

Go Forth & Reforest

LEAF'S TREE TENDERS GRADUATES GET THEIR HANDS DIRTY

Robin Sutherland & Janet McKay, Local Enhancement & Appreciation of Forests, 2008 Jack Kimmel Grant Recipients

LEAF (Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests) is a grassroots environmental non-profit based in Toronto working at the community level to improve the urban forest. This goal is realized through concrete, ground-breaking programming which includes providing subsidized tree and shrub planting services for homeowners, educating citizens about the integral role that trees play in everyday life, and encouraging and supporting citizens to become engaged in the urban forest through advocacy and self-directed tree stewardship initiatives.

LEAF was founded in 1996 by current Executive Director Janet McKay. As a long-time environmental advocate and activist, McKay realized that in order for Toronto to take real steps toward improving its tree canopy, more was required than just lip service; a paradigm shift that would see every citizen take ownership of the urban forest was necessary. All of LEAF's programs have followed this basic belief with incredible success. To date, LEAF has planted over 13,000 trees and shrubs in Toronto through its Backyard Tree Planting Program – this includes over 2,400 in 2008 alone. Each tree is selected carefully and planted in consultation with homeowners. The care and investment that goes into the tree at the planting stage, along with the personal connection each homeowner develops for their tree, come together to ensure that they have the highest possible chance of surviving the tender early years.

Training Programs

LEAF's approach to citizen education and training is unique in that it attracts a diverse populace. Urban Forest Orientation sessions capture those who are uninformed about the full worth of the urban forest but feel an inherent connection to trees, and turn them into urban tree advocates, active volunteers and community leaders. Tree Tenders I and II provide further training for these individuals. They also offer skill development for professionals, such as landscape architects and gardeners, already working in the field. In each case, graduates serve their community by helping to restore, enhance, and protect Toronto's tree canopy.

Thanks to a \$6,000 grant from the Canadian TREE Fund in 2008, as well as additional funding from other partners, LEAF was able to improve upon each aspect of its citizen education and engagement programming last year.

Level 1: Caring For Trees

Four Urban Forest Orientation sessions were held in 2008. These sessions act as an entry point for citizens who are unfamiliar with the urban forest, but are aware that trees are important. The idea of caring for trees resonates with these individuals on a personal level; it is this starting sentiment that LEAF, with the help of the Canadian TREE fund, helps cultivate and bring to fruition. Sessions begin by introducing attendees to the existence of the urban



forest. Following this, attendees learn about the importance of trees in the city and the unique set of stresses they face, as well as how each individual can contribute to the mitigation of these stresses. These educated citizens often go on to enter the Tree Tenders training program, or volunteer with LEAF.

Level 2: Building Blocks of Healthy Urban Forests

The next level of citizen engagement that LEAF offers is the Tree Tenders Volunteer Training Program. Three Tree Tenders I sessions were held in 2008 with class sizes ranging from 25 to 39. Using ISA's *Citizen Arborist Guide* as a training manual, Tree Tenders training acts as an avenue for citizens with an interest in the urban forest to expand their knowledge about trees. In a classroom setting and in outdoor sessions, volunteers are taught proper tree planting techniques, how to identify trees, and how to recognize the stresses they face. Sessions also raise awareness about the professional arboriculture field, shed light on the types of services arborists provide, and demonstrate why they are so important to a healthy urban forest. Lastly, Tree Tenders training increases public understanding of climate change and its implications for the urban environment. Reduction of the heat-island effect, protection from UV radiation and the reduction of stormwater runoff are just a few of the important benefits that Tree Tenders learn about.

Positive Outcomes: Taking Action for Trees

Armed with this knowledge, graduates of the program have frequently gone on to undertake their own urban forest initiatives in their respective communities. This "train the trainer" approach allows urban forest information to be disseminated widely and effectively through Toronto's large and diverse neighbourhoods. Gregg, a Tree Tenders participant, says that "it's quite possible that the community I decide to settle in will have healthier trees because of the knowledge and sense of purpose I now possess." Some program participants have gone on to create programming in communities outside Toronto as well.



Coming Full Circle

LEAF was also able to hold its first advanced Tree Tenders Training session in October of 2008, which welcomed 26 eager participants. Tree Tenders II participants were able to choose between two streams. The first, presented in collaboration with the City of Toronto's Community Stewardship program, focused on hands-in-the-ground planting techniques and invasive species removal in Toronto's naturalized areas. The second saw Tree Tenders graduates who had since undertaken their own community initiatives return to the Tree Tenders classroom as instructors, where they provided practical, applicable advice to participants about how to engage fellow citizens in community activism around the urban forest. At the end of the training sessions, which lasted three hours and were conducted over three days, LEAF distributed a collection of fact sheets created using in-house expertise that in-

cluded information about project management, advocacy, volunteer management, and how to engage local politicians in community initiatives. Tree Tenders II graduates will go on to work with the city and other non-profit organizations and community groups to improve the health of trees, increase tree canopy cover, and promote and protect the city's green infrastructure.

The Tree Tenders Volunteer Training Program is all about incubating new ideas and monitoring innovation in community-led urban forestry. It supports people who care about Toronto's trees, gives them some practical tools and resources, monitors their involvement and creative ideas and shares their stories in order to inspire others. What LEAF has created, through this pioneering programming, and with the help of the Canadian TREE Fund, is an empowered and engaged citizenry that actively cares for Toronto's urban forest – both with their hearts and with their hands. ♦