

EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF URBAN FOREST LEADERS

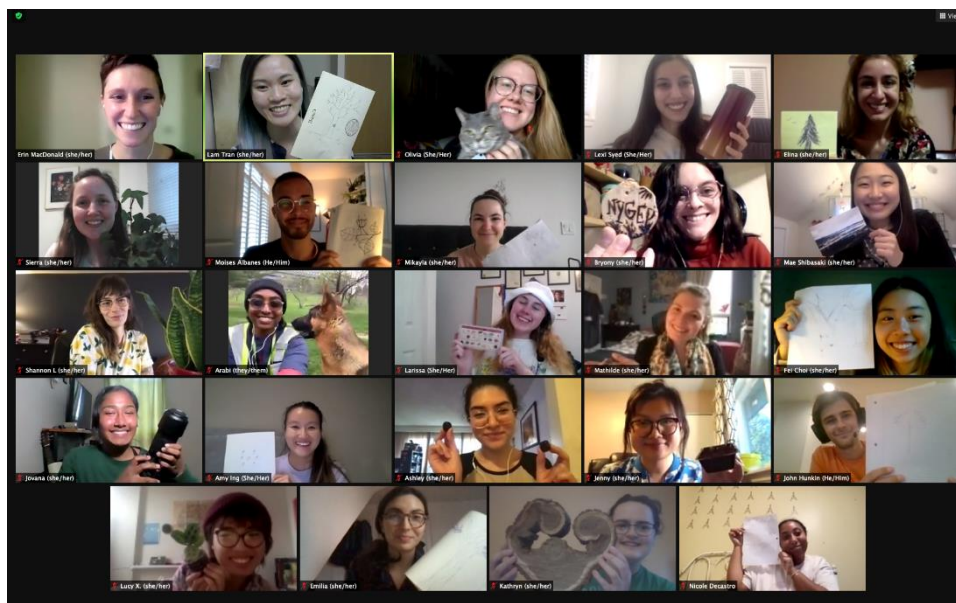
Greening the City of Toronto and diversifying the urban forestry industry starts today with the Young Urban Forest Leaders program which provides hands-on training and mentorship for underrepresented youth. Tomorrow's urban forest leaders develop skills, gain career insight and work together to grow the urban forest in their communities.

With the support of the Canadian TREE Fund through the Jack Kimmel Grant, LEAF (Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests) supported 21 youth to drive change in their communities and across the City of Toronto, by enabling members of the public to grow and sustain the urban forest!

Urban Forestry and Arboriculture – a Growing Field

The urban forest is a critical component of our city as living, green infrastructure that makes our communities more resilient and healthier for residents. The benefits and services that the urban forest provides are plentiful and include, but are not limited to, mitigating the impacts of climate change, cooling surface temperatures, stormwater management, increasing land and property values and improving mental and physical wellbeing. Recognizing the multitude of ways the urban forest sustains us, the City of Toronto published the *Sustaining and Expanding the Urban Forest: Toronto's Strategic Forest Management Plan 2012-2022* with a goal of increasing canopy cover from approximately 28% to 40%. To achieve this target, planting and care of trees on public and private property, where most plantable space exists in Toronto, is crucial. As the urban forest grows, so will the urban forestry and arboriculture sectors - this is where LEAF comes in.

The Young Urban Forest Leaders (YUFL) Program is a free training and mentorship program that has been running since 2015. The program is designed to provide experience in the fields of urban forestry, arboriculture and community engagement to youth (ages 18 – 29) from underrepresented groups within the fields including, but not limited to, women, non-binary people, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, LGBTQ+ persons and visible minorities. This intensive, four-month, hands-on learning experience gives underrepresented individuals valuable experience, supporting them on their path into the work force while simultaneously increasing education and outreach to the general public around the importance of the urban forest and stewardship. In 2021, the program supported 21 youth from across Toronto.



2021 cohort of Young Urban Forest Leaders showcasing their favorite tree / connection to nature

(©2021 Lam Tran / LEAF)

Central to the program is an effort to remove barriers that individuals may face in entering the fields of urban forestry and arboriculture. This includes removing financial barriers, thereby reducing the financial risk that is typically involved in exploring a new career path. Further, by providing access to diverse voices in the field and by building peer relationships within the program, a support network is established that helps underrepresented individuals feel greater comfort and ease to move into and become leaders in a historically male and white dominated industry.

