

Community, society, ecological being, and public space —Community gardens tour in Toronto and elsewhere

Guest Speaker: Dr. Yan Zhou

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VA9500, Master's Research Methods and Practices

Course instructor: Professor **Alena Robin**

November 20, 2025

Room VAC 247

Department of Visual Arts. Western University.

Photo by Tish Carnat. Jangchup Sangmo and Yan Zhou. Visit to Milky Way Garden, Toronto. July 28, 2025.



reading/ watching materials on the topic of community gardens

Two videos to watch:

- Purple, Adam. n.d. *DIRT: A Film on NYC Garden Activists*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCTKxmUQKYE>.
- “Alex Wilson Community Garden.” n.d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ismjfpiljwk>.

Texts highly recommended:

- Xu, Tan. n.d. *Social Botany*. https://ecoartasia.net/XTN/XTN_eng.html
- AGO. 2019. “Gardening to Address a Complex Idea: From Panama to Parkdale – Here’s the Extraordinary Story of *Freeplots*, a Community-Based Work by Artist Hito Steyerl That Addresses a Complex Global Idea with a Simple Community One.” December 17, 2019. <https://ago.ca/agoinsider/gardening-address-complex-idea>; <https://pnlt.ca/land/milky-way-garden>.

Suggested readings:

- Irvine, Seana, Lorraine Johnson, and Kim Peters. 1999. “Community Gardens and Sustainable Land Use Planning: A Case-Study of the Alex Wilson Community Garden.” *Local Environment* 4 (1): 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839908725579>.
- Jacob, Michelle, and Cecilia Rocha. 2021. “Models of Governance in Community Gardening: Administrative Support Fosters Project Longevity.” *Local Environment* 26 (5): 557–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2021.1904855>.
- Wilson, Alexander. 2019. *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. 2nd ed. Toronto: Between the Lines.

From: Rebecca Catching <rebeccacatching@gmail.com>

Date: Tue, Jul 15, 2025 at 4:21 PM

Subject: [Toronto Urban Growers] Some Curators and Artists From Toronto and China Seeking to Visit Community Gardens

To: <toronto-urban-growers@googlegroups.com>

Hello Tuggers,

I got my start in gardening at the Dufferin Grove community garden and I've done some pro-bono work for the Milky Way garden in Parkdale.

I used to be a curator in China before I was doing this and I have some curator friends in Toronto who are doing a project with Xu Tan, who is a well-known artist who has participated in the Venice Biennale. Recently he has been working with gardening, botany and social engagement in Southern China and is planning to make a community garden of sorts.

You can see his bio here:



We are looking to meet some people who are running interesting community gardens to know more about how you function and see the various kinds of spaces you have.

Community gardens in China do not really exist in China despite there being a large population of farmers who now live in cities. Many of these people would die to have a small patch of land but often the municipal government will rip out guerrilla gardening efforts. People often have to do it on the sly, like on the roof of this 30-story apartment building in Chongqing (see photo).

If anyone is keen to meet up, we would love to drop by and see your garden between July 30 and August 1st. Ideally we could organize a few gardens on the same day, but given the short notice we understand the need to be flexible.

Thanks so much for your time.

Rebecca



Rebecca Catching. Rooftop gardening on a 30-story apartment building in Chongqing, China.

Links to Toronto Urban Growers:
<https://torontourbangrowers.org/>
<https://www.instagram.com/tourbangrowers>
<https://www.facebook.com/TOurbangrowers/>

Alex Wilson Community Garden is stuck between 2 buildings on a busy downtown Toronto street.
552 Richmond St. W.
<https://www.cityfarmer.org/alexwilson.html>

Visit time: July 30th
Photo by Wang Yifan





Photo by Wang Yifan

Alex Garden won a legal case against the real estate developers who planned to build a 14-storey high-rise that would block sunlight from reaching the garden.

Eventually, the developers were restricted to constructing a seven-storey building instead. During an interview with Stephen Andrews on July 30, 2025, the chair of the board of the Alex Garden Land Trust, he said:

I think the government wasn't prepared for gardeners to come at them with, like a film, with all of these various witnesses, to make their case, against the developer. We obviously won the case. But normally, they just think gardeners, they just grow plants, flowers, and vegetables. **But we are very politically engaged people. We want to see this type of development (community garden).**

