



Landscape Ontario Podcast

Green Thumbs: Sowing the seeds for future generations

Host: Karina Sinclair

Guests from Green Thumbs: Sunday Harrison (executive director), Chanel Harris, Sail Vettivulu, Iris "Ike" Karuna

Transcription

INTRO:

Karina: You're listening to the Landscape Ontario Podcast where we explore stories of growth, both literal and metaphorical. Today, we're diving into the world of gardening and early education with a panel of inspiring individuals who are sowing the seeds of knowledge in young minds.

There's a profound beauty in planting a seed and watching its journey from a tiny speck to a flourishing plant. But what if that journey could also nurture the minds and hearts of children? That's exactly what our guests are doing through their charity, which is dedicated to teaching schoolchildren the art and science of gardening.

Sunday Harrison is the founder and current executive director of Green Thumbs Growing Kids, a Toronto community-based not-for-profit now celebrating its 25th anniversary. Their mission is to cultivate environmental stewardship through hands-on garden and food education for urban children and their communities. Green Thumbs operates in three different schools in East Toronto, where students tend to gardens, share the food they grow within their community and support biodiversity by nurturing tree seedlings grown for urban planting. Sunday studied landscape architecture at what was then Ryerson Polytechnic University, and also has a master's degree in environmental studies from York University.

Joining Sunday are three Green Thumbs board members. Chanel Harris was an inaugural participant in the school garden program in the early 2000s. Since then, she has graduated from Queen's University with a Bachelor's of Art in French studies and at University of Toronto with a Master's of Teaching. She has become a French elementary teacher with the Toronto



District School Board and enjoys the full circle of seeing children have the same enriching experience she had with Green Thumbs.

Also joining us is Sail Vettivelu. Sail worked as a summer intern at Green Thumbs in 2009, and has been volunteering with the group ever since. He says the experience started a passion for gardening and giving back to the community. While participating with the program, Sail became fascinated by the rainwater catchment system devised to harvest rainwater off a tall fence. He later went to school for civil engineering, and is now a Senior Project Manager at the City of Toronto.

Rounding out the panel is environmentalist and artist, Iris "Ike" Karuna. Ike has been working as a children's arts educator since 2003, and while working at the Avenue Road Arts School, they developed a program called "Nature Art" which encourages school-aged children to consider the connection between art and the environment. Ike graduated from OCAD University in 2013 with a BFA in Printmaking, and completed a certificate in Child & Youth Care Practice at George Brown College in 2019. Their relationship with Green Thumbs began as a Child and Youth Care placement student, and continued as a staff member. They joined the Green Thumbs board in 2021, and currently holds the position of Vice-Chair, as well as chairing the Fundraising & Communications Committee.

All of our guests today are passionate about introducing children to the wonders of gardening and all the related life lessons. From patience and responsibility to resilience and the interconnectedness of life, the act of tending to a garden offers invaluable teachings that extend far beyond the boundaries of the garden bed.

Join us as Sunday, Chanel, Sail, Ike and I delve into the transformative power of planting an early seed and watching it grow, not just in the garden, but in the hearts and minds of our future generations.

Music transition

INTERVIEW:

Karina: Welcome, everyone. It's so exciting to have a great crowd gathered today to learn about the various benefits, careers and passions that the Green Thumb's Growing kid's organization

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has inspired over the past 25 years. I'd love for you to take a minute to just introduce yourselves. Sunday, let's start with you.

Sunday: Hi, I'm Sunday Harrison. I started Green Thumbs as an after school program, gardening and nature program in a local park for kids in my neighbourhood, including my own young child, wanted to be able to have the same experiences that I had growing up, connecting to plants and soils and that's where I started. And here I am 25 years later. Who knew?

Karina: Who knew how quickly time flies! Chanel, over to you.

Chanel: Hi there. My name is Chanel Harris. I am a French elementary teacher at Toronto District School Board and I am currently on the board of directors of Green Thumbs. I was introduced to this organization as an inaugural participant back in the early 2000s.

