

Case Study of the Use of Organic Land Care Practices in a City Park

Corktown Common Park

Completed in 2014, Corktown Common is a 7.3 hectare (18 acre) park in the heart of Toronto that combines the technical requirements of flood management with the design of a multi-use urban park. The site is a former industrial brownfield located west of the Don River. Today, the park is an ecologically diverse landscape that attracts people and fauna throughout the year. This award-winning park is a destination that draws from across the city and establishes a new benchmark for ecological diversity and organic land care in Toronto's park system.

DESIGN

Built as part of the revitalization of the West Don Lands by Waterfront Toronto, Corktown Common was designed by the landscape architecture firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates to protect surrounding neighbourhoods from flooding and to create a high-quality public space. The park design features are rooted in sustainability and the use of natural infrastructure. The landscape design and initial planting laid the groundwork for the evolution of dense plant communities that offer a diverse range of habitats for a growing population of birds, amphibians and insects. The park was designed to work with natural systems and processes and to be cared for in a way that increases ecological services in the area.



CHOOSING ORGANIC LAND CARE

The founding principle of maximizing regionally appropriate biodiversity, and the subsequent resiliency and function of the landscape, is achieved through the implementation of organic land care standards and maintenance practices.

Corktown Common was the first park in the City of Toronto to be maintained using strictly organic horticultural practices. Specially trained Toronto Parks horticultural staff implement organic methods that are geared to the landscape's specific habitats and uses. The organic maintenance program covers all aspects of the park except the turf and consists of several components including soil management, invasive plants management, composting, as well as the selection and placement of native plant species found in southern Ontario.



IMPLEMENTING ORGANIC LAND CARE

STAFF TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION: In the first year, the City selected maintenance staff to work at Corktown Commons based on an assessment of their expertise and knowledge. Those staff who passed an in-house organic horticultural knowledge assessment were given the opportunity to be part of the maintenance crew at Corktown. In addition, a few managers completed Gaia College's Organic Horticulture Specialist course on-line or through an accelerated course at Humber College.

OUTSIDE EXPERTISE: For the first two years, the City of Toronto hired an external Organic Land Care Professional to provide monthly half-day training on organic horticulture practices for soil and plant health. The consultant worked with the park's maintenance crew to carry out site inspections throughout the park to respond to any issues and determine best practices. The consultant developed lists of materials and supplies for organic horticulture and wrote monthly reports with recommendations on next steps.

GUIDELINES AND STANDARDS: The landscape design firm, together with trained staff, created a site-specific Organic Landscape Maintenance manual for Corktown Common. The manual provided an overview of organic maintenance principles and standards to manage and sustain the functioning of the diverse ecological systems within the park landscape. This manual is regularly reviewed and updated and is a valuable resource for staff.



DIVERSE ECOSYSTEMS

The park features a careful selection of vegetation in various zones - urban prairie, aspen woodlot and a wetland. The park contains more than 700 native trees and thousands of shrubs, groundcovers, and aquatic plants. Native, self seeding wildflowers that grow throughout the park support a wide array of butterflies and other pollinators through the seasons.



Active play area of safety surface and natural boulders



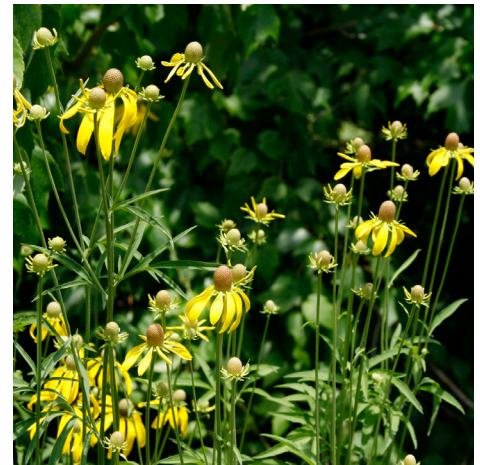
Aspen Woodlot



Sweetspire, Cattails and Tamarack



Bumblebee on Monarda



Grey-headed Coneflower



Boardwalk through flood mitigation wetland

OUTCOMES OF IMPLEMENTING ORGANIC LAND CARE

INSTITUTIONAL

By creating Corktown Common Park as an ecologically diverse destination park that is organically maintained, the Park Forestry and Recreation division increased its corporate knowledge of organic horticulture and organic methods for park maintenance. A number of trained staff have moved to other parks in the city bringing their organic land care experience with them. Moving forward, the intent is to distill the information identifying core differences between currently applied horticulture practices (used in other parks) and organic practices that have been tested at Corktown Common and use this information to set guidelines for the incorporation of organic land care practices in all city parks.

ECONOMIC

While a thorough economic review hasn't been undertaken by the City, the cost to implement organic maintenance practices has not exceeded that of non-organic methods. Materials such as compost and compost teas are produced on site and soil amendments and other products are relatively inexpensive. The costs associated with transitioning to organic land care practices come primarily from providing training and oversight for staff as they become comfortable with organic practices.

CORPORATE

The design of Corktown Common and the subsequent organic landscape maintenance practices support the City of Toronto's city-wide environmental strategies such as the Biodiversity Strategy and the Pollinator Protection Strategy. The park is a model of what is possible in terms of flood mitigation and creating habitat for wildlife while at the same time providing an active greenspace for neighbouring communities and visitors from across Toronto.