The Milky Way Garden: Tibetan and Nepali ladies' community garden

87 Milky Way, Toronto, ON M6K 3L4

<https://pnlt.ca/land/milky-way-garden>

visit time: August 29





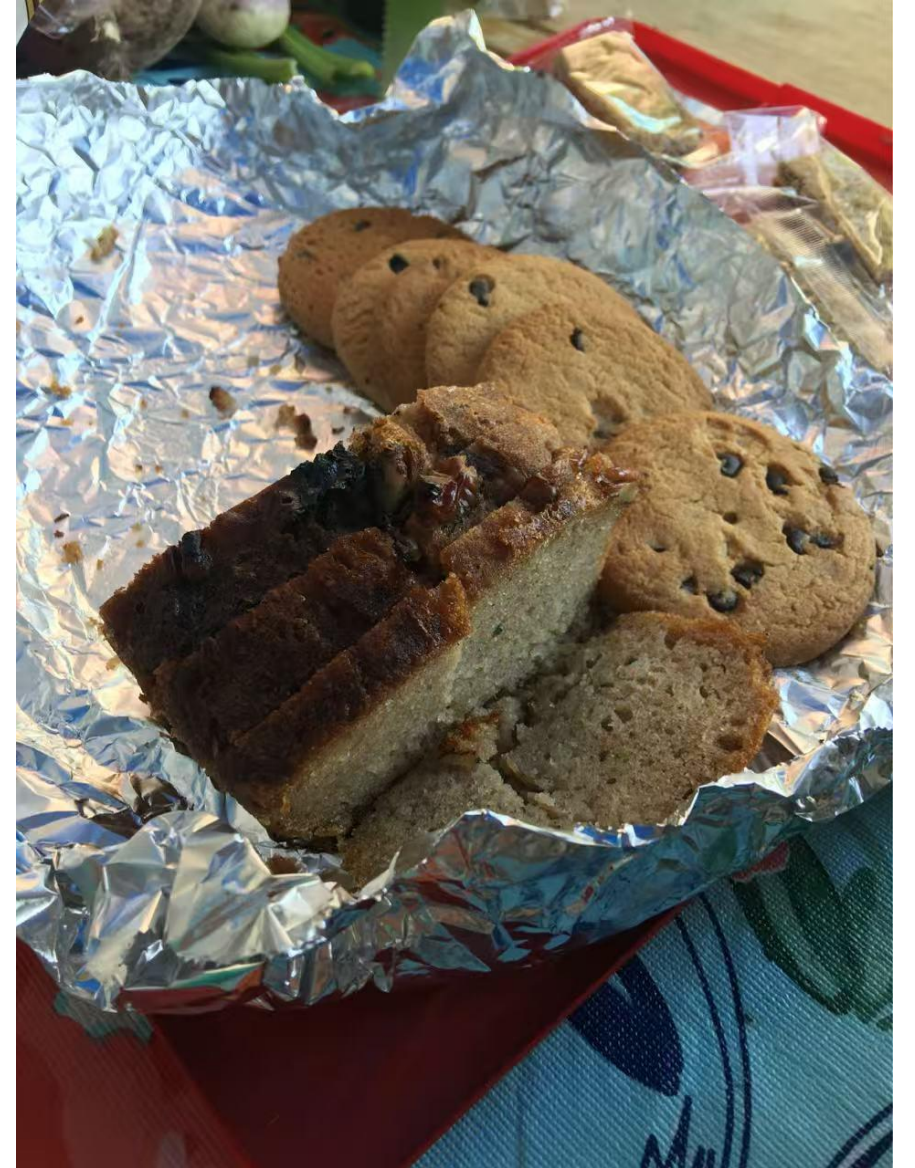
Sonam Yangzom, head gardener. Her parents followed the Dalai Lama exiled to northern India, where they lived as farmers. They had no citizenship in India. She came to Canada as a refugee and obtained citizenship for the first time in her life.



