REIMAGINING THE TEACHING GARDEN: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT

TORONTO BOTANICAL GARDENS
FEBRUARY 2026



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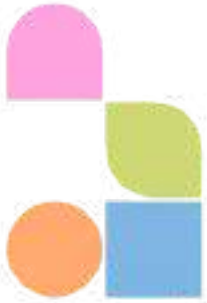
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ABOUT THE GARDEN

The Teaching Garden is an immersive and engaging place where visitors can explore nature and the ravine ecosystem, learn about edible and local plants, and dig in the garden beds. The garden welcomes a diversity of park visitors, including children and youth with school groups, campers, families, seniors and members from the broader community. It's truly a living landscape - alive with insects, flowers, scents, sounds and textures

The Toronto Botanical Garden (TBG) opened the Teaching Garden in 1998 with the generous support of the Garden Club of Toronto. Today, the garden offers year-round programming focused on building connections to nature and sparking curiosity through hands-on learning experiences.





Image by Toronto Botanical Garden

The journey to the garden is part of the experience! A short walk from the main building through Edwards Gardens (heading West) leads visitors across the river and along a winding path up a curved trail. This journey invites visitors to slow down and take in the wonders and natural beauty of the ravine system. Then, as you enter the Teaching Garden, you're surrounded by gardens of varying levels, towering white pines, and views into the ravines.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

TBG is exploring opportunities for enhancements for the Teaching Garden in an effort to ensure the space is evolving and responsive to the needs of visitors. TBG has engaged Child Engagement Specialists at Recreate Place and Evergreen's Children's Design Specialist (referred to as The Team in this report) to lead an engagement process, gathering ideas for the space.

During the fall and early winter of 2025, the project team gathered ideas and insights from children, youth, adults, seniors, staff and volunteers.



Image by Toronto Botanical Garden

We would like to thank everyone who shared their time, ideas and suggestions for the Teaching Garden. We would like to thank the TBG team for prioritizing community engagement as a fundamental pillar in creating an equitable and inclusive space.

Two complementary resources were created as a result of this process. The purpose of these resources is not to prescribe outcomes or dictate specific design solutions, but rather to support an emergent, collaborative approach—one that remains responsive to evolving ideas, values, and opportunities throughout the design process. The two resources include:

- **Reimagining the TBG Teaching Garden: Community Engagement Report**

A detailed summary of the engagement process, including feedback, observations and suggestions from the community.

- **The Teaching Garden: A Visual Reference Guide**

A visual guide intended to support and inform a future design process by grounding it in the voices of children, staff, teachers, and visitors. It is offered as a starting point for continued conversation with Toronto Botanical Garden staff and future design professionals, reflecting the engagement feedback gathered through listening, observation, and shared experiences in the garden.





METHODOLOGY

Over the fall and early winter of 2025, the team gathered ideas and feedback from a diversity of voices, including visitors to the site, school groups, TBG campers, teachers, staff and volunteers. Below is an overview of these engagement sessions:

1. Community Pop-Up Activation:

A pop-up engagement activity was held as part of the TBG Fall Ravine Festival on October 4th, 2025. The Team hosted a series of activations and engagement prompts asking participants to share their ideas for hopes and dreams for the space. On average, participants stayed at the engagement area between 5-30 minutes. The Team connected with over 100 people, ranging in age from infants to seniors.

Activities included:

- Dotmocracy: Review a collection of precedent images and select your favourite feature by placing a sticker on it.
- Create Together: Engage with loose, natural parts to represent something you'd like to do/see/experience the garden.
- Idea Wall: Add your idea by drawing, writing, scribing on the idea wall.
- Face painting: Learn about local plants and animals.