Karina: Well, that's really exciting to have somebody from those early days. I can't wait to hear more about your story.

Sail, let's hear from you.

Sail: Hello, everybody. My name is Sail Vettivulu, and I work for the City of Toronto as a project manager and my journey with Green Thumb started in my early childhood when I started going to Winchester Public School, and after that I also had a chance to work at the garden as a summer student. And then ever since then I've been volunteering. So it's been a great journey so far.

Karina: Well, it definitely sounds like it's been part of your life in many different ways. And rounding out the panel, let's hear from Ike.

Ike: Hi there. My name is Iris "Ike" Karuna. And I am a long-time arts educator. Currently I'm the vice chair of the Green Thumbs Board and I chair the Fundraising and Communications Committee.

Karina: Well, thanks so much for joining us on the podcast today. We're going to have a chance to get to all of you and hear a little bit more of your stories. But let's start back at the beginning with Sunday.

As the founder and executive director, Green Thumbs is your baby, a baby that's now 25 years old! That's a tremendous accomplishment for a nonprofit organization. Congratulations.

Sunday: Thank you. A lot of fundraising.

Karina: And hopefully some fun along the way as well.

Sunday: Absolutely. Well, that's what keeps you going. Like, , the response from children and youth in the program has just always fed exactly the vision that I had when I started it. And, it's magical.

I used to use the term biophilia because that's what a lot of children and youth are missing in the school setting is a connection with living things. Not that they don't have sometimes a lizard in the classroom or something, but to use the school lands for food production and and connection to growing plants of all types, not just food plants, but also trees and pollinator plants to really engage with the land, the school land.

It was actually not what I started with. What I started with, as I mentioned, was an after-school program, but it was actually children in that program who said, 'Why can't we have a school garden?' And I said, 'I don't know. Let's let's see if we can make that happen.'

And really, within a couple of years, we were on school property and things came together for that to happen. And around the time that Chanel was a student there, there was a student who, 2003 probably early 2004, I'm not sure — but there was a student who spoke no English. He was fresh off the streets of Baghdad after the U.S. had invaded the country and he had no English. He was so traumatized. And his teacher signed up their class to come out and plant some plants with us. And as it happened, we had had a snack in our afterschool program of Asian pears and we had saved the seed and planted the seed of that fruit.

And as it turned out, those little trees were ready to go into the garden. And so this child, whose name I'm fortunately I don't recall, but I knew he would be a young adult now and it would be amazing to share this story with him. But the trees that he planted from the Asian pear seed that the kids ate in the program are now fully mature and bearing fruit. They had the most beautiful fruit last year.

If I could find that kid and give him a bowl of that fruit, I would be so happy. But that's the kind of thing that wouldn't happen if we hadn't stuck it out and really not gone away.

Now, it's kind of my secret. Just don't go away.

So now we have Asian pears growing and producing wonderful fruit for children at that school. So that's that's definitely a highlight.

Karina: That's incredible. I mean, the whole idea of bearing fruit, that's an expression that we use when we finally realize a goal. And here you've done it figuratively and literally. And there's a few universal unifiers. I think music is one, food is definitely another. And nature, perhaps it would be a third. And with nature and the food and the combination of those, you've created a bridge between people with different cultures, different backgrounds, all kinds of reasons for being at that space in time. And what a wonderful journey to have actually seen from seed to fruit over those 25 years.

Sunday: Yeah, so special.

Karina: Do you have any other standout moments that confirmed that this was the right thing for you to be involved in?

Sunday: As these years have gone by, I've become more committed to Indigenous solidarity and recognizing that for children who are learning to say the word *Haudenosaunee* every morning and the land acknowledgment that's now read in public schools in the morning, we want to bring that to life. We want to make that real.

We want to have a deeper dive into that, not just a rote recitation. And how better to do that than the land right outside the door. Right. So I think that's been an important development of the organization. We have more Indigenous participation and in teaching and mentorship.

