

SUPPORTING THE NEXT GENERATION OF URBAN FOREST CHAMPIONS

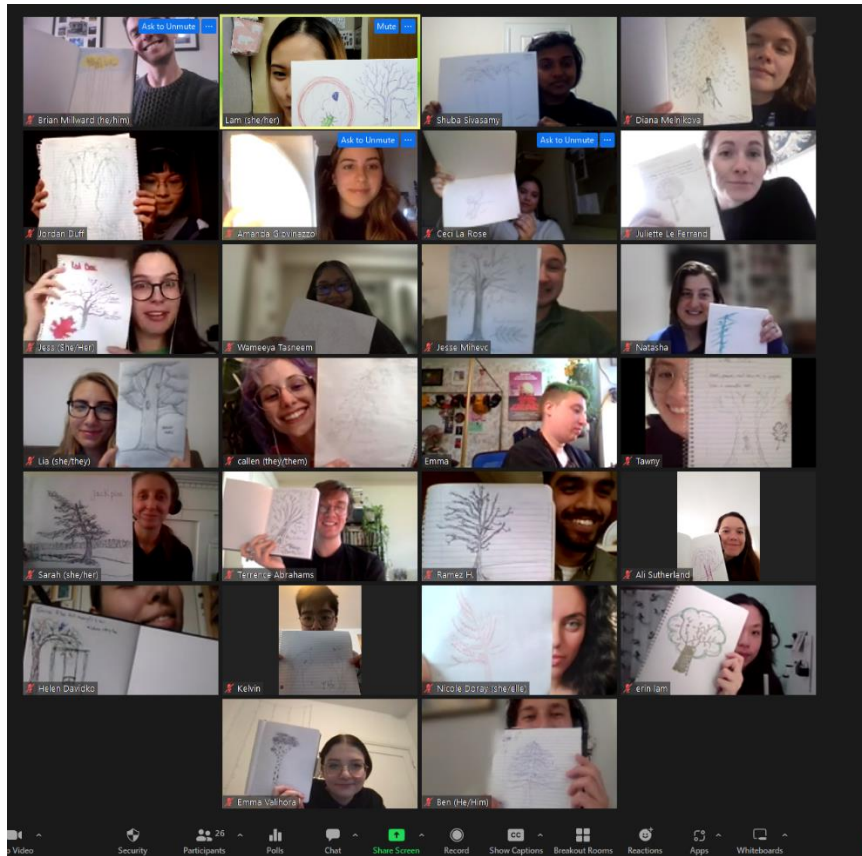
There is a strong desire amongst young people to take meaningful action in environmental stewardship and increase the equity of the urban forest across the City of Toronto. The Young Urban Forest Leaders (YUFL) program is focused on diversifying the urban forestry sector by nurturing the next generation of urban forest champions while also engaging Toronto residents to grow the urban forest in their own communities. By providing a combination of hands-on training and mentorship for equity-deserving 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, and the City of Toronto through an Urban Forestry grant, LEAF (Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests) empowered 20 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 – a growing 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 and our YUFL program comes in.

The YUFL Program is a free training and mentorship program that has been running since 2015. The program is designed to provide hands-on training in urban forestry, arboriculture, and community engagement to youth (ages 18 – 29) from equity-deserving groups within these fields including, but not limited to, women, non-binary people, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, 2SLGBTQ+ persons and racialized individuals. In 2023, this intensive, four-month, hands-on learning experience gave 20 youth participants valuable training, 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.



2023 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 equity-deserving individuals feel greater comfort and ease to become leaders in a predominantly male and white field.

Building Skills to tackle Urban Forestry Challenges

The YUFL participants were guided by LEAF Community Programs Manager, Brian Millward, Education Coordinators, Lam Tran and Kristen Bedley, 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 2023 cohort.



YUFL participants developing their tree identification skills.

(©2023 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 in-demand soft and technical skills within the urban forestry and arboriculture sectors. These skills included, but are not limited to, tree identification, tree inventory and mapping, visual communication, public speaking and virtual outreach and marketing. Workshop topics were also tailored to the interests and knowledge gaps identified by the YUFL participants.



YUFL participants conducting a tree inventory during a training workshop.

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LEAF leveraged the benefits of both virtual and in-person training to implement a program that best suited our participants needs. This not only helped mediate transportation barriers, but also facilitated tactile learning, which 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 2023, YUFL participants got to take part in a workshop with Carolynne Crawley in High Park where she shared Indigenous perspectives on how they could build reciprocal and responsible relations with the lands, waters and all beings.



YUFL participants showcasing leaf diversity during a tree tour.

(©Jess Wilkin / LEAF)

"All these workshops were perfectly tailored to meet the goals and outcomes of the session. The "All My Relations" workshop [with Carolynne Crawley] was an eye-opening for me, knowing about the Indigenous Peoples practices and the way they connected to the land and its relatives made me feel more present whenever I pass by a relative in the nature or in our urban forest." – 2023 YUFL participant

An in-person Fireside Chat was also held with three professional speakers including an International Society of Arboriculture certified Consulting Arborist and Forestry Planner, a Stewardship Ecologist and a Ph.D. student whose research is focused on race and access to green spaces and forestry. 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 11 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.

Giving back to the community

Exercising skills and knowledge developed through the workshops, the YUFL participants worked to improve local canopy cover and engage with community members across Toronto. The YUFL participants developed and lead a series of four educational tree tours that took place in two parks (Dorset Park and Spenvally Park) located with Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs) experiencing low canopy cover. The goal of the series was to spark interest and action within equity-deserving communities in the city. It was very important that the same communities represented within our YUFL cohort were those who received the opportunity to learn from this diverse group of youth. 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. Tree tours consisted of fun tree-identification tips and information on the importance of the urban forest and stewardship.

Through this series of tree tours, YUFL participants facilitated greening by promoting the giveaway of 400 native 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 resident receiving a native shrub from LEAF after the Spenvally Park Tree Tour.

(©2023 Kanchan Maharaj / LEAF)



YUFL participants leading a tree tour at Spenvally Park.

(©2023 Kanchan Maharaj / LEAF)

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 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, 223 individuals engaged with the YUFL program.

“The tree tour was so important. It allowed us to bring everything we have learned in the program and bring it to other people. It’s really allowed us to contextualize all our studies into human stories. It brought the care and compassion we have to trees to real people.” – 2023 YUFL participant

“Being able to work with my team to organize our tree tour felt like a real accomplishment. It was amazing to see how far each of us progressed every time we practiced and how supportive we all were for each other. It gave me the confidence I needed to do more public speaking and talk about my passion for trees and urban ecology.” - 2023 YUFL participant

“The mentors were exceptionally knowledgeable, enthusiastic and encouraging! I enjoyed and benefited from each and every moment I spent during the YUFL program.” – 2023 YUFL participant

An Experience Like No Other

Since 2015, 154 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 2023 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.

A Greener and More Diverse Future

For today’s youth, addressing climate change and equity issues is an undeniable part of their reality. 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 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 equity-deserving 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 equity-deserving youth, there are still opportunities for improvement. This year, the program continued to offer 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. We are also continuing to identify and engage with new approaches to recruiting environmentally-conscious youth who have not pursued post-secondary education by reaching out to youth serving community groups and organizations.

Feedback was collected from the 2023 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 and the City of Toronto through an Urban Forestry 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.