ECOLOGICAL

As a former industrial site that was completely devoid of nature, the park is an inspiring regeneration story. The diversity and abundance of wildlife in the park continues to increase as the vegetation cover grows and expands. The park features an interconnected marsh systems, which supports waterfowl and other aquatic wildlife. Organic practices also help to safeguard the water quality and the ecological function of the marsh and of downstream ecosystems.

COMMUNITY

The community's response to Corktown Common has been positive overall. Signage at the Park provides the public with information on the different habits and the organic maintenance practices that support the health of the soil, plants and water. As in all ecologically designed parks, there is some public feedback related to the plant palette from those who are used to an aesthetic that includes annuals or more formal planting. Park staff acknowledge the need for additional public outreach to help build public awareness as the community adapts to this cultural shift in park design. However, there has also been a large show of public support for this type of naturalized area in a dense urban neighbourhood. A 'Friends of Corktown Common Park' formed shortly after the park opened and it hosts park clean ups. University of Toronto researchers conduct research in the park and groups often tour the park.



GOING FORWARD

THE INFLUENCE OF CORKTOWN COMMONS PARK

By designating Corktown Common Park as an organically managed park, the City of Toronto has increased its institutional knowledge and experience in using organic care practices and this experience can be applied to other parks in Toronto's Park System

As a reconstructed brownfield site, the park has established a new benchmark for ecological diversity and services that Toronto's urban parks can provide, even on challenging sites.

Institutions and researchers visit the park as a model park and to carry out research. The Red Bud Project, for example, studies the Red Bud tree and the habitat the species provides for pollinator species.

Corktown Commons won an ASLA award in 2016 and was recognized by Popular Science for its sustainable design and its positive and lasting impact on the community and the environment.



FUTURE PLANS

As explained by the Horticulture Manager Michelle Reid, the City of Toronto's Park staff are highly educated in horticulture, ecology, forestry and environmental science and therefore have an appreciation for the value of ecological landscape design and ecologically sensitive maintenance practices. However, there is a knowledge gap related to the specific methods and practices of organic horticulture. The experience of only using organic methods in Corktown Common for the past five years has been useful to build knowledge and experience in implementing organic practices at an urban park scale and how to apply organic practices in other existing parks and new park developments.

Moving forward, the intent is to distill the information of what the difference is between currently applied horticulture practices and organic practices and use this information to incorporate best practices in the City's Horticulture Guidelines for all city parks. Each park has its own designation and considerations, but the goal is to proactively increase the use of organic practices city-wide when possible and feasible.

The City is currently developing an internal program to train staff on organic practices, recognizing that organic land care represents a cultural and aesthetic shift and changing practice takes time. It is widely recognized that using organic methods has many benefits and Corktown Common Park is an example of what Toronto Parks System could, and should, do to support ecosystem health and increase the public's knowledge about solutions to addressing the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss.

THE CITY OF TORONTO STEP-BY-STEP PREPARATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING ORGANIC LAND CARE AT CORKTOWN COMMONS PARK

BUILT INTERNAL CAPACITY

Identified a Park staff person whose role was to devise the systems and processes to initiate and maintain the park through organic means; this staff person had experience in expanding another pilot initiative into the park system city-wide

The City supported this staff member to complete Gaia College's Master Organic Gardening Class at Humber College to become SOUL accredited

Initiated a process to test staff knowledge of organic practices through an internal horticulture assessment tool

Invited staff who passed the assessment to be part of the maintenance crew at Corktown Common Park

Supported key staff to take Gaia College's Master Organic Gardening course

Worked with the union representing city staff to cultivate staff by-in and ensure organic land care designation was recognized

OBTAINED INITIAL EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Engaged a certified Organic Land Care Professional from Gaia College to review the Toronto Parks organic land care assessment tool that was developed for Corktown Commons

Contracted a SOUL Accredited Organic Land Care Professional to provide on-site training and recommendations

Increased institutional capacity to implement organic maintenance principles and methods through monthly site visits through the park with staff and consultant to address issues, provide recommendations for the next month and to monitor vegetation health and maintenance processes

Landscape designers and Parks staff used SOUL Organic Land Care Standard as a basis to develop a site-specific Organic Landscape Maintenance manual for Corktown Common.



ABOUT SOUL AND THE ORGANIC LAND CARE STANDARD

The Canadian Society for Organic Urban Land Care (SOUL) is a non-profit Canadian organization. It was formed in response to the growing need for ecologically responsible land care practices.

The Organic Land Care Standard was first introduced by SOUL in 2003. This document was developed to address the need for a tool to support a successful transition toward sustainable land care practices by individuals, community, industry and government. Now in its 7th edition, the Standard is a reference document that defines practices appropriate for use in organic urban landscapes and includes an extensive list of allowed and prohibited substances and materials.

It is a document intended for use in the design, specification and bidding stages of a project and can be a useful reference for anyone working on developing service contracts for organically maintained landscapes.

It is also the Code of Conduct adopted by Organic Land Care professionals certified by SOUL.

This Standard was developed in consultation with many landscape professionals across the world. Like all standards it is a living document, and subject to change in the light of further experience with Organic Land Care.

The most current edition of the Standard can be found on the SOUL website at www.organiclandcare.ca