Sova Lama from Nepal

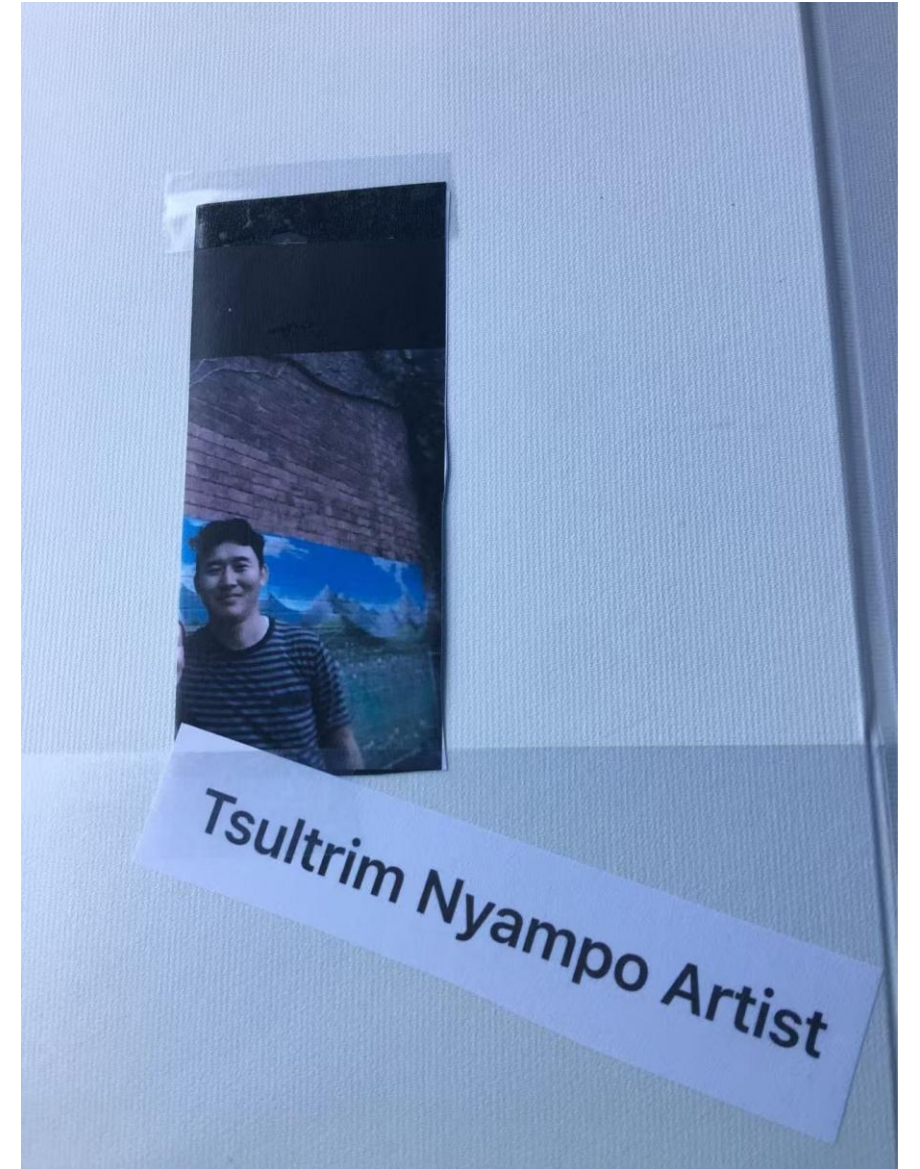


Left: Tsering Lhamo (L) and Tish Carnat. Right: Rahma Idriss from Eritrea, and Sonam Yangzom.





A mural painting by Tibetan artist Tsultrim Nyampo; and the manifesto of the gardeners: We will garden through together.





MILKY WAY GARDEN - An Urban Agriculture Space for Parkdale.
Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust. 2016.



Top: Hito Steyerl with AGO staff visiting the Milky Way Garden in Parkdale. From left to right: Hito Steyerl, Sova Lama, Katarina Veljovic, Tenzin Tsundue, Hadera Asefa, Angela ElzingaCheng, Nyima Tsering, Sonam Yangzom, Adelina Vlas, Kyi Thaung, Tish Carnat, Mama Sanneh Sonko, Rahma Idriss, Dechen Dolma, Dhekyi Yangzom.

Right: Hito Steyerl, *Freeplots*, 2019. Wooden planters in freeport shapes, grow lights, compost, plants, sound; dimensions variable. Installation view, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2019. Photo Art Gallery of Ontario.

FreePlots is a site-specific installation consisting of three pairs of custom-built wooden planters in freeport shapes and UV lamps hanging above them, compost, plants, and sound.

Gardening to address a complex idea. AGOINSIDER. December 17, 2019.

<https://ago.ca/agoinsider/gardening-address-complex-idea>

<https://www.esterschipper.com/artists/102-hito-steyerl/works/20136/>

Hito Steyerl, *Freeplots*. Listening to Art. 13 December 2019. <https://listeningtoart.org/06.03>



Hope Garden, a multi-cultural community garden near The Milky Way Garden.



An indigenous community garden built and run by volunteers near The Milky Way Garden.



Sabina Ali and Yan Zhou.
Photo by Wang Yifan.





Photo by Wang Yifan.



Photos by Wang Yifan.



Video by Wang Yifan.





Photo by Wang Yifan.
