Building Skills and Confidence

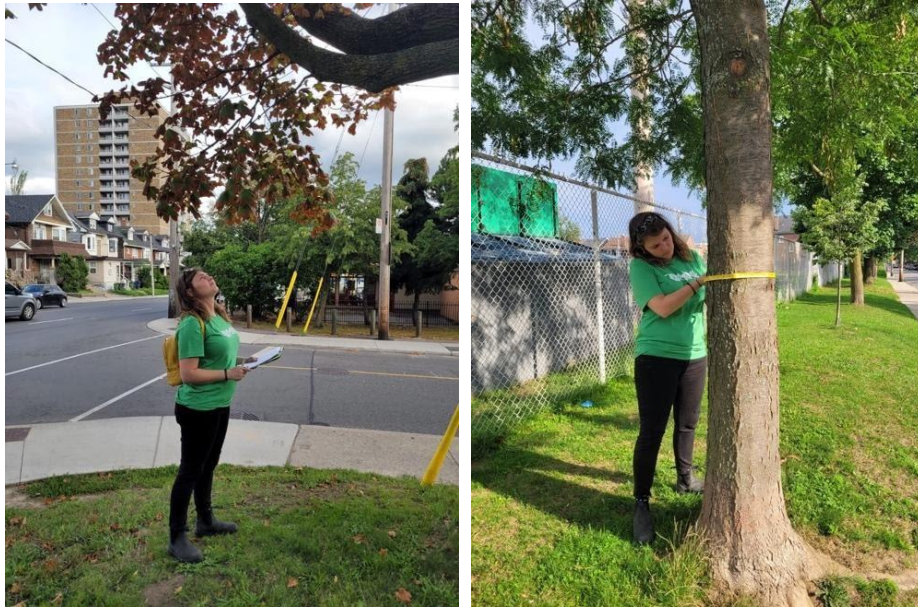
The 21 YUFL participants were guided by LEAF Acting Community Programs Manager, Brian Millward, and Education Coordinator, Lam Tran, over the course of four months. Lam is a past graduate of the YUFL program and was able to bring a unique perspective and expertise to the 2021 cohort.



A YUFL participant developing their tree identification skills

(©2021 Bryony Wharfe / LEAF)

Weekly workshops and mentored activities provide ways to deepen knowledge, develop skills and network with various professionals. At the outset of the program, the YUFLs participated in LEAF's long-running Tree Tenders Training course, which provides 15 hours of arboriculture training led by ISA certified instructors and utilizes the ISA's Citizen Arborist Manual. Building on this knowledge, YUFL participants engaged in weekly workshops that developed soft and technical skills that are in-demand in urban forestry and arboriculture such as tree identification, tree inventory and mapping, visual communication and virtual outreach and marketing. Workshop topics were also tailored to the interests and knowledge gaps identified by the YUFL participants. This year, supplemental topics included invasive species and Indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants. A virtual Fireside Chat was also held with three professionals who shared their personal experience working in the private, academic, and municipal sector, providing insight and inspiration to the group. Over the course of the program, the YUFL participants learned from 12 professionals who provided the group with diverse representation and experience in the field.



A YUFL participant conducting a tree inventory in their community

(©2021 Mathilde Bertin / LEAF)

Empowering Youth to Spark Change

Exercising skills developed through the workshops, the YUFL participants worked to improve local canopy cover and engage with community members Across Toronto. In their own neighbourhoods, they assessed the canopy, conducted tree inventories and created maps to identify opportunities for planting and stewardship. Each YUFL participant engaged with their own community in a way that was unique to their collective needs. Through community outreach to residents, leaders and local city councillors, YUFL participants facilitated greening by promoting the giveaway of 300 native trees and shrubs for planting on private property. In addition, educational materials and messaging from LEAF's #BackyardBiodiversity campaign (in partnership with the Toronto Wildlife Centre) was used to strengthen the message on how the planting and stewardship of native trees and shrubs on private property can support local biodiversity overall.



LEAF staff delivering native trees/shrubs to residents

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Beyond the impact in the local community, the YUFL participants drew on what they learned over the course of the program to curate and deliver a series of four educational webinars. The goal of the series was to spark interest and action in community members across the City of Toronto. This was an effective way to introduce members of the public to urban forestry and arboriculture and to connect them with available resources in the City of Toronto. Webinar topics included tree identification, common urban stressors or pests and cultural and historical significance of tree species.