I do have a thank you letter from one of the teachers whose class participated in a Green Thumbs session, and this one in particular was Indigenous-led and included a smudge and conversation among the Grade Seven and Eights on what it means to be Indigenous. And they thought about their own indigeneity in their home countries, since many, many of our students are newcomers.

And so the teacher said, 'I cannot thank you enough once again for providing such an enriching experience for my Grade Seven/Eight students right in our schoolyard. When I first reached out, I was just looking for time in the garden. Instead, you provided the most enriching and curriculum-connecting programing.'

That's important to hear back from teachers because they're under pressure to produce a lot of checkboxes on the curriculum and make sure that they cover off what's there. And I think Chanel could tell us it can be very stressful to do that. So to have teachers really praise the program as helping them, not another burden on their shoulder but something that helps them do their job is really, really special.

Karina: It sounds like being able to participate in this program, people might say, 'I get to do this' instead of 'I've got to go do this.' A totally different approach. And now, since your programs are geared towards elementary school students, what opportunities do you have for engaging older students who might want to stay involved or become involved?

Sunday: Well, that's something that we've really developed over the years as well, which is A: we're a placement site for teacher candidates and students in other disciplines. And those post-secondary students help us with delivering our programs. So it's a very, very mutually beneficial arrangement. And it's kind of, I think of it as a fractal where the learners are learning and the teachers are teaching.

The other piece there though, is actually a youth after-school program, which Sail was part of as well. And then also as a summer student. So he can speak to that. Getting the Canada Summer

Jobs Program has been very helpful over the years. So after-school program on the elementary school grounds with high school age, and they love to cook. So we try to bring them to our headquarters and do simple recipes with them as well. So that's an add on that the elementary students don't necessarily get.

Beyond that then the youth in the youth program have a guaranteed interview for the Summer Jobs positions as well as the placement students who are with us often two semesters. A lot of programs that we serve that the placement students come from September to April.

So they get a pretty good deep dive into the curriculum based programming and the gardens through the winter season as well. Everybody says, 'What do you do about summer?' Well, we say, 'Well, what do we do about winter when we have to basically move the programs indoors?'

And then the summer piece obviously is important, and really, the way that I've been encouraged to think about that is that from September to June, the garden is curricular, it's connected to primarily and the science curriculum, and in the summer it's civic, it's a community responsibility to harvest those foods and to make sure that the garden is cared for.

And we do that through the Canada Summer Jobs Program, but also community connections and volunteers and making sure that that the July-August season when the produce is coming in is cared for.

And so we also do a market table at the local farmers market and some of those foods are given away and some are sold. We also have a rooftop under cultivation at our office. And so what we're trying to develop is that that rooftop produce would go directly to market and the school produce would go in more directly into the community as a donation.

Karina: There's some really wonderful holistic approaches there. Let's talk a little bit more about this full circle, because Chanel, you were in the inaugural program of Green Thumbs, and now here you are, an educator and participating with Green Thumbs still. Tell me a little bit more about your experience with the organization.

Chanel: Yes. So as Sunday was talking, it was very ironic that she mentioned about 2003 because my mother's the type where she'll keep every little thing that I've ever participated in,

especially if there's any photos of me, and my mother over the weekend was able to find the 2003 report of Green Thumbs and I actually have it in front of me here.

And there's a photo of myself holding radishes in my hand with some classmates. And you get to see other students as well just growing and being able to harvest different vegetables. (see podcast episode thumbnail)

And that's the type of experience that I've had with Green Thumbs. So it wasn't just the education part, but just as Sunday was saying, making the connection of yourself and nature in general. And I would say that the impact Green Thumbs has had on me has been great in terms of my relationship with nature and how I also try my best to incorporate it into my curriculum today as a teacher. And so I'm really grateful for the organization and it's definitely a full circle moment, to say the least.

Karina: I read something where you said one of your fondest memories of school was being in this garden program and having worms in the classroom.

Chanel: Yes. So I remember I don't recall the exact grade, but I remember I was very young and the teacher had one of those compost bins and she had some soil. And she revealed to us that we were going to be keeping and taking care of some worms. And initially for me, I was really scared because prior to my experience with Green Thumbs, I would say my exposure to nature was very limited.

