



VanDusen
BOTANICAL GARDEN



Bloedel
CONSERVATORY

Vancouver
Botanical
Gardens
Association

LEARNING GARDEN

2024 project report



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As the Director of Education and Research at the Gardens, I am proud to support people on their journey of discovery at the garden, especially as I witness the city's green spaces replaced by condos and carparks. It is no longer the case that every family has a garden of their own, a place where putting your hands in the earth and caring for what you have grown is commonplace.

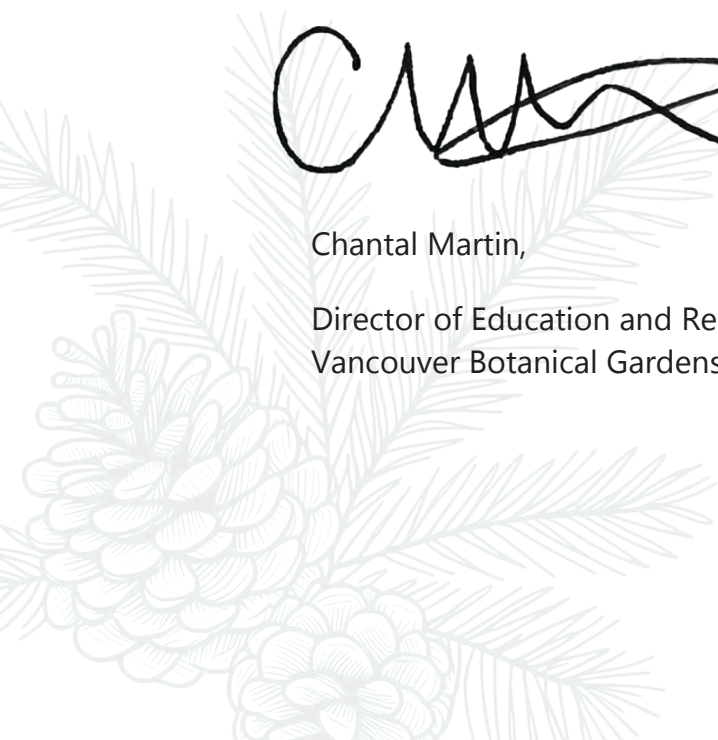
The Learning Garden gives the simple joy of planting back to the community.

Witnessing how inner-city children interacted with nature at VanDusen is what inspired us to begin the Learning Garden project back in 2018. Today, after years of planning, fundraising, and development, the Learning Garden has already given back the simple joy of growing and all that it can teach us to hundreds of people. As we look to the future, I am humbled by the fact that it will impact many thousands more lives.

I am immensely proud to present this report, detailing some statistics and reflections we have gathered throughout the journey to create and run the Learning Garden. I hope that you, too, enjoy reading about this project which I feel so passionately about.



Chantal Martin,
Director of Education and Research,
Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association



"What would inspire an 8 year old? What about an 80 year old? We found the common ground and built upwards from there."

- Chantal Martin



Features

The process to create the Learning Garden spanned six years and underwent many iterations as we refined our vision. The version which we see today can effectively facilitate interactive horticulture, is highly accessible, provides quality interpretive signage, and greatly improves the aesthetic qualities of the garden.

The Learning Garden features seven, 32 sq ft raised planters and a larger central U-shaped demonstration bed. Benches suitable for groups of 30 or more are arranged in a semi-circle to allow for presentations, and a three-level potting bench gives learners additional space to work. Five new educational signs will provide education on key themes such as sustainable water use and easy to grow edible plants, enhancing education for the hundreds of thousands of visitors who pass through the Learning Garden each year. A 96 sq ft storage shed allows for efficient storage, and new plumbing has allowed for immediate access to water for irrigating, cleaning, and drinking, as well as upgrading previously manual irrigation to an automated system.

Starting with the standards set by City of Vancouver, we then collaborated with the Disabled Independent Gardeners Association to develop a space which would be truly accessible. The entire area now has wheelchair grade gravel, and each planter wheelchair accessible. A broad range of specialist ergonomic gardening tools accommodate a wide range of users, and the sensory garden can engage the public, no matter what sensory impairments they may live with.

Lastly, the Learning Garden has provided substantial improvements to the beauty of what was a notably underused area of the garden. Beds are now in metal rimmed or wood finished planters, paths are gravel instead of mud, and the sensory garden replaces what were once empty grass patches.

