

The Food Garden

A Place To Learn

The Food Garden at the UBC Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research was the first major demonstration and display garden devoted to food plants in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. It carries on a long tradition by responding directly to a growing need for a well documented demonstration garden that displays a wide assortment of fruits and vegetables that can be used for both demonstrations and teaching at university and public non-credit course levels.

Its situation on the university campus makes it ideal for use by students and faculty, as well as a destination for school groups of all ages. A well educated and knowledgeable staff as well as eager volunteers add to the strengths of the garden. It is ideally placed to provide public research and education to its visitors. It maximizes the visitor experience with easy access to the produce being grown. The Canadian west coast has an almost ideal climate that allows visitors year-round opportunities to discover which fruits and vegetables grow best in the region, as well as different growing techniques.

Research and learning come together in the garden, both formally and informally. Visitors often come to the garden to research what's best to grow in our area and to ask questions of the horticulturists about varieties, growing techniques and pruning methods. They leave having learned more from our educational signage, which is aimed at both children and adults. Their visitor experience and conversations with the experienced staff personalize their visit, making it more likely they will return. This kind of informal and somewhat passive learning is a key element in the success of the garden.

Another important element in the informal learning process is provided by our volunteer group, the Friends of the Garden (FOGs), who are

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responsible for the harvesting of the vegetables and have direct contact with the visitors during the harvest and through tours. They are a valuable part of the public education aspect of the garden, through their interaction with the public, hands-on evaluation of the harvest, productivity and growing techniques, and by their interest and input on varieties that we grow. The FOGs own ongoing education increases their importance as informed liaisons with the public.

The natural inquisitiveness of children makes the Food Garden a logical destination for learning. Pre-schoolers marvel at the white pumpkins in the fall and are enthralled to see their favourite and not so favourite vegetables. Guided tours by FOGs or staff bring to life the natural wonders of food in the “wild,” as opposed to a supermarket shelf. Elementary and high school students benefit from more formal tours and are often given worksheets to complete as they roam the garden. Professors at UBC and other colleges also bring classes into the garden’s living classroom for practical instruction on a variety of food related projects. As well as guided tours, the students in the Horticultural Techniques course participate in practicums on the pruning of fruit trees.

An important task in the garden is record keeping and evaluation. All sowing and planting dates are recorded as well as germination and harvesting times. Notes on pests and diseases, variety success or failure are noted, and in some cases the quality is assessed through taste tests by staff, students, visitors and, of course, the Friends of the Garden. These notes are compared from year to year to help decide on future plantings and to advise those who need varietal information for research or for their own gardens.

The Food Garden is a place to learn about fruits and vegetables and is a “must see” for any serious gardener. It provides easy access, wide varietal selection, educational and informative signage, friendly and knowledgeable staff, as well as institutional support in the academic life of the university. The expanding website forums and the good selection of books from the Shop in the Garden make the Food Garden at the UBC Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research your one stop for gardening information.