I grew up in the city downtown Toronto, born and raised, and my mom wasn't really nature forward or didn't really have a green thumb. So a lot of my first experience was at school and that was definitely an interesting experience, to say the least. But it was my favourite because we got to see how those worms contributed towards the ecosystem of how we were able to grow plants and create compost.

I even remember at lunch we would have to put our food scraps into the compost and we learned later when we did have sessions in the garden that we used those scraps to then create compost in and create the soil to then create the dirt that we're using to plant the radishes that I'm now referring to in the photo that we get to see. So really seeing from the beginning steps with the worms to then again, you yourself, your connection to nature just by your food waste

and what you could do with it, as opposed to just throwing it out, to then seeing the finished product of actually eating or harvesting said plant or vegetable or legume. And I would say in those ways it really made nature something that was important to know and important to be in touch with as well as a kid, especially, again, growing up in the city where those urban spaces and urban agriculture wasn't really prominent then.

Karina: Well, that's really cool that that early experience of something that might have seemed scary to you ended up being such a positive experience.

As a teacher now, what are the benefits that your students are getting from being involved in a gardening program?

Chanel: What I've noticed a lot is, again, not even just downtown, there's many areas in Toronto in general where these students just don't have the opportunity to have a garden in their house or in their building, or maybe even having the discussion of what is a garden and what it takes to take care of it. So the kids are really getting to have a hands-on experience and again, putting in the hard work because I think with students now that instant gratification, whether it's likes on Instagram or the retweets that they get on Twitter or X now that it's called, kids nowadays are really looking for the instant gratification of their actions.

And I feel like with gardening in particular, it's a type of activity where you're forced to really be patient. But not only that, to put in the extra work for it to come to fruition. You're unable to have a great harvest if you're not there every day checking. Make sure it's getting the amount of water needs and nutrients and making sure that there's diversity inside the soil.

Just so many different elements that takes the extra time and effort for that person to really see that soil and that seed coming to bear fruit is something that I think kids these days is lacking in. And gardening does help in a really real way to really learn what it is to have hard work and how hard work can pay off in the end.

Karina: Oh that's super valuable. That idea of showing up every day, no matter what you're doing and just putting in that work and being present and maybe being hands-on is so important in this very digital age where you create so many things, this podcast included, that are intangible. You can't lay your hands on them, you can't smell it, see it, breathe it. So I love

that. And it goes back to that whole idea of planting that Asian pear seed and seeing the fruit of it 25 years later. You really have to have faith that what you're doing is paying off and just trusting that that's enough.

Did being involved with Green Thumbsthe influence your career, did it inspire you to become a teacher?

Chanel: I would say in different ways. Again, going back to the hard work, I think it allowed me to really just take anything that came my way, whether it was my academic studies or any volunteer work that I did was to put in that extra 10 per cent and put in that extra mile. So I think in terms of discipline and in terms of just being the hardworking person that I am today, I think it did contribute towards becoming a teacher because it's definitely not an easy road and it's definitely not a short journey, to say the least.

I'm not, unfortunately, in the gardens all the time with my students, but just again, just the intangible skill set that I was able to obtain from working in the garden are invaluable in my career today.

Karina: I love it. Thank you for sharing that part of your story. Sail, I'd like to ask you a similar question since you also participated in Green Thumbs's programing as a youth, how did that experience influence your career?

Sail: It was a phenomenal experience that any teenager could ask for, and I would say it has certainly influenced my career in a positive way as I went on to specialize in soil and water related courses. I'm so grateful that I was given this opportunity to work with kids, youths, schoolteachers and the community for just one common goal, which is providing the garden space. It addressed food security and lack of green space in the community. So, while working as a youth, I was able to acquire many valuable lessons as well, which helped me to learn and call on my soft skills. And it has definitely helped me in my career.