Tree of Heaven
Ailanthus altissima



Ecological impact

- Chemicals that inhibit the growth of other plants
- Aggressive roots
- Preferred host for the spotted lanternfly

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Reproductive Methods

Angiosperm

- "Case seed"
- Seeds develop inside the ovary
- Flowers and fruit



Gymnosperm

- "Naked seed"
- Seeds develop outside the ovary
- Lack flowers and fruit



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Trembling Aspen vs White Birch



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Paper Birch
Latin Name: *Betula papyrifera*

Bark

- Inner bark is salmon colored
- Used for making canoes, baskets, maps, artwork by some Indigenous peoples
- Winter staple for moose



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Slides from the YUFL-led webinar series

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At every opportunity, the audience was pointed towards the important and specialized skills of arborists and encouraged to seek expert advice and services through ISA Ontario. In total, 320 individuals from the Greater Toronto Area tuned in to the series. The audience learned not only about the trees in their community, but how they can be stewards of the urban forest, contributing to efforts by the City of Toronto to grow its canopy cover to 40%!

"I loved their enthusiasm for the subject, it was inspiring for personal interest and action." - Feedback from a 2021 YUFL Webinar series attendee

"Knowledge of trees can be had anywhere; a huge difference for me was being part of a format that is structured yet allows for a degree of intimacy in terms of experiencing diverse presenters who are also local youth. I enjoyed the presenters as much as the subject, and this always makes for a good learning environment. Generally, I am inspired more by youth who are passionate about a subject than by adults." - Feedback from a 2021 YUFL Webinar series attendee

An Impactful Experience

Since 2015, 113 YUFL graduates have successfully completed the program, leveraging the skills and knowledge gained to pursue further studies or a career path in urban forestry, arboriculture and community engagement. For the 2021 cohort, many of whom are in the early stages of their career or are looking to transition into these fields, participating in the YUFL program has been a fulfilling experience.

"I think the program is wonderful and I've learnt so much and have loved it! The biggest value for me was realising there's so many avenues to go down and so many different people who I can learn from about their positions, and that made me feel really comfortable thinking about my future careers" - 2021 YUFL Participant

"This program has had a profound influence on my personal well-being. I feel more connected to my city and province, and can identify trees with fairly high success. I make a point of travelling to arboreta and appreciate the impact they have on human and non-human life. I want to learn more about the places I visit, how to improve tree health, and what I can do to protect the urban forest. I hope to bring this knowledge forward with me as I continue to study human health in the future." - 2021 YUFL Participant

A Greener and More Diverse Future

Awareness of the multitude of benefits and services that the urban forest provides has been amplified in recent years. Access to quality green spaces has become a focal point during COVID-19 as residents recognized the value of their connections with these spaces to maintain their physical and mental wellbeing. Furthering the conversation was the recognition that green spaces and canopy cover are not equitably distributed across neighbourhoods. Addressing this need will spur growth in the fields of urban forestry and arboriculture and create a greater need for leaders in the work force. Directly supporting underrepresented groups plays a critical role in building equity in the sectors and in the city.

While the program has been successful over the years in providing mentorship and training to underrepresented youth, there is still much work to do. Building and strengthening connections among the cohort and guest speakers continued to be a challenge as COVID-19 kept the program remote, limiting the full potential for the YUFL participants and speakers to connect. The virtual format also favoured certain learning styles and posed limitations in teaching hands-on skills. Another challenge faced was ensuring effective outreach to underserved communities. While most YUFL participants identified as underrepresented, they were also in university or had recently graduated. Students and recent graduates are well suited for the program, but this highlighted a gap in reaching those who do not have the privilege of pursuing post-secondary education. To address these challenges, feedback was collected from the 2021 cohort and will be used to inform improvements for future years. This ensures that the program delivered will continue to evolve in ways that best support the needs and interest of the participants.

LEAF is grateful to have the support of the Canadian TREE Fund through the Jack Kimmel Grant to empower the next generation of urban forest leaders! With their support, LEAF was able to eliminate barriers, provide hands-on training and mentorship and support a diverse community of driven youth. The success of the YUFL program demonstrates that there is a desire among youth to get involved in environmental stewardship and civic action to protect and enhance the urban forest, ensuring that it is equitable across Toronto and that all voices are heard and supported.