Photo by Wang Yifan.





Photo by Wang Yifan.

Plants You May Find in the Pollinator Garden

 <p>Butterfly Milkweed <i>Asclepias tuberosa</i></p> <p>Butterfly milkweed grows on sandy, sunny or rocky limestone soils of meadows, open woodlands, roadsides, and disturbed areas similar to other milkweed species. It has green foliage and inconspicuous orange flowers, with a moderate amount of conspicuous brown trails or streaks. The ground below is usually covered by the tall stems. The most notable difference from other species is the tall, upright, stalked base (including green papery bracts), which are sometimes included in the flower.</p>	 <p>Side Oats <i>Germea botulphorum</i></p> <p>Side oats is a native plant that grows in meadows, dry to medium moisture soils in full sun. It has a wide range of soil conditions from well-drained sandy soils to heavy moist. Inflorescences of purple-lipped flowers appear on woody stems above the foliage in early to mid-summer. Foliage forms green stems in autumn, sometimes also developing hues of orange and red.</p>	 <p>Dense Blazing Star <i>Liatris spicata</i></p> <p>This plant is native to moist meadows and sunny margins, but a more common species than the wild. It grows in a wide range of soil conditions from sandy to rich. The flowers are a bright purple color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>
 <p>Yarrow <i>Achillea millefolium</i></p> <p>Yarrow is a hardy and versatile perennial with flat-topped leaves and colorful flowers. The plants are remarkably versatile, tolerating dry spots and low soil fertility. Yarrow blooms from mid-summer into fall. Flower colors include red, pink, salmon, yellow, and white. Attractive to butterflies, it is also known as a mosquito repellant and a remedy for cuts and burns.</p>	 <p>Prairie Smoke <i>Thymophylla</i></p> <p>The preference is full sun, except in dry conditions, and a barren soil that is richly granitic or sandy. The blooming period can occur from early to late spring and lasts about 12 months. There are 3 flowers on long stalks. The flowers are about 2 cm long, generally with long, but they are a distinct shade of pink-purple. The flowers are also known as a native species and are a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>	 <p>Black Eyed Susan <i>Rudbeckia hirta</i></p> <p>Black eyed Susan grows best in full sun and moist well drained soil. It is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens. The flowers are a bright yellow color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>
 <p>Green Headed Coneflower <i>Rudbeckia laciniata</i></p> <p>The green headed coneflower does not have the same flat topped head as other species. It has unusual green-centered flowers surrounded by bright yellow petals, and tall stems. It does best in full sun, but can tolerate light shade. It can be found in flower from July through to the first frost.</p>	 <p>Blue Vervain <i>Verbena hastata</i></p> <p>This plant prefers full to partial sunlight, moist conditions, and soil containing a little or no lime. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens. The flowers are a bright blue color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>	 <p>Lance leaved Coreopsis <i>Coreopsis lanceolata</i></p> <p>This plant is commonly known as the flower that has a long stem. It grows in a wide range of soil conditions from sandy to rich. The flowers are a bright yellow color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>
 <p>Wild Bergamot <i>Monarda fistulosa</i></p> <p>This plant, also commonly known as the wild bergamot, has a long stem and a dense head of flowers. The flowers are a bright purple color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>	 <p>Great Blue Lobelia <i>Lobelia spicata</i></p> <p>This brightly colored plant prefers wet to moist soil and partial sun. It is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens. The flowers are a bright blue color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>	 <p>Bloodroot <i>Sanguinaria canadensis</i></p> <p>Bloodroot is an early spring blooming plant that grows in the shade of the forest floor. It is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens. The flowers are a bright red color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>
 <p>New England Aster <i>Symphyotrichum novae-angliae</i></p> <p>New England aster grows in moist soil and full sun. The flowers are a bright purple color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>	 <p>Wild Strawberry <i>Fragaria virginiana</i></p> <p>The wild strawberry grows in moist soil and full sun. The flowers are a bright red color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>	 <p>Ironweed <i>Vernonia spicata</i></p> <p>Ironweed is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens. The flowers are a bright purple color and are arranged in a dense spike. The plant is a native species and is a good choice for pollinator gardens.</p>

SHADOWLAND Theatre presents...

MIGRATION CELEBRATION



Wed. August 13 - Fri. August 15
RV Burgess Park

Arts & Nature Workshops
Everyday 3pm - 7pm

Final Parade
Friday August 15 @ 7pm

Indigenous teachings, nature walks, costume & puppet-making, and music!

Join in the Grand Parade of Animals as we migrate through the park!