Karina: Sunday had mentioned to me that while you are participating, you were fascinated by rainwater catchment system that was devised to harvest rainwater off of a fence and now you're a hydrological engineer. How often do people get exposed to something that opens their

eyes to a career path as interesting and complex at such a young age like that? What do you think you would have done if you hadn't been involved in this program?

Sail: I think you said it perfectly. It really opens up your eyes. When I think about it, looking back when I was actually a kid, just in that kindergarten and running around helping with the garden activities and building that harvesting system, I wasn't thinking too far into the future. But it definitely has shaped me over the years — as I went on to study in university, when the courses and curriculum was offered, I started leaning towards that path, so I ended up specializing in water and storm water management and those kind of subject areas because I think I had the passion for it.

So indirectly or directly, I would say my childhood and my experiences have certainly shaped me to choose and make the choices that I have made in my career.

Karina: That's amazing. And you're also on the board of directors now. What's it like to contribute back to an organization that inspired you at that young age?

Sail: Being on the board feels great because it's another area where I can have a voice and work with like-minded individuals and achieve the mission and visionary goals of Green Thumbs.

And in terms of giving back, I always wanted to contribute back to the community. And this is my way of showing gratitude to Green Thumbs and for all the people that have helped me along the way.

Karina: Do you have some standout memories from the program? What brings you the most joy as a participant now?

Sail: I have plenty of memories. I fondly remember many standout moments, but just to pick a few, I would say educating the kids about composting and the biological process that involves thought that was cool. I enjoyed the storytelling and sharing the knowledge with kids in the classroom and in outdoor workshops. The thank you notes that you used to get from summer camps and schoolchildren always brings a great memory to me.

Karina: I love it. I can hear the smile in your voice while you're talking about that. So that that's pretty exciting.

Sail: Thank you.

Karina: So far we've heard from a teacher and an engineer. Ike, I would love to hear more about your perspective as an environmentalist and artist and program coordinator. Have you noticed any changes in creativity at the partner schools? Does spending time in nature help students get in touch with their artistic side?

Ike: Yeah, I think it does. I really believe that arts education is an essential part of STEM education and that all those fancy programs should be called STEAM instead of STEM and integrate arts programming. Because in my experience, professionals in STEM fields ultimately really need visual and language communication skills in order to succeed. And art is not lesser to those other valuable disciplines. Everyone benefits from arts education.

And in a garden, form and contrast, design, beauty, language, it's all around you. Nature is a really great teacher and just noticing the details of the world around you helps you to become more capable of making connections and asking questions and Green Thumbs Programs really support students' natural curiosity.

Art activity is used in those programs can solidify the connections that students are making and offer some tangible reminders of what's being learned. And art and nature are both really good ways to understand ourselves more deeply as human beings.

More people are living in cities now than ever before, but we're never really disconnected from nature because human beings are nature. So spending time in gardens and particularly making art in gardens while learning curriculum connected concepts, it allows kids to connect with their emotions and fears and hopes, and to develop a sense of purpose and belonging. And art is a method of communicating what we learn.

Karina: That's really beautiful. I love the idea of this programming having the opportunity to introduce and reinforce some classic hard skills, right? There's there's all kinds of math and science involved. There's a sense of history, there's language, there's problem solving and

creative thinking and the visual elements of being in the garden that I can't think of any way that it doesn't interact with curriculum in schools. You must be so excited of all the different ways that you could be introducing the connections — how do you narrow it down of what are we going to study and explore with the kids today?

Ike: I think that the vast array of lesson plans that Green Thumbs has in its vault will definitely speak to that. There are many, many ways to make those connections. A lot of the time it ends up being about what the kids are interested in and about what the educators find inspiring.

Karina: Yeah, it's all inspiring. What's your favourite part of working with these school kids? Like when you're seeing them deeply engaged? What brings you the most delight?

Ike: The one thing that really stands out for me is that I am seeing them experience all these little moments of wonder and awe and joy while they're learning. I was lucky enough when I was growing up to have a garden and I had parents who valued nature and time spent outdoors. But in other ways childhood was a very difficult time for me and nature was something that brought me joy. So when I see kids enjoying themselves in Green Thumbs programs, I'm really reminded of nature's power to heal us in many different ways. And seeing them have those little moments of joy and healing is really rewarding for me.