2. Visiting School Observations:

Recreate Place observed a school visit with two kindergarten classes in the Teaching Garden on October 29th. Photo documentation and interviews were used to build an understanding of how the space is used in school programs. During the visit, Recreate Place spoke with students, guardians and teachers, asking for their feedback and suggestions about the space. In addition to these conversations, Recreate Place documented observations of how the participants explored and experienced the space. This engagement approach was shared with TBG staff, who then led the same conversation with two additional classes visiting the Teaching Garden, and documented their feedback.

3. School Survey to Teachers who Visited the Site:

A series of questions were integrated into an existing TBG survey that staff shared with teachers following participation in a visiting school program. Three teachers responded to these questions after participating in a fall program.

4. Staff and Volunteer Surveys:

A survey was circulated for staff and volunteers, with an invitation to explore ideas further by phone. Originally, the plan was to host a site walk with staff and volunteers, however scheduling challenges made this difficult, and a survey was created as an alternative. This approach gave staff and volunteers time to reflect on their ideas. A conversation by phone was held with two respondents to expand on their answers.

5. Interviews with Teachers:

Interviews by zoom were held with three elementary school teachers who had visited the site either in the spring or fall of 2025. Participating teachers were from Gateway Public School, O'Connor Public School and Northlea JR Public School.

6. PA Day Camp:

An activity was designed for TBG Camp Staff to facilitate with campers during the PA Day camp on November 14th 2025 and at the December Winter Camp. The engagement included a dotmocracy activity in which campers were presented with a series of precedent images of various outdoor features and asked to place stickers' on those they liked the most. As well, staff facilitated a conversation with campers to gather further input.

EMERGING DESIGN IDEAS

The following are ideas and themes that came out of the engagements. They are detailed with accompanying images in *The Teaching Garden: A Visual Reference Guide.*

DESIGN PRINCIPLES:

Design principles are simple guiding ideas that help designers make decisions. These early principles were shaped by the voices and perspectives shared during engagement activities, ensuring the design reflects the needs, experiences, and hopes of the children, staff, volunteers, and visitors to the Teaching Garden.

Surprise, Discovery & Wonder

Design the garden as a place of continual revelation, where small and large moments of surprise invite curiosity, imagination, and close observation. Hidden details, playful prompts, and unexpected encounters should encourage visitors to slow down, explore, and look twice.

Seek & Find

Create layered experiences that reward exploration through self-guided discovery. Scavenger-hunt moments, interpretive prompts, and seasonal cues should invite children to search, notice, and return again and again.

Movement & Play

Encourage physical engagement through spaces that support running, climbing, balancing, and navigating. Movement should feel natural and integrated into the landscape, blending active play with garden exploration.

Artistic Expression

Use art as a playful and provocative tool to engage visitors and deepen their relationship with the landscape. Artistic moments should be embedded throughout the garden—both as standalone features and within functional elements—celebrating creativity at multiple scales.

Interaction with Nature

Design the garden to invite hands-on participation and stewardship. Children should feel welcomed to dig, water, mulch, harvest, and care for the landscape as part of their learning and play. Introduce loose parts—primarily natural materials that support free play, collaboration, problem-solving, and pro-social behaviours through shared problem solving and making.

DESIGN ELEMENTS:

Design elements are the specific physical features and components that shape how a space looks, feels, and functions. Here, they reflect what we heard during engagement sessions, turning shared ideas and experiences into visible and functional parts of the landscape.

Integrated Art

- Temporary and permanent art installations embedded within the landscape
- Colourful, playful, and interactive artworks at varying scales
- Functional elements (benches, seating, furnishings) designed as artistic features (e.g., snake benches, snail stools)

Interpretive & Playful Signage

- Child-friendly signage of varied sizes and formats
- Plant identification, garden information, and fun facts
- Provocative prompts (“smell me,” “look closely,” “can you spot…”)
- Wayfinding and signage that supports scavenger hunt experiences

Seek & Find / Scavenger Hunt

- Self-guided, seasonal scavenger hunt integrated through signage and landscape features
- Discovery-based prompts that encourage observation and exploration

Water Play (with Conservation Lens)

