



Photo Courtesy of Knox United Church

# KNOX UNITED CHURCH

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## SUBURBAN COMMUNITY GARDEN

With a large expanse of lawn, support from the City of Ottawa's Community Garden Network Fund and a generous bequest, Knox United Church has created a wonderful local gardening space that is open to both congregants and community members. Community gardens such as these allow people to grow local healthy fresh produce that doesn't have to travel far from garden plot to dinner plate. They not only reduce food travel distances but also allow for local food hubs which provide easy access to healthy food, new gardening skills and local resiliency.

### BACKGROUND

Knox United Church is a suburban church in Nepean that was built on former farmland. Their unique building, a Panabode structure of cedar logs, is surrounded by a large property. As their

website describes: "The log cabin style of the building creates a warm and welcoming sanctuary that fosters a real family atmosphere for services." They have opted for chairs, instead of pews, that

can be moved to facilitate various events and services, so that their space is flexible.

The church received a bequest and established a committee to seek ideas to use the donation. The first project undertaken was the installation of solar panels. A community garden was the second project voted on by the congregation to be implemented with the funds and it received quite a high level of support from within the church. The parishioners were “enthusiastic about using their perfectly sunny location to transform a parcel of land into a thriving area for produce.” Members, if they had any concerns about the project, wanted to make sure that the resulting garden would add to the visual appeal of the site.

The garden project also supported the goals of the congregation’s mission such as community outreach, reducing emissions from food transportation, increasing local food resiliency and supporting local food banks with healthy local produce. The idea was that “by providing garden plots to those in the community who love to garden but have no space, they would be able to offer good health for the soul”. The garden would also support the United Church of Canada’s food sovereignty mission that includes uplifting locally-grown food, creating opportunities to increase local food producing skills and working with nature.

## PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The first step for the garden before implementation could take place was research. A few members of the congregation stepped up – some had gardening experience and another, a city councillor, knew of local resources. They researched the best type of garden to move forward with – especially in terms of in-ground or raised beds. They also researched possible sources of funding and the councillor provided a list of local resources, including the local non-profit that supports community gardens: Just

Food. The next step was for the congregation to put together applications for funding from the City of Ottawa’s Community Garden program and also a second one to the United Church Foundation.

Garnering support from the larger community was also key, so Knox United Church held a community meeting to share their vision and the plan for the new garden. The community meeting in March was well received by the neighbourhood citizens who attended. With the community backing the project, and having been successful in receiving funding from both The City of Ottawa Community Garden Network Fund and The Seeds of Hope Fund of the United Church Foundation, the congregation was well on its way.

The proposed location for the garden was where the original farm buildings had been located (barn and tool shed), so due to the possibility of contamination, raised beds with new soil were planned. A congregation member provided a garden design with L-shaped raised garden boxes, where the angles of the raised beds provided easy access for all gardeners.



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The installation of the garden beds was done over two weekends in May, with the help of approximately thirty adults and fifteen youth (both teens and younger children). The volunteers were from the congregation and the surrounding neighborhood including another nearby community garden in Leslie Park. The youth volunteers included two local Scouting groups and a Venturers group. This hard-working crew helped build the garden beds and add the needed sand and soil – a mixture important for the best growing conditions.



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### RESULTS

The community garden includes twenty beds in total, a large shed for storing tools and other equipment along with two large water storage totes and two well-ventilated compost bins. An Outdoor Dedication - Garden Blessing ceremony was held at the end of May, as part of the normal Sunday service with the full congregation attending service outdoors in front of the new garden beds. Updates on the progress of the garden have been shared on the church's social media. The gardens have been a great success and Knox United even organized a Salsa Canning workshop in September. In the end, the cost for the full first year of the project was \$15,000 which paid for the materials to build the raised beds and the soil to fill the beds and the shed. Signage is planned to raise awareness of the local organizations supporting the project.

Eighteen of the twenty garden beds are rented by congregants and community members, with an even split between the two. As a community service, two of these 18 garden beds are available at no fee for community members in need of financial support. The annual garden bed rental fee would be waived in such a case, so that the cost would not be a barrier to anyone who wanted to have the opportunity to garden. The gardeners donate some of their time to doing communal work for the community garden and they also donate the extras of their harvest to the local community cupboard.

The other two garden beds, called the Sharing Gardens, have been set aside for specific community needs. One is to grow local produce that is donated to FAMSAC Food Cupboard and the other is a "help yourself" garden to encourage those who desire some healthy locally-grown food to pick and enjoy. This also helps discourage people from taking food from the rented garden plots of hard-working gardeners. Knox United is collaborating with Dovercourt's program for adults with Autism – WAVE (Work and Volunteer Experience) and also students from two school programs – Sir Robert Borden Autism Class and Ottawa Technical Secondary School Autism Program - to work in the Sharing Gardens. The students and the WAVE program members planted, watered, weeded and harvested all the produce in the two garden plots along with the garden members who also volunteer some time.



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## KEYS TO SUCCESS

The main key to success for this project was the enthusiastic volunteers. This project could not have been done without a lot of sweat equity – both in building the gardens and in the running of the garden. Volunteers supported this project for the full growing season, ensuring that the large water totes were filled regularly and that the two community garden beds were taken care of also. It was wonderful to see people helping each other out also – carrying heavy water jugs for other gardeners and sharing gardening knowledge with novice gardeners. Knox United received generous donations of equipment and occasional labour from a number of congregation members, too. A strong, caring community was created!

## LESSONS LEARNED

**Local Community can make a change:** One of the lessons learned was in regards to how keen people were in terms of support. It's hard to gauge the response from the community when a project is started but the response in supporting the garden was great! It was important to have the community support and the congregation made a great effort by going door to door, dropping off flyers and reaching out to communities that might benefit from the community garden (such as townhouse neighbours who might not have space for their own garden), They also had great support from the local community association who posted information on their website and Facebook page and from the local community garden organization: Just Food. These partnerships were key to helping getting the word out.

## NEXT STEPS

With a successful first year, Knox United is looking into expanding the community garden by adding new plots. They are also working on two new garden projects: a First Nations Healing Garden and a children's garden, where they can use the garden as an educational component, developing a curriculum for the Sunday School, and starting the children with growing seeds in the winter to planting and gardening in the warmer season.



Photo Courtesy of [knoxnepean.ca](http://knoxnepean.ca)

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### MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Two memorable moments for the church minister, were the outdoor garden service that included the Blessing of the Garden in May and seeing how the garden was expanding beyond what anyone had even imagined at the beginning. It's always wonderful to be able to worship outdoors and it was especially great to be able to celebrate the new project and all the hard work that had been done so far with the full congregation on a lovely spring day!

One of the gardeners is actually from another parish and was keen to be able to show his congregation what they were doing at Knox United. So he set up a tour with a committee from his church which was marvelous to see. It's great to think that the garden project can inspire others. Once people actually start gardening, it's easy to get hooked. The key is get them to try – even children are keen to learn once they get their hands in the dirt and learn where their vegetables come from!



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