13,950
Square foot of
renovated space


5,000+
Annual capacity

DIGA
Approved for
accessibility

50+
New plants
species

96%
Of funding came
from the public

1,248
Hours of
volunteer
support per year



"We often hear people refer to VanDusen as 'their garden'. Thanks to the Learning Garden, that is more true than ever before. "

**- Sangeeta Thomas,
VBGA Instructor**

Who has been using the Learning Garden

Opening during our popular Summer Camp season, over 500 children between the ages of 5 – 12 have participated in one or more sessions at the Learning Garden. In the past month, over 100 teachers attended an education open house, with a further 100 attending professional development sessions this autumn.

Children came from a diverse set of socio-economic backgrounds, with the majority of sessions including one or more children attending on a donor-funded bursary. Although we do not collect data on ethnicity or gender, session leaders have unanimously reported a broad demographic, representative of the population of Metro Vancouver.

From September onwards, the Learning Garden will open up to adults, community groups, pre-school children, and teachers. In total, we predict a further 3,315 to have used it by July 2025. Thanks to new interpretive signage and the inclusion of the Learning Garden in volunteer-led garden tours, the total number of people improving their understanding as a result

of the Learning Garden may rise to the hundreds of thousands.

While we continue to gather qualitative and quantitative data, current feedback from children, parents and instructors has been overwhelmingly positive. As one instructor puts it:

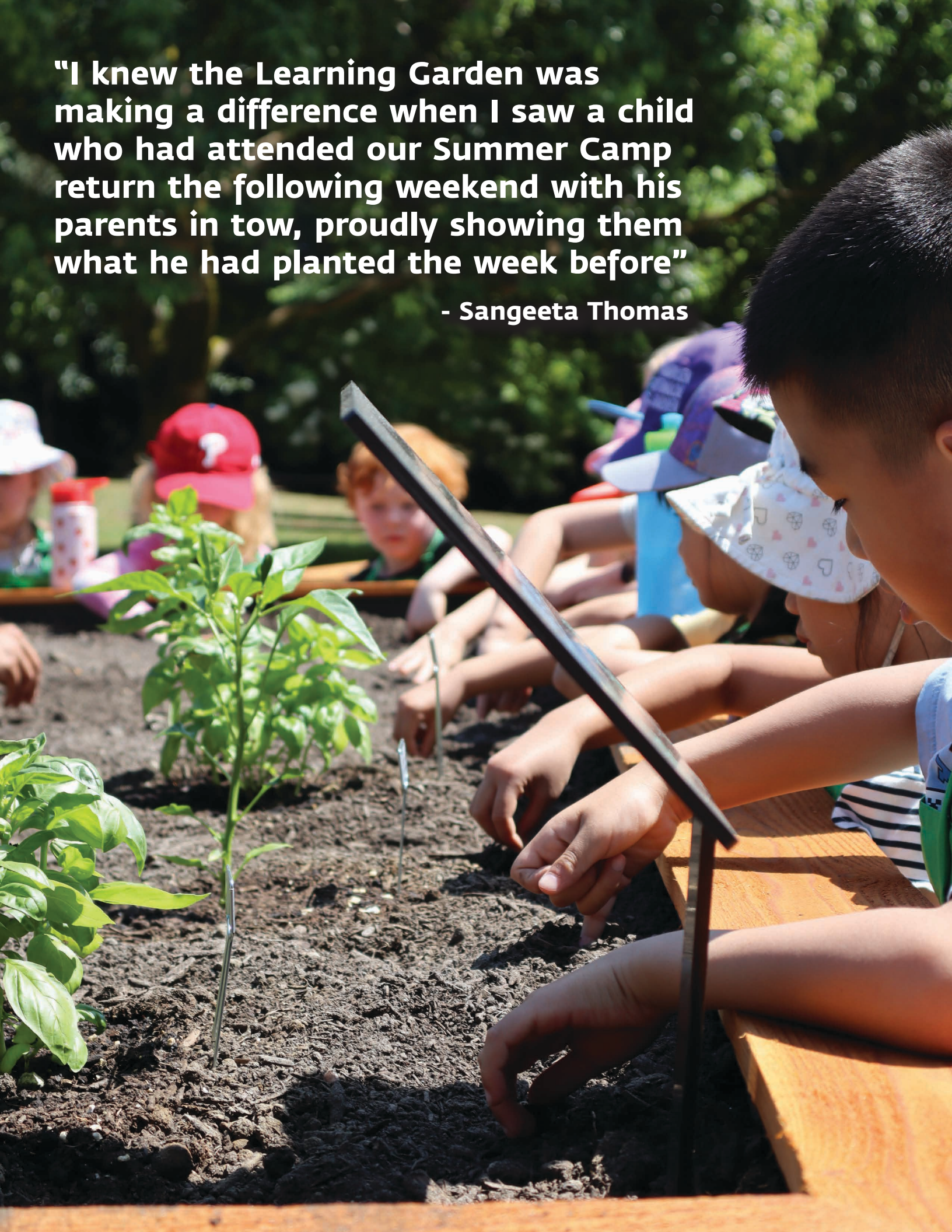
"In all my years as an educator, I can think of only a slim handful of sessions where everyone fully engages. There is always one for whom the session is too easy, too complex, or simply failed to connect with the content."