- Water hand pumps, mud kitchens, and movable water-play elements
- Opportunities for tactile play while reinforcing water awareness and stewardship

Seating & Gathering

- Formal and informal seating distributed throughout the garden
- Gathering spaces for groups (e.g., circles of logs)
- Quiet, contemplative seating moments embedded in planting areas

Movement & Active Play

- Climbing and balancing features such as rope nets, balance logs, and tunnels
- Augmented existing features to support interaction and movement
- Routes and spaces that encourage running, navigating, and discovery

Loose Parts

- Provide a collection of open-ended, primarily natural materials (e.g., logs, stones, sticks, shells, seed pods, fabric, water channels) that invite free play, experimentation, and imagination.
- Encourage collaboration, co-creation, and pro-social behaviours by enabling children to build, rearrange, negotiate, and problem-solve together in ever-changing ways

Discovery Details

- Small-scale surprise elements such as animal footprints, carved or embedded objects in boulders, or hidden textures
- Moments of delight woven subtly into paths, structures, and materials

Garden Interaction Zones

- Designated areas for digging, watering, mulching, picking, and eating
- Clear visual cues that signal permission to touch and participate

Storage & Program Support Spaces

- Improved, multi-use storage areas that support programming
- Child-accessible storage to encourage involvement in set-up and clean-up

Screening & Transitions

- Landscape or artistic screening to visually soften and separate service areas (e.g., washrooms) from program spaces

FEEDBACK FROM ENGAGEMENTS

1. COMMUNITY ACTIVATION

General Observations in the Garden:

- Young children (aged 2-4) were climbing on the dinosaur and the butterfly sun dial.
- Families moving slowly and meandering through the garden - taking their time and looking down at the plants.
- Several children looking for hiding spots behind some of the plants (hide and seek).
- In the spiral walk to the butterfly/sun dial, children were creating their own shortcuts.

Conversations + Comments from children and adults:

- Requests for more flowers - in addition to edible plants, flowers that bring colour.
- “I want surprises! I come here a lot and it would be nice to see new surprises. For example, someone one year made a big question mark on the path out of flowers. I thought that was so interesting. I like things like this,” commented a child who attends summer camp each year..
- A designated space for toddlers and children to dig in the soil and mud. Parents were concerned about disturbing plants, so were asking about designated ‘digging’ zones.
- Consider adding several loose parts as provocations - these could be “‘toys such as diggers” or shovels.
- Water for kids to play with.
- Plants that have Interesting seeds and textures.
- A ‘seek and find’ activity that is self-guided and changes in the seasons.
- More signage about plants, pollinators, animals, etc.
- Consider an ‘aromatic’ experience - encourage exploring plants more closely.
- Several visitors asked about repairing the alphabet and dinosaur garden.





Images from the community activation event.

CONTINUED...COMMUNITY ACTIVATION







Images from the community activation event.

Dotmocracy experience:

We shared 21 images for the dotmocracy activity, and the items listed below received the highest votes (in order of most popular):

- Willow tunnels
- Bench seating carved in the shape of animals (ie. snakes)
- Tunnels to run through that had artistic expressions
- Low rope hanging net
- Animal sculptures (owls)
- Mud play, sand and water play
- Small frames to play in
- Stepping stones with colourful mosaics embedded

2. VISITING SCHOOL OBSERVATIONS

- **Entryway:** Students arrived through three different entry points (the hiking trail from the ravines, the entrance closest to the pavilion, and through the main gateway)
- **Tunnels:** Students enjoyed running through the polytunnels in the garden, zipping back and forth laughing and running. We heard, "*Come on, let's run!*"
- **Spiral Sun Dial/Butterfly Garden:** There was some confusion about what to do with the butterfly. Students asked if they could touch it, climb it, and why is it here?
- **Garden Shed:** Largely used by staff. However, students were curious about what was in there.
- **Planting:** Students loved planting the garlic. They wanted to do more!
- **Gathering circle:** There were not enough logs for the full group to sit down and several of the logs were quite rotten inside, so students were unsure if they could sit on them.

