife habitat around the college. Since 2015, under the tutelage of Myriam Mansour, Geography teacher and Coordinator of the Sustainability Major, the gardens have blossomed into a centerpiece of lush life, greenery, beauty, inspiration, and sustenance. In this interview, EWM program coordinator Brandee Diner sits down with Myriam to get her take on the history and importance of the Gardens as well as the opportunities and challenges facing the project as Vanier College strives to develop its expertise in the field of urban agriculture.

BD: What are the Vanier Collective Gardens?

MM: The Vanier Collective Gardens are a variety of areas around campus that have been cultivated for the purpose of growing specific plants. These include planters, beds along building edges, and boxes. Essentially, the gardens comprise anything other than lawn that is being used to grow perennials, annuals, herbs, and other edible and non-edible plants.

What inspired the creation of the Gardens?

The Gardens started officially in 2014 with the launch of the Sustainability Major, when Alena Perout (then Geography teacher) and Richard Dugas (then Sustainability Officer) recognized that students would need volunteer opportunities on campus in order to meet the criteria of the new major. Simultaneously, urban agriculture was on the rise; growing food in abandoned lots, in public urban spaces, on lawns, and on rooftops was becoming more popular. These factors, combined with the fact that Vanier students had already gotten involved in turning lawn into biodiversity services around the N building, resulted in the creation of the initial Vanier Gardens- a plot containing fruits, vegetables and herbs, as well as a shed, in front of the A-wing of the College's main building. The primary location of the gardens is now in the back of the college, where there is more space for future growth.

And what continues to inspire the development of the Gardens initiative?

Learning is what is really propelling the Gardens forward. Though the project was originally based in the sustainability major, its scope has grown over the years, and it now responds to teacher and student engagement with a range of current issues such as food insecurity, loss of biodiversity, and the use of natural resources. Students from programs all over the College are learning that as a society, we are not

Getting my hands dirty, meeting other people with similar interests, and being able to watch things grow thanks to the care and time of the volunteers was just a very healing and important experience for me.



Photo credit Gerald Nino



Photo credit Brandon Calder

well fed, and that developing collective gardens offers a solution to this fundamental problem. They are beginning to recognize the value of planting and growing organic food, of developing skills in self-sufficiency, of understanding the processes involved in food production, and fundamentally, in developing self-confidence.

Would you say that the gardens offer an opportunity for students to better appreciate what they are eating?

Absolutely. It also ties into many aspects of students' lives- psychological, social, cultural, economic, and environmental. The Vanier community is re-appropriating its own land to make something worthwhile and meaningful for itself. From a cultural viewpoint, for instance, it's always a pleasure to see a flash of recognition on a student's face when they realize there's a plant present that their Portuguese grandmother used to cook with, or a Caribbean plant that they used to eat all the time back home.

What would we see if I took my class on a tour of the gardens?

We offer tours by section or by theme, depending on the needs of teachers and students. For example, we could visit the Sports Complex where you would see a wildlife garden made to attract pollinators. It is local, diverse, and self-sufficient, featuring native plants like milkweed, which is a key food source for Monarch butterflies. Here you could also visit the plasticulture planter, which contains primarily edible annuals such as Swiss chard, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, and kale; the plastic mulch film covering the soil retains moisture and heat, and it reduces weeds. Alternatively, we offer thematic tours: you and your students could explore the wildlife gardens near the N-building, the main food garden at the Open Garden, or the herbal medicine garden behind the K wing. Other important components of the Gardens you could share with your students include rainwater collectors, drip irrigation, three composting systems, an insect hotel, a cold frame greenhouse, and permaculture practices. Innovative elements are being added regularly thanks to collaborative projects and initiatives from members of the Vanier community. A guideline for teachers is available on the website.

We have 7000 people in our college community, and the gardens can't feed everyone, so how is the food distributed? What are the rules?