Sessions at the Learning Garden have been the exception to this rule. Novices have marvelled at the simple joy of picking and eating things they had only ever seen on restaurant menus, while seasoned gardeners were able to discover new uses for familiar plants. I've never found it so easy to engage groups as I have at the Learning Garden."



"I knew the Learning Garden was making a difference when I saw a child who had attended our Summer Camp return the following weekend with his parents in tow, proudly showing them what he had planted the week before"

- Sangeeta Thomas



How have people been using the Learning Garden

Practical knowledge.

One of the major goals of the Learning Garden is its ability to root botanical and environmental education in lessons which someone with little exposure to plants can understand. Each planter has been curated to reflect a use which everyone is familiar with; plants that can be used for taco fillings, herbs used in teas, flowers you can press dyes from – even plants which have been grown in outer space. With each session, learners not only grasp the fundamentals of horticulture, but they grasp the relationship plants have with everyday life, different cultures, and the impact of climate change.

First steps.

Due to the broad range of abilities of Learning Garden participants, instructors have noticed many people approaching the space with some trepidation, particularly children who have never directly interacted with plants and soil. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the Learning Garden is how it has fundamentally transformed the very way people feel about plants.

“In the span of an hour, she went from being afraid to touch the soil, to pulling radishes straight from the earth, giving them a quick rinse, and then eating them with glee.”

- Sangeeta Thomas

Multi-disciplinary education.

The natural world has a great deal to teach us beyond biology and horticulture. Children have learnt how to harvest, chop, and combine herbs, learning cooking skills often for the first time. Plants have been used to create art, both as inspiration and as a medium. Groups have discovered how Indigenous people use native plants, and have grown plants used in Asian cuisine to better understand the culture. An entire bed is currently dedicated to plants which have been grown in space, encouraging people to consider the impacts of gravity and the role plants will play in space exploration. Each lesson stretches far beyond biology and botany, improving education in a broad range of subjects.

Volunteer engagement.

