

## **SUPPORTING THE FUTURE OF URBAN FORESTRY**

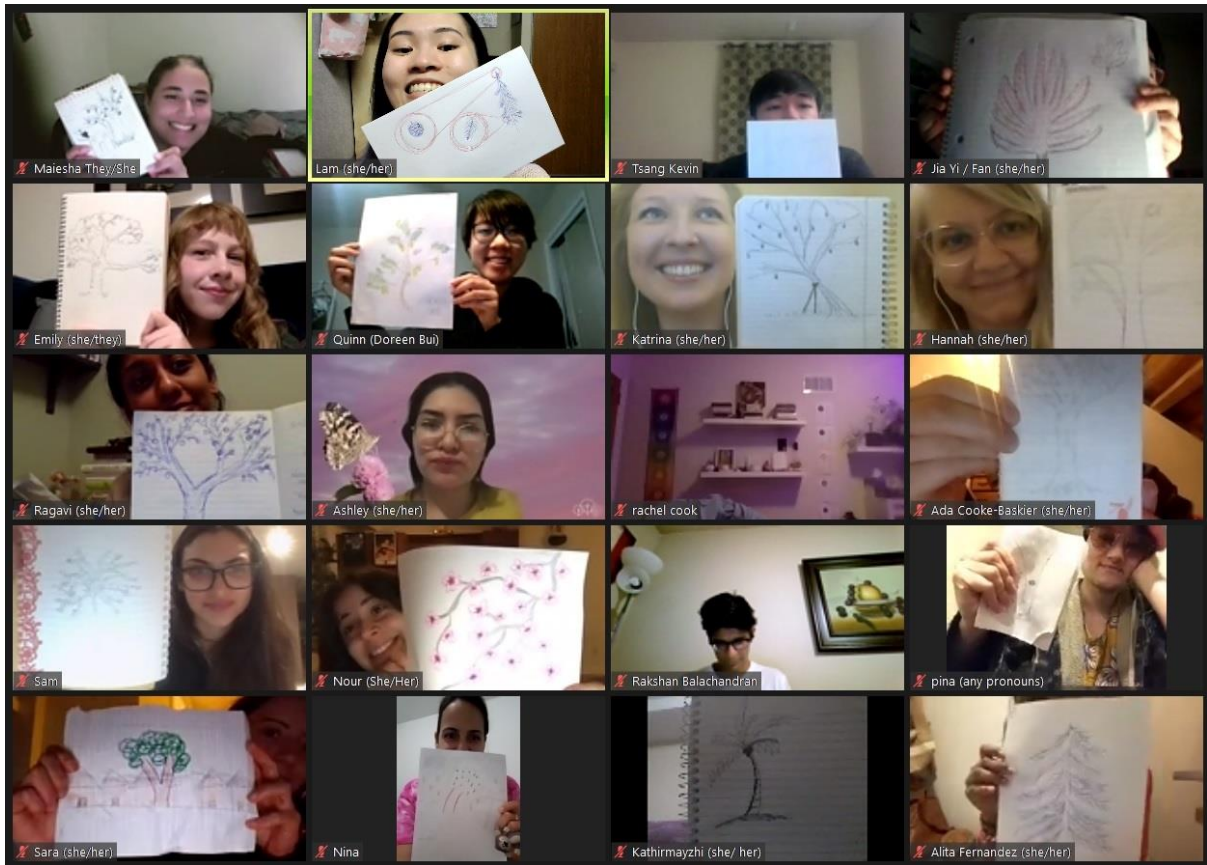
There is a strong desire amongst young people to take meaningful action in environmental stewardship and increase the equity of the urban forest across the City of Toronto. The Young Urban Forest Leaders (YUFL) program is focused on diversifying the urban forestry sector by nurturing the next generation of urban forest champions while also growing Toronto's urban forest. By providing a combination of 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 support from the Canadian TREE Fund through the Jack Kimmel Grant, LEAF (Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests) empowered 15 youth to drive change in their own communities and across the City of Toronto, by inspiring residents to grow and sustain the urban forest!

### **Urban Forestry and Arboriculture – an In-Demand Field**

The urban forest is a critical component of cities 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. The City of Toronto's urban forest provides annual ecosystem services valued at \$55 million, as estimated in the *CanopyTO* report. Recognizing the value of the urban forest as living green infrastructure, 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 YUFL Program is a free training and mentorship program that has been running since 2015. The program is designed to provide experience in urban forestry, arboriculture, and community engagement to youth (ages 18 – 29) from underrepresented groups within these fields including, but not limited to, women, non-binary people, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, 2SLGBTQ+ persons and racialized individuals. In 2022, this intensive, four-month, hands-on learning experience gave 15 youth participants 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.



*2022 cohort of Young Urban Forest Leaders showcasing a drawing of their favorite tree*

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Central to the program is an effort to remove barriers that individuals may face when entering the fields of urban forestry and arboriculture. This includes removing financial barriers associated with training and resources, thereby reducing the financial risk that is typically involved in exploring a 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 Remotely and In-Person**

The YUFL participants were guided by LEAF Community Programs Manager, Brian Millward, Education Coordinator, Lam Tran, and Residential Planting Programs Supervisor, Jess Wilkin, over the course of four months. Being graduates of the YUFL program as well as ISA-certified arborists, Lam and Jess were able to bring unique perspectives and expertise to the 2022 cohort.



*A YUFL participant developing their tree identification skills*

*(©2022 Brian Millward / LEAF)*

Weekly workshops and mentored activities provided 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 Volunteer 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. These skills include, but are not limited to, 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 management and Indigenous stewardship.