Karina: It sounds like there's a chance that working in nature and working in gardens is... it's one solution to many problems, or it's many little solutions. There are so many different ways that interacting with it can be so uniquely applicable. Because all three of you, well, all four of you, really, have these different stories, and it's that early exposure, a love and commitment to nature and gardening and good soil and having these broad perspectives as adults.

So now when you're looking at these students as they're growing through the years and graduating and moving on, I bet you're seeing a lot of well-balanced adults coming out of this program.

Ike: I hope so. But I think that we would really love to connect more with people who have been through the Green Thumbs program. While we're very, very, very lucky to have Chanel and Sail here with us on the board, we don't always hear from the kids who've gone through Green

Thumbs programs and it's something that we're really very interested in doing in the coming years, connecting with people who've had experiences with Green Thumbs in their childhood.

Karina: That's a great point. So if there are any listeners out there who have participated with Green Thumbs as a youth and are now adults remembering those great days back in the school program, reach out to Ike, or Sail or Sunday or Chanel and let them know about the influence they had in their lives. I'm sure they would love to hear from you.

Now, before I move on, Ike, you're also the vice chair of the board of directors and the chair of fundraising. Why should people donate to or volunteer with charities that run green programming?

Ike: It's a great question. Before becoming involved with Green Thumbs, I was actually struggling a lot with not feeling capable of making an impact in our world. And even though I had already been exploring the nature or connection as an arts educator, I felt isolated from not all but many of my art world peers because of my environmentalist viewpoint. And I knew I wanted to find ways to make tangible change, but I wasn't sure how to approach it and, shout out to my therapist at the time, Celia Schwartz, who validated my concerns and encouraged me to seek out values-aligned people and organizations where I could focus my energy.

So I became aware of Green Thumbs. At that time, I was attending a program at George Brown and I was able to secure a placement with Green Thumbs. So I became involved as a postsecondary placement student and later became a staff member. And now I'm on the board.

And when I became involved with Green Thumbs, I really felt like the system was too big and complex and that I was too small to have an impact. But my time with the organization has really been very inspiring, and I think that grassroots groups like Green Thumbs have the potential to resist the kind of churn that comes with large governmental systems and to create an environment where children and people in general can really learn and grow and thrive.

So I think maybe for an individual listening, it's not going to be Green Thumbs. But my advice is to trust that someone in your community is doing this work and to find them and connect with them. Offer your support, whether it's money or time and help build on the work that's already been done because that's how we gain momentum in our changemaking.

Karina: That's interesting that you thought that as an individual, maybe you were too small to be able to make an impact, but by aligning with like-minded people, that has a lot of power to make change. Does anybody else have any thoughts on that? Is that what drew you to come back to the program?

Chanel: Yeah, I think it was really important for me to give back. I even began volunteering in general in the community since I was 12 years old. So just giving back in general and at such a young age was really important for me. And as an educator especially, I found it very, very important for me to go ahead and find ways that I can give back to Green Thumbs because it has informed me with my teaching today. Whether that is taking kids outside to do a municipal assignment or whether that is to take them to a farm and they're able to have Indigenous leaders to be able to learn more about the land that they're on.

Green Thumbs, in my experience in general, has been so impactful and who I am today that it was no question that I would come back and be able to give back. So I do call for any other past participants. Please reach out to us. It would be great to connect with you. And most importantly, as Ike said, it doesn't necessarily have to be your money, but it could be your time.

We have a farm market that happens every Sunday, for example. So if you're able to volunteer your time there, they're more than welcome to have you. And so just again, giving back is always great to do for a community so that we're able to carry on for the next generation.

Karina: Well, thank you for that. And Sail, what do you think about encouraging people in these professions that may not seem like they're directly connected, but getting them to join something that offers green programming to make connections between engineering and science and professions outside of landscaping, but that are still a way to connect?