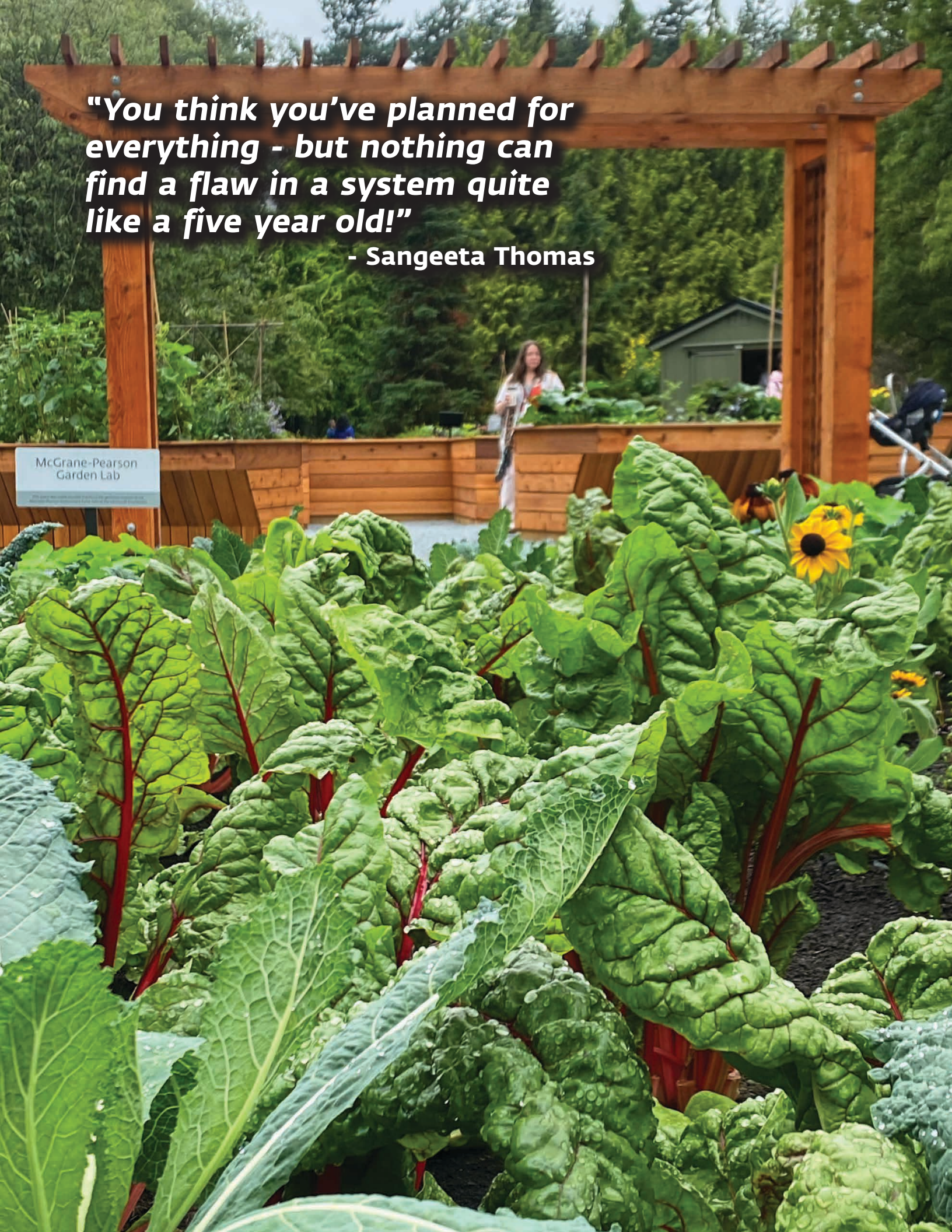
Volunteers have always been the linchpin of the garden's success, and have already provided major support to the Learning Garden. Three times every week, a team of eight volunteers with experience in horticulture tend the beds, ensuring that they are kept in good condition for that week's classes.

Volunteers provided advice and guidance throughout the planning process, and continue to lend their expertise as we plan new sessions. While supporting the Learning Garden, they also learn from it, improving their own knowledge and understanding.

"You think you've planned for everything - but nothing can find a flaw in a system quite like a five year old!"

- Sangeeta Thomas

McGrane-Pearson
Garden Lab



Learnings

The Learning Garden hasn't just helped to educate the public, it has taught us a great deal. Through regular evaluation and constant reflections, the Learning Garden continues to improve, day by day. The scope of what has been learnt already is too great to list here, but includes:

Many of our sessions involve harvesting edible crops, but we often find ourselves with a surplus. We are looking to partner with community groups in need to distribute vegetables to people in need.

While pandemics and other major events cannot be predicted, future projects must have a contingency plan to protect against potential delays and cost increases.

Finding the right level of complexity in lessons is a challenge, especially as children come with such varied exposure to plants. This will be a long process of constant adjustments to find the right balance.

We expected this to be a popular space for formal education, but what we didn't anticipate was how well attended it would be by the general public.

Asking kids to share a watering can does not always work! We have purchased extra items and will purchase one item per child in the future.

Temporary signs which can weather both heat and rain are hard to create. We recently invested in a washable paint which, after 3 days drying, has withstood the elements.

Popular and reliable plants such as radishes need to be re-planted weekly to ensure we have a constantly available harvest.

When two adjacent plants appear even mildly similar, they will be confused during a session. We are learning not to assume any botanical knowledge, and plant more varied neighboring seeds.



***"I am just as excited about
the next ten years as I was
about the first ten days."***

- Chantal Martin

Looking to the future

From the earliest stages of planning, the Learning Garden was intended to be a place where collaboration between the VBGA, volunteer groups, other non-profits, and local Indigenous groups can take place. In the coming months, we will be joined by:

The Master Gardeners: This group will begin working with us to deliver classes on advanced horticulture, as well as hosting Junior Master Gardener sessions for the first time.

Disabled Independent Gardeners Association: Having collaborated with us to ensure the Learning Garden is accessible, they will host a session at the Learning Garden for their members in the coming months.

Dyers Apothecary Farm: This dye-specialist farm provided us with expert botanical knowledge which kickstarted our dye planter, and will continue to help us develop this resource for our community.

American Public Gardens Association: Throughout the planning process, the APGA network was invaluable in connecting us with botanical gardens across North America who had completed similar projects. We continue to work closely with several partners and look forward to sharing what we have learnt with other botanical gardens in this network.