Insight Gathered by TBG Staff: Staff gathered further information from students and teachers over two additional school visits and below is their feedback:

- More hands-on opportunities (planting, creating, experimenting)
- More sensory elements (things to touch, taste, smell, hear, see, etc.)
- More opportunities to see or experience animals
- More seating and/or tables
- Access to washrooms and water fountains
- Plant labels and signs to encourage self-guided experiences through the Teaching Garden





The Teaching Garden during a school visit

3. SCHOOL SURVEY

Recommendations from teachers included:

- Additional composting areas where students can see the process in play
- More information about animal habitats
- A designated ‘play area’
- Trail maps
- Scavenger hunt opportunities with connecting signage.

4. STAFF & VOLUNTEER SURVEYS

What do you love about this space?

- **Aesthetic and Sensory Appeal:** The thoughtful design, varied plant beds, pathways, natural fences/lattices, flower arrangements, and the feeling of it being a "secret garden" with a special, tucked-away feel and sense of quiet seclusion are highly appreciated. The feeling of the space being whimsical and magical.
- **Educational and Hands-on Experience:** The garden is valued as an accessible teaching space, especially for children to learn about edible and local plants, to see vegetables/fruits grow, and have the ability to encourage kids to dig in the dirt. The tea is harvested for the staff, and it would be great to expand that experience to visitors.
- **Connection with Nature:** Respondents love the connection with the land, sharing space with animal kin, the variety of nature spaces, and being surrounded by large ravine and arboretum trees.
- **Maintenance and Structure:** The garden is praised for being well-maintained and having a good foundational structure.

What would you say are the most popular activities to do in the garden? (ie. gardening, watering, campfire, etc).

- **Gardening and cultivation:** Planting, harvesting, growing food from seeds, weeding, and general gardening activities are frequently mentioned.
- **Watering:** Watering is consistently cited as a popular activity, especially among children.
- **Campfire:** The fire circle and campfires are highlighted.
- **Exploration and learning**: Activities include wandering and exploring, scavenger hunts, learning about special plants, composting, exploring the land, and watching insects.
- **Relating to nature:** Being in relation with the animal and plant kin is noted as a meaningful activity.

CONTINUED...STAFF & VOLUNTEER SURVEYS

What are some of the features or areas that visitors love to spend time in/at? What do they do in these areas?

- **Butterfly Sundial/Pollinator Gardens:** This area is frequently used as a meeting place, and is popular with photographers looking to capture images of butterflies, birds, and bees.
- **Log Circle:** This space is used by kids and camp groups, as well as adults for activities like forest bathing, meditation, painting, and drawing. It is also noted as a good meeting place.
- **Vegetable Garden & Plants:** Visitors enjoy learning about what is growing, looking for signs, fruit, and flowers, and some groups even pick produce.
- **General Activities/Experiences:** People enjoy walking and exploring the entire garden, taking pictures, sitting on benches to quietly enjoy the space, and using the fire area. Groups with disabilities appreciate the peace, sounds, and scents of the garden.
- **Flower Arrangements (near parking lot):** This spot is popular for photographers to capture nature, specifically butterflies, birds, and bees.

Are there any challenges that you see in this space?

- **Location and Programming**: Being far from the main building is a challenge, and there is a lack of engagement for visitors when active programming or staffing is not present, making it hard to know what is happening.
- **Infrastructure and Safety:** Issues include a non-functional or low-pressure drinking water fountain, decaying logs in the log circle, and the need for shelter areas in case of inclement weather.
- **Maintenance and Signage:** The recycling/landfill bins are not well-managed, and there is a need for better seating and more signs to identify plants and explain the space.
- **Environmental Factors:** Limited light makes vegetable gardening difficult, and animals such as deer eat the produce.
- **Access and Visibility:** The steps down into the ravine may be a barrier for some, and the space could be made more inviting by opening it up to adjacent garden areas.