Sail: I strongly believe everything is interconnected. So whether it's one field or the another field that you might be expert in, everything can be connected back to the nature and soils engineering or anything for that matter. And when you're in the nature, there are a lot of things that you see that can be connected to your field. And there is always room for opportunities to bring in new ideas and advance our goals.

So I see this as a great opportunity to work and also communicate with a lot of the other individuals that are participating in these activities. And I think we talked about instant gratification through social media earlier. To me, this has been the gratification; giving back and participating in volunteering is my way of feeling that instant gratification. And I think this is a healthier way to go, especially with the lack of green space and lack of activities that are out there.

Karina: Thank you for that. Sunday, hearing these endorsements by people who have come through your program and that work with you now, how does that make you feel as the founder and facilitator of Green Thumbs?

Sunday: I'm just so grateful to Chanel and Sail and Ike for what you've brought to the organization as participants on whatever level, at whatever age, and you've enriched the organization. It might be my baby, but it's certainly not all about me. And I could not have done it without support from folks like yourselves.

And I think, going forward really the question is going to be it is going to be a question of succession, because I'm just not as young as I used to be. And at some point I want to pass this along. And I wanted to survive. I would like to see Green Thumbs continue on and other organizations model what we do, take lessons from what we do.

I mean, we had at one time an advocacy grant that was called Imagine a Garden in Every School. And through that grant we developed a website that had a map of all the school gardens in Ontario that we could find. And that was really, really great. Unfortunately, like most grants, it was time limited and came to an end. But, , I still hold that vision of a garden in every school.

And I think, Karina, you mentioned something about multiples of solutions, and it reminded me of a quote by Wendell Berry about solving for pattern. And he talked about solutions that solve more than one problem and that don't create new problems. And I really see school gardens situated as solving for pattern. And I think that that speaks really well to what we're doing.

I mean, yeah, it does create sort of a new problem like what to do about summer. But, but that's a good problem to have because we're producing local food and we're coming into an era of

climate change affecting everything, including our food system. So the more food we can grow locally, the more chance that we remain healthy individuals. There's also a big piece of science that we're learning about due partly to the tool of the microscope of how living soils sequester carbon and keep deepening those soils to sequester more carbon and how we know tree planting is good. So, where do those trees go and make sure that they're biodiverse, make sure that they get out to the community, and that there's shade protection for people.

There's just so many things that we can do as landscape gardeners to support our ecosystem and mitigate the effect of climate change. And we need to learn those things from a young age because we know that students are growing up climate anxious and they know there's climate change, but people aren't talking about it in school because they don't have the resources.

And I think sometimes they're nervous to get into that conversation. They don't want to doom and gloom the kids, but the kids are hearing about climate. They're smelling the smoke and they know. So let's not gaslight kids. Let's make sure they have an opportunity to learn about solutions. And the solution of soil organic matter is under our feet, and that's what we can do at a really hyperlocal level.

So that's a huge piece of going forward with Green Thumbs and groups like ours. Because we're so place based, I do think of not scaling up exactly, but scaling out so that what we're doing is creating a model that other community groups could use to be a partner to a group of schools.

I don't know if I said this earlier, but we have three main elementary schools that we partner with and they're all within a geographic area. So they're very different schools, very different school grounds. But by offering programming and garden care to a small group of schools, we've kind of demonstrated a certain efficiency of labour and programming. If that could be scaled out, not necessarily up because, there's a lot of relationships that are very important in each of those school communities. And, being small isn't necessarily bad in this case. Well, I think we could scale up a bit, but I would rather replicate what we're doing.

The other piece with the school gardens is really just growing our network. And I should mention we have a training program for people in the GTA who want to start and support a school garden nearby themselves, whether it's there, whether they're a parent there or a community member there, if they want to participate in a school garden, we're offering our

knowledge gained over the past 25 years to help them navigate the systems that they will need to understand to do that. This program is running till June. We're really excited about it and hope that that helps grow a network of school garden practitioners and that we can develop the kind of professional learning community that that other professions have so that school gardens know that each other is out there. Like right now, if you ask me how many school gardens there are in Toronto, I cannot give you an answer. We don't have that knowledge base, so I'd like to move to having that piece of information and being able to offer support to other school gardeners.