Seed Collectors: For over 40 years, this group has preserved plant biodiversity and promoted horticulture by harvesting, preserving, and selling many rare and interesting seeds. From October, the Seed Collectors will utilize the Learning Garden to test the growth of several native species.





Adult Education

The rapid growth of the city has meant that thousands of former gardeners have downsized and can no longer engage in their love of horticulture. At the same time, many people now moving into homes with gardens lack the skills to properly tend them. Towards the end of the year and entering into 2025, adult education at the VBGA will start to incorporate regular use of the Learning Garden. Sessions include topics such as:

Gardening essentials, from pruning techniques to how to winter vulnerable species.

Growing and cultivating cultural plants, such as those used in traditional Chinese medicine to plants important to local Indigenous groups.

Artistic sessions, from growing flowers for arrangements to plants that can be used to create dyes.

Evaluation & adaptation

The Learning Garden was not envisioned to be a complete and unchanging project, but rather a place of continuous growth, able to adapt to changing times.

Many of our courses include various forms of evaluation, from formal surveys to anecdotal evidence from staff and instructors. As we continue to gather data, we improve our understanding of how best to utilize the Learning Garden, and will continue to update our practice based on our findings.

What will the Learning Garden look like in ten years? Only time will tell.

UPCOMING FEATURES

**Rain
Barrel**

+

**Compost
Tumbler**

September, 2024

**Sensory
Beds**

+

**Vermi-
composter**

October, 2024

**Education
signage**

November, 2024

**Little
Library**

+

Planters

+

**Discovery
Station**

TBC, 2025

**"Between the pandemic, inflation,
and global supply chain issues, I have
never worked with a more challenging
budget. Our donors never lost faith,
they are what kept this project alive."**

- Chantal Martin



Final budget

This budget states our current and upcoming expenditures. In-kind donations such as volunteer hours and donated plants & seeds are not included.

Please note that certain upcoming features are not yet accounted for and may require additional funding. To learn more or to support these features, please call: **250 397 0390** or email: **fundraising@vandusen.org**

Construction	\$234,434
Labour, site preparation & minor misc.expenses	\$89,334
Drainage, plumbing & irrigation	\$43,400
Concrete, surfaces, gravel & paving	\$101,700

Furnishings	\$104,551
Custom arbour	\$9,500
8 X accessible planters plus demonstration bed	\$26,980
Three height potting benches	\$3,900
Hydrant	\$9,240
Storage shed	\$7,336
2 X custom benches	\$21,720
Rinse station & water fountain	\$5,875
Educational signage (in progress)	\$20,000

Tools and supplies	\$26,269
Plants & growing medium (not incl. in-kind donations)	\$13,778
Accessibility specific tools	\$1,300
Children's tools	\$1,639
Education materials	\$851
Gardening tools & equipment (some items in progress)	\$2,877
Misc. (shade tents, storage, first aid etc.)	\$5,284

Staff (incl. associated costs)	\$91,325
Learning Garden Coordinator (12 months)	\$60,000
VBGA staff planning time (approx. 325 hours)	\$31,325

Total	\$456,579
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Thank you

VanDusen Botanical Garden is a beloved cornerstone of our community but would not exist today were it not for public support. From the visionaries who supported its construction, to those who keep the gardens alive through their annual donations, VanDusen stands testament to the dedication and generosity of our community.

These supporters are the reason the Learning Garden exists today.

In the short time in which it has been in operation, the Learning Garden has given hundreds of children their first experience cultivating plants they can call their own. Memories like these have the power to be truly transformative – especially to children who have few chances to interact with nature – and can lead to a lifelong appreciation for the world around them.

Every single memory created at the Learning Garden, season after season and year after year, is a direct result of the people who funded it. If you were one of the incredible people who made this possible – thank you. The Learning Garden exists today because of your generosity.



Chantal Martin

Director, Education & Research
Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association



Special thanks to the following people whose generosity made this all possible.

Derek Belyea

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VanDusen Plant Sale

Brenda Vanry

Sandra M. Walton

West Coast Seeds


Marie Westby

Linda Westerlund

Angela White

Y.P. Heung Foundation

John Zaplatynsky



THIS BED, PLANTED
BY GENEROUS DONORS
ON JULY 5, 2024,
MARKS THE BEGINNING
OF GROWTH IN THE
LEARNING GARDEN.
THANK YOU
FOR YOUR GENEROUS
SUPPORT!



seeds donated by
WEST COAST SEEDS.