There are no set rules, but we believe that the volunteers deserve to be compensated for their hard work, so they are the first to get their hands on the harvest. We also try to make produce available to the community through Jake's Café. What is not claimed by community members is used to prepare dishes offered at the café. We're happy for passersby to take plants that are in abundance such as mint and lemon balm, but we trust that every member of the Vanier community will consume ethically. In other words, if a couple is strolling along and comes across a ripe cucumber, we hope that before taking it, they would ask themselves if they are entitled to it; if they worked for it; if they volunteered; if they helped it grow...

How can people get involved with the gardens?

Anyone, be they students, staff, faculty, or community members, is invited to get involved or simply stay informed by signing up via one of the links provided at the end of the interview.

Can students' volunteer hours count for academic credit?

Yes, under three main avenues- the Student Transcript Activity Record (S.T.A.R.) program, the Sustainability Major, and Explorations. Volunteer work in the Vanier Collective Gardens also looks really good on a C.V.; this kind of experience can give an applicant to a job or university a real edge. Furthermore, there is an annual student volunteer recognition ceremony where all students get a letter of attestation for their volunteer work.

We're an academic institution. How can the gardens be used in an academic context or as a teaching tool?

In 2015-16, the *raison d'être* of the gardens shifted from biodiversity and volunteering to academics. Since then, a concerted effort has been made to bring students and teachers out into the Gardens.

4 – VANIER ACADEMIC VOICES

The first class came out as a response to a need for labour, but the Gardens' need for students quickly turned into the students' (and teachers') needs for the Gardens, as discussions about how to incorporate them into the curriculum grew. At least a dozen classes from a wide variety of disciplines have taken advantage of this opportunity. For example, the psychology course "Health and Happiness" uses the gardens to illustrate how a healthy environment can contribute to happiness, and biology students were tasked with choosing a plant and filming it from seed to maturity before finally pressing a specimen. Poems inspired by the Gardens have been written in French and English classes. Chemistry and physics teachers have designed lessons around the Gardens' composting and irrigation systems. Likewise, individuals and student groups have used the gardens for Launch Box projects, and our new insect hotel was created by students in a French course entitled *La planète en danger*.

It sounds as though a positive, productive feedback loop has developed – a dynamic where the Gardens inspire the students and the students inspire more growth in the Gardens, and so on?

Yes! This is why we've chosen to call this project the Vanier Collective Gardens: the community creates and embraces the garden. Originally, the students were useful for the Gardens, but now the Gardens are useful for the students. When students are on a tour, I tell them, "This is your shed." "Here's the key." "This is your garden!"

Students from programs all over the College are learning that as a society, we are not well fed, and that developing collective gardens offers a solution to this fundamental problem.

What are the challenges and opportunities facing the Gardens today?

The challenges often come down to communication. How do we reach the students; how do we recruit and retain volunteers? How can we make students and other community members aware of all they can do with the Gardens? Another challenge involves getting the community to recognize the worth of the Gardens. We ask ourselves how to diversify the appeal and make people recognize that this is more than a hobby garden. The Vanier Collective Gardens project is an opportunity to learn life skills, build tools, get grounded in reality, and connect to food. We need to get people to think of this collective as not just a garden, but as urban agriculture. Furthermore, I'd like to see every member of the Vanier community take pride in the Gardens, to be aware of them, enjoy them, connect with them, and celebrate them. The Gardens can and should be used as a living laboratory, a place for experiential learning, a place for self-fulfillment and personal growth. If we allow our Collective Gardens to flourish and blossom, the opportunities are infinite; the sky is the limit.

Do you have anything else to add?

I wish to end with the acknowledgment that the Vanier Collective Gardens are built on unceded Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) land, a traditional meeting place for many First Peoples. As we engage in all of our garden-related activities, we should keep in mind and be thankful for the natural wealth that we get to interact with and which contributes to our growth.

Teacher Testimonials

The significance of the Vanier Gardens, from a pedagogical point of view, and with respect to the discipline of psychology, cannot be over-expressed. The Gardens represent an experiential, active learning opportunity for students. When students visit the gardens their stress levels decrease, which illustrates that gardening, and being outdoors in general, is wonderful for mental health. Being with other students and working in teams, the students experience the satisfaction of meeting shared goals and collaborating in a most convivial environment. With regard to my own course, Health and Happiness, learning in the Gardens vividly acquaints the students with the principles of sustainability, particularly with regard to the link between sustainability and the global epidemic of depression, which is one of the key links between psychology and the global sustainability movement, and which has, as its goal, not only the preservation of human sanity, but of life itself.