CONTINUED.....STAFF & VOLUNTEER SURVEYS

Do you have suggestions for enhancements to the garden?

- **Signage and Interpretation:** Suggestions included interpretive signage, better wayfinding, dedicated signage for teaching aspects, and labels for native plantings.
- **Water Features and Amenities**: Respondents suggested adding a water feature (fountain, small waterfall), improving the existing water fountain/adding a water bottle station, and adding toilets (even portable ones).
- **Educational and Thematic Gardens:** Ideas included bringing back the "Alphabet Garden" and creating a themed garden featuring plants mentioned in literature (like Shakespeare's plays).
- **Habitat and Ecological Enhancements:** Suggestions were made to add a bird bath and/or bird feeders, bat boxes, overturned clay pots for amphibian habitat, and an Indigenous area with native plants. Look to other gardens for inspiration, such as Van Dusen Gardens in Vancouver where they have plants to cook, recipe cards, pictures of plants, etc.
- **Operations:** Recommendations included expanding the garden, growing produce for donation, and establishing a sign-up for volunteers to assist with gardening tasks.
- **Expanding Engagement to Different Ages**: Recommend increasing programming to include teens, adults, seniors and self-organizing groups (birding, tai chi, etc). Currently, the programming focuses on early years to 12 years old, but it would be good to consider expanding programming to include teens. Suggestion to co-design a high school program with young people from local high schools. Additionally, more early years programming, such as with caregivers & children. Explore engaging students from colleges.

What resources or features would help support more self-directed programming?

- **Self-Guided Activities and Signage:** Include laminated signage with facts or scavenger-hunt activities, printable seasonal programs like "What's Blooming," and "Do it yourself" activity guides available at the main building.
- **Digital Resources and Interactive Elements**: Ideas involve using QR codes on signage to link to landing pages or YouTube videos, along with interactive exhibits and self-guided experiences like story walks and a labyrinth.

CONTINUED...STAFF & VOLUNTEER SURVEYS

- **Information Boards and Community Involvement:** Respondents recommended information boards detailing seasonal plantings and garden usage statistics, a suggestion board for future plantings, and incorporating a small community garden area.
- **Garden Infrastructure:** One response mentioned that a working bathroom would be a "game changer," and another suggested adding more space for diverse vegetable planters (bins, troughs, vertical gardening) since the vegetable gardens near the TBG building were removed.

Is there anything else you'd like to see that would support programming?

- **Signage and Awareness**: Suggested adding interpretive signage, clarifying that produce is used for education or donated to a food bank to reduce theft, and increasing visibility so the garden is easier to find.
- **Youth and Adult Programming:** Suggestions included more programming for older youth (13-29) and Indigenous/Racialized specific programs/partnerships, and community planting hands-on courses for adults.
- **Staffing and Training**: Proposed hiring a Youth Program Coordinator and having more training days.
- **Aesthetic Details and Activities:** Mentioned the appeal of whimsical details like butterflies and dinosaurs, and tailoring current Scavenger Hunt activities for school groups to what kids will actually see based on the time of year.
- **Accessibility:** Noted that accessibility is an issue unless approaching from the "back."

Is there anything else you'd like to share about the space?

- **Leveraging new additions:** The new pavilion/covered area is seen as a great activation space for groups and could potentially be a new meeting point for campers/classes, potentially with a designed drop-off point.
- **Appreciation of the space and staff:** Respondents expressed a deep affection for the Teaching Garden, calling it a favorite place, relaxing, calming, and with a wonderful arboretum area.
- **Maintenance and Signage:** Steps and paths need some tender loving care (TLC), and signage is requested for the white pines and many trees on the park grounds off the Bridal Path.
- **Community involvement and promotion:** Volunteers expressed interest in wanting to help with new plantings.

5. INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS

Highlights from visit:

- Hands-on activities where students engaged directly with the garden. These include planting, watering, and touching worms as part of the as vermi-compost program.
- Students were invited to explore the landscape and engage all of their senses, with free time to wander the gardens, balance on stumps, and participate in other forms of open-ended exploration.
- Students were particularly intrigued by the art installations and shared that engaging with the mirrored installation at the front entrance was a highlight of their experience.

Suggested Enhancements and Ideas for the Space:

Art:

- Use art to weave narratives into the gardens, creating a whimsical atmosphere that offers a sense of surprise upon entering the space.
- Consider creating nature based art, temporary and permanent, and art that offers a surprise.
- Consider the opportunity for children to add to or create an art installation.

Indigenous Teachings:

- Work closely with Indigenous communities and Elders to acknowledge ancestral teachings on the land.

Water:

- Create a water play area in the garden. This is something students rarely engage at schools and it offers a unique opportunity for play. Draw connections to the ravine system through interpretation, as well as water conservation.

CONTINUED...INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS

Signage:

- Add child-friendly signage with information about plants, and potentially connecting to the scavenger hunt.
- Consider engaging signage beyond the Teaching Garden, to encourage students to make observations on their journey to the garden.
- Signage can be playful, and something beyond the standard park signs.

Seating:

- Create a more formalized seating area. Consider securing logs so they do not roll around.
- More informal seating throughout the garden, such as the stump that has a carved back to it (students loved this seat).

Exploration:

- Students loved running up and down the large spiral mound at the front entrance. Is there an opportunity for something similar to this in the garden?
- The trellis hoops were very popular to run through - consider more opportunities like this for children to run through and explore.

Habitat + Stewardship:

- Organize the storage shed so children can be invited in to help with the set-up and clean-up of programming, making the experience authentic.
- Consider creating habitats such as bird houses and insect houses.
- Emphasize children helping to make, build and grow something that they're invited to come back and visit. Nice way to entice families to come back.
- Add signage that teaches about different plant types, what is edible, and how plants can be prepared, promoting healthy living habits.
- Focus on teaching values related to respecting the earth and caring for the garden.

Note: One teacher asked her students what their favorite experience was they shared, "*The spiral mound near the main building; making art on the ground with leaves; measuring the tree trunks (hike in a bag); going to the river and racing little things in the water; and exploring the bridges."*

6. PA DAY CAMP

General Feedback:

- Favourite places to explore were the bug hotel, dinosaur and the log circle
- Consider integrating more ‘animal habitat experiences’ such as the bug hotel.
- More places to hide, climb through and explore in.
- Consider working with Indigenous Community to create a medicine wheel and a place to plant the three sisters - leads into teaching about nitrogen in soil
- The color and design that the mosaic brought was appealing to the kids, more color, especially in the winter!

Dotmocracy Results:

Based on the results of the Dotmocracy engagement, campers ranked the images in the following order:

- Carved seating that mimics the shape of an animal
- Water play
- Mud kitchen
- Tunnels and bridges
- Balance logs
- Pathways with coloured stones and tiles
- Weaving and nature art
- Archways for plants to grow



Children’s ideas sketched onto paper

CONTINUED...PA DAY CAMP

















CONCLUSION

Thank you to everyone who shared their time and energy providing their feedback and suggestions for this *Community Engagement Report: Reimagining the Teaching Garden.* The ideas shared by everyone speak to an inspiring vision for the future of the Teaching Garden - a significant community space, and one that is rooted in building connections, fostering curiosity, and encouraging stewardship and care for both people and the environment.

Participants emphasized the importance of integrating natural elements, maintaining a whimsical experience, and creating flexible areas for exploration and reflection, and designing with accessibility. These ideas reflect a shared desire for a space that nurtures creativity, wellbeing, and meaningful relationships with the natural world.





Images by the Toronto Botanical Garden