*YUFL participants conducting a tree inventory during a training workshop*

*(©2022 Brian Millward / LEAF)*

With COVID restrictions being lifted over the summer, opportunities for in-person learning were integrated into the program where possible. This not only facilitated tactile learning but fostered stronger bonds amongst the cohort as they connected with each other organically. The in-person workshops led by LEAF staff covered tree inventories, how to curate and deliver a tree tour and a tree identification workshop. In addition, a workshop was led by Johl Whiteduck, who is the co-founder of Miinikaan Innovation and Design on Indigenous stewardship. Johl covered Indigenous food sovereignty and shared traditional Indigenous stories and teaching about various perennial plants and tree species.



*Johl Whiteduck from Miinikaan Innovation and Design leading a workshop on Indigenous stewardship.*

(©2022 Lam Tran / LEAF)

*“I really appreciated the opportunity to hear about how we are connected to plants and nature from an Indigenous perspective, which is not something that you come across frequently in much of the horticulture/forestry/agriculture worlds. Johl's remarks regarding how Indigenous peoples were deprived of their cultural knowledge and connections to the natural world were also important to hear.” – Indigenous stewardship Workshop participant feedback*

An in-person Fireside Chat was also held with three professional speakers including an International Society of Arboriculture certified Consulting Arborist, a Senior Landscape Architect and Planner and a Program Manager from a non-governmental organization. The speakers shared their personal experience working in urban forestry, providing the participants with insight and inspiration for potential career paths as they wrapped up the program. Over the course of the program, the YUFL participants learned from 13 professionals who provided the group with diverse representation and experience in the field. In our goal to diversify the urban forestry sector, it is crucial that our participants see themselves represented in the speakers and teachers of the YUFL program.



*In-person Fireside Chat*

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### **Sparking Community Action**

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. They also identified ways to mobilize the community to enhance the local tree cover through a variety of remote and in-person opportunities, from collaborating with

Community Groups to attending festivals. Each YUFL participant engaged with their own community in a way that was unique to their collective needs.

Through community outreach and email promotional asks to residents, leaders and Toronto 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.



*Toronto residents receiving native shrub deliveries from LEAF*

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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 develop and lead 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 community members to the importance of growing and sustaining the urban forest and connect them with available resources in the City of Toronto and beyond. Webinar topics included tree and shrub identification, cultural and historical significance of tree and shrub species, edible features, and urban wildlife.

## Paper vs Yellow Birch Buds



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## How Trees Support Wildlife

### Host Plants



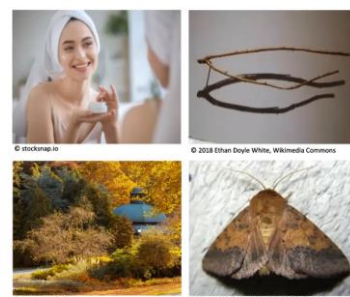
## Identifying the Ginkgo Tree



27

## Common Witchhazel - Uses

- Astringent skin products
- 'Dowsing rod'
- Seasonal garden
- Food & cover for wildlife



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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. The audience learned not only about the trees and shrubs 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%! In total, 268 individuals from the Greater Toronto Area engaged with the YUFL program.

*"[The most valuable aspect of this event was] learning about the tree species, knowledgeable presenters with senses of humour & easy relaxed pace, diversity of presenters." - Feedback from a 2022 YUFL Webinar series attendee*

*"[The most valuable aspect of this event was] learning about native species that I will use in my own backyard, after years of planting stuff without knowing any of this" – Feedback from a 2022 YUFL Webinar series attendee*

*"The enthusiastic facilitators and wealth of knowledge about local trees and shrubs. The photos were very helpful." – Feedback from a 2022 YUFL Webinar series attendee*

The value of the program was also shared by two media outlets (toronto.com and canadatoday.com) who published articles based on a LEAF media release following the Fireside chat,

helping to showcase the tremendous impact this opportunity has had for the youth and communities across Toronto.

### **An Experience Like No Other**

Since 2015, 134 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 2022 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.

*“The YUFL Program equipped me with local knowledge, new skills, and greater confidence in my abilities. It empowered me to pursue my goals of having a green career and affecting positive change. Thank you YUFL!” - 2022 YUFL Participant*

*‘An essential program for anyone. It helped me strengthen and develop my skills and knowledge, and overall bolstered my relationship with nature. Positivity, harmony and peace; the program helped me find it with nature and inspired me to encourage others to do the same!’ - 2022 YUFL Participant*

*“I came to this course looking to learn about the urban forest, but I left with a community.” - 2022 YUFL Participant*

### **A Greener and More Diverse Future**

For today’s youth, addressing climate change and equity issues is an undeniable part of their reality. Awareness of the multitude of benefits and services that the urban forest provides has been amplified in recent years, especially as folks relied on access to quality green spaces as a way to maintain their physical and mental wellbeing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthering the conversation was the recognition that environmental issues and equity issues are intertwined. Green spaces and canopy cover are not equitably distributed across neighbourhoods, as canopy cover is positively correlated with how affluent and white a neighbourhood is. Addressing this disparity and working towards a city that where everyone can thrive will spur growth in the fields of urban forestry and arboriculture and create a greater need for representative and diverse 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 are still opportunities for improvement. This year, the program offered a mixture of remote and in-person workshops. This hybrid model leveraged how accessible the program was while creating opportunities for face-to-face connections and skill-building workshops which would be challenging to facilitate online. Moving forward, we plan to use both in-person and virtual settings in a way that best enhances the participants' experiences while continuing to minimize or eliminate any barriers to participation. Program outreach was expanded to include new youth-serving community groups and organizations to improve program recruitment and promotions within 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. We are continuing to identify and engage with new approaches to recruiting environmentally-conscious youth who have not pursued post-secondary education.



Feedback was collected from the 2022 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 interests 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 enable a diverse community of driven youth to pursue change. 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.