Karina: So if there were members of Landscape Ontario with their expertise in horticulture and construction and hardscaping, softscaping, irrigation and pest control, all the many factors that are involved in the landscape profession, it sounds like there's a chance for them to connect with you, contribute, perhaps find schools in their areas that could benefit from a similar program and introduce their skills and career paths as well.

Sunday: Awesome!

Karina This is your 25th anniversary year. How are you celebrating? Do you have any events coming up this year?

Sunday: We have an event that we do pretty much annually, although COVID messed with it, but it's called Spring Is in the Air. It's at the Allen Gardens Children's Conservatory on April 28th this year. It includes a plant sale and family-friendly activities and silent auction. And we especially welcome landscape companies to sponsor the event. Please get in touch and we'll be happy to promote your company through our work and through this event.

And we would love former participants to connect with us.

Karina: And how would you like people to reach out to you? What's your website?

Sunday: It is greenthumbsTO.org and our socials are at @greenthumbsTO, and we'd be excited to hear from past participants or people who just want to say hi and get more information.

Karina: Before we wrap it up, does anybody else have any final words that they'd like to say that would again either highlight the benefit of this program to be put in to a school or to connect with it, volunteer with it, sponsor it? Any final words from the panel?

Sunday: And I say again a little bit that story that I was telling about the Asian pear, I don't know if I was clear to say how important that planting was to that child and how his teacher said that afterwards that he brightened up and started participating in the class in this situation because he didn't have to know English to do that. And it just gave him what he needed because he had that ownership of planting that tree. It gave him the confidence to engage with the other students and it was a marked difference in that child's life.

Karina: These seemingly small moments can have such a huge impact and what a privilege to be in that position where you can facilitate it for schools, 30 kids per classroom at a time. There's a lot of power in that. And it's very exciting that you've stuck to it and not gone away for those 25 years to see such success. So congratulations again.

Sunday: Thank you so much.

Karina: Thank you to everyone for joining us in this conversation. I'm really glad you could come in and share your story with us. And it was very inspiring to hear all the different ways where participating in Green Thumbs has made an impact on your life. And now in turn, you get to impact the lives of students. So well done. Congratulations and thanks again.

Sunday: Thanks, everyone. Thanks for listening.

Sail: Thank you.

Ike: Thanks for having us, Karina.

Chanel: Thank you so much, Karina. Thank you so much to everyone for listening. Again, please reach out. Donate. We love to see your participation and support.

Sunday: Oh yeah, we won't turn away your donations, that's for sure. (chuckles)

Music transition

EXTRO:

Karina: I loved hearing about all the different ways that early exposure to gardening can influence someone's life. The children who participate in these kinds of programs might very well fall in love with gardening and grow up to become the next generation of landscapers. Or, like our panelists today, they could be environmentalists, teachers, engineers or artists who maintain a strong connection to nature and to their communities. This is how we grow a society of green stewards.

I invite you to think about how you can "plant a seed" with younger generations. You might start your own program, like Scott Wentworth has done with Come Alive Outside, or you could connect with Sunday Harrison at Green Thumbs to see how you can sponsor their programs. Maybe you have ideas of your own... either way, I'd love to hear about your experiences!

As always, we have a full transcription and relevant links for today's interview on this episode's web page at landscapeontario.com/podcast.

Thanks so much for listening to the Landscape Ontario Podcast. We talk to all kinds of innovative and knowledgeable landscape professionals, so be sure to subscribe to catch new episodes for inspiration every month.

Resources relevant to this episode

[Green Thumbs](#)

Social handle: @greenthumbsTO

Come Alive Outside: [Podcast Episode with Scott Wentworth](#)

Landscape Design for Schoolchildren: [Podcast Episode with Heather Jerrard and Dawn-Marie Deagle](#)

[Wendell Barry: Solving for Pattern](#)

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