—Christine Lavoie, Psychology

When I brought my English classes to the gardens in the spring of 2016, I noticed something interesting. Some students who until that point in the semester had not participated much in class and had been quite quiet, came alive. A switch seemed to turn on, and they were clearing debris, moving border bricks, and digging with enthusiasm. We had been talking about sustainability in our class, but the activity seemed to make the concepts more real for the students: composting, weather conditions and climate change, the food we eat; all these ideas came up in our visit, and the garden, I believe, allowed students to make connections they wouldn't have made in the classroom alone.

—Mark Cohen, English

I teach a course on food studies. We examine where our food comes from as well as social and environmental issues that arise because of our current food system. The Vanier Collective Gardens allow my students to get out of the classroom and into the "field." Rather than simply listening to lectures about how urban agriculture builds community, grows healthy and affordable food, preserves biodiversity and beautifies urban areas, they are able to experience this for themselves. Several of my students have gone on to volunteer regularly in the Gardens; they are excited to have a place on campus to learn new skills, try new foods, decrease anxiety by spending time in nature, and build a new community. The Vanier Gardens are a wonderful use of our spacious, green campus.

—Maro Adjemian, Humanities

Student Testimonials

It was good working hard so there will be flowers that will bloom in a couple of months. I appreciate the fact that I had a part in making this happen.

—**Nikolitsa Elizabeth Baltas Lopez**

I really enjoyed this gardening activity! It allowed me to appreciate gardening as a way to be in touch with what we eat as well as to save money. Growing plants allows someone to have access to the freshest ingredients at all times. By planting my own vegetables and herbs, not only do I save money, but I am also doing a service to the environment by not buying products from big companies who pollute to transport all the veggies to big retailers.

—**Antonino Messina**

As for composting, I knew about it, but only compost with the city. We just dump everything organic in a bin and then put it by the road, and the city picks it up. The idea of layering the dry [biomass] with the organic matter to balance the chemicals released was new to me. As far as the visit went, I found it very interesting and informative; it makes me interested in trying my hand at gardening this summer.

—**Megan Parker**

I want to thank Myriam Mansour and all the members of the Vanier Collective Gardens for giving me the opportunity to be a part of the gardening project. There was a sense of belonging present through the many interactions with the other members. Through my interactions, I gained love for nature, sustainable education and health.

—**Melisa Edward**

The garden is a place where I can go to get out of my head and work to make something beautiful. It helps me deal with my anxiety and go back to class feeling rejuvenated.

—**Rachel Shelton**

Vegetables, herbs, and flowers aren't the only things that flourish in Vanier's Gardens; you can also find friendship, memories and endless knowledge blooming.

—**Sophie McCafferty**

My experience at the Gardens have brought me lots of happiness and joy. Getting my hands dirty, meeting other people with similar interests, and being able to watch things grow thanks to the care and time of the volunteers was just a very healing and important experience for me. It let me feel much more in tune with nature and other forms of life.

—**Janella Snagg-Romeo**

The gardening workshop was very interesting. It opened my eyes to how to garden in an urban setting while using the space available effectively. Moreover, it was interesting to see what possibilities are available when planting space is limited. I'm planning on moving out into an apartment soon, so it was great to hear that I could still garden even without a lawn.

It was very encouraging! On top of that, the actual gardening was a lot of fun. I'm always a fan of getting my hands dirty and getting some exercise. Overall, an enjoyable and eye-opening experience!

—**Claire Beeman**



Photo credit Gerald Nino

For More Information and to Get Involved:

Check out the Vanier Collective Gardens website for contact information, guides, and informative posters: <http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/sustainability-major/collective-gardens/>

Visit the Gardens' Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/956934947670755>, or sign up on Mail Chimp: <http://eepurl.com/b7vStn>



Brandee Diner is coordinator of the Environmental and Wildlife Management program.