More info at shadowlandtheatre.ca



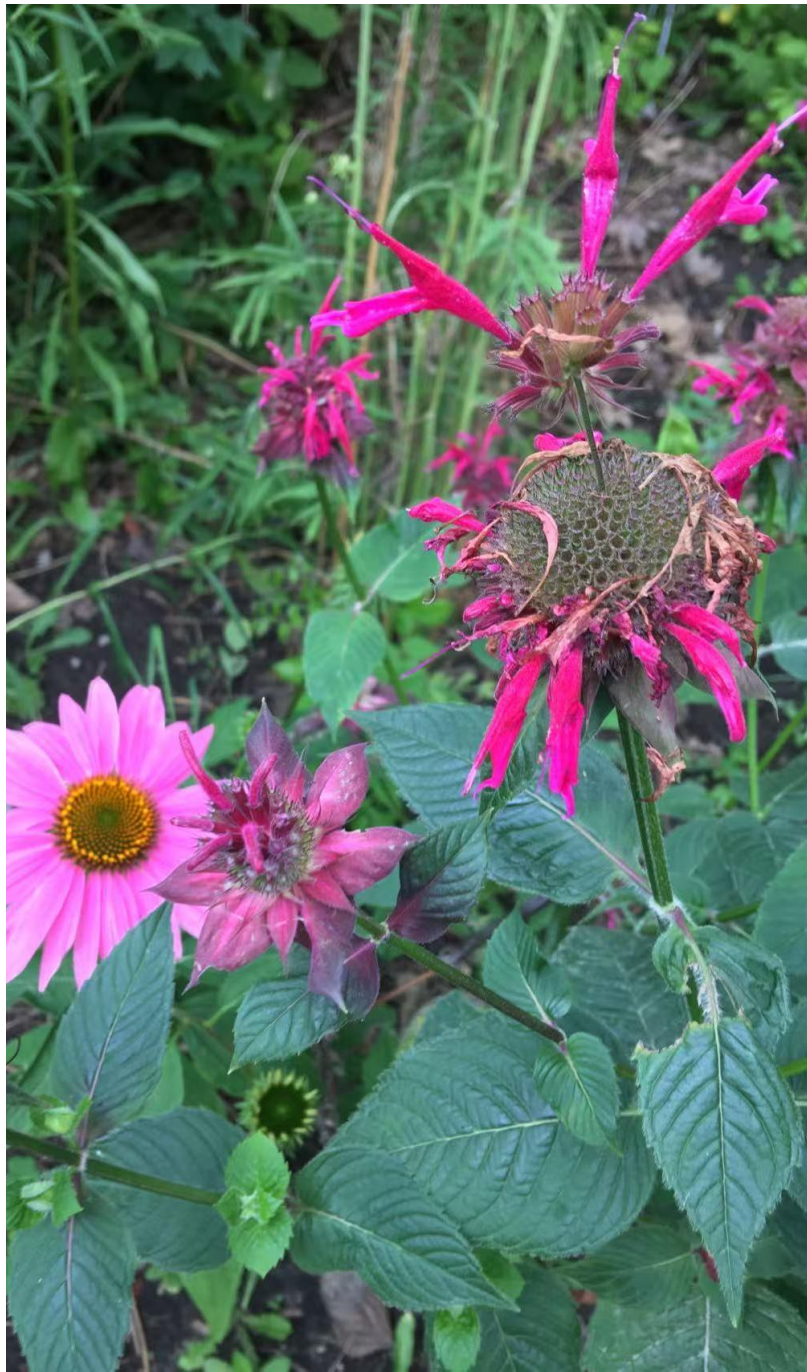



Scarborough Village Community Garden is a community garden in Fred Johnson Park, south central Scarborough. The garden is about 1/4 hectare, about half a football field roughly, including 16 raised beds, the rest ground-level. The Garden has a unique model of operation. About a quarter of the plots are "adopted," meaning volunteers take the lead on growing vegetables in them (no charge to them), but they share about half of their produce with other volunteers and a local food bank, as well as at the community's annual Harvest Fest in late September. The rest of the plots are taken care of by non-adopting volunteers, some student volunteers, and the adopting volunteers when they have time/energy. In short, by a crew of about a dozen folks. (John Doleweerd) <https://scarboroughvillage4.wixsite.com/svcg>
3630 Kingston Road (behind the Parkdale Library)

Visit time: July 31.













An artist installed these patterned pebbles in the garden.



Dufferin Grove Park Garden Co-op

875 Dufferin Street, Toronto, ON, Canada, Ontario

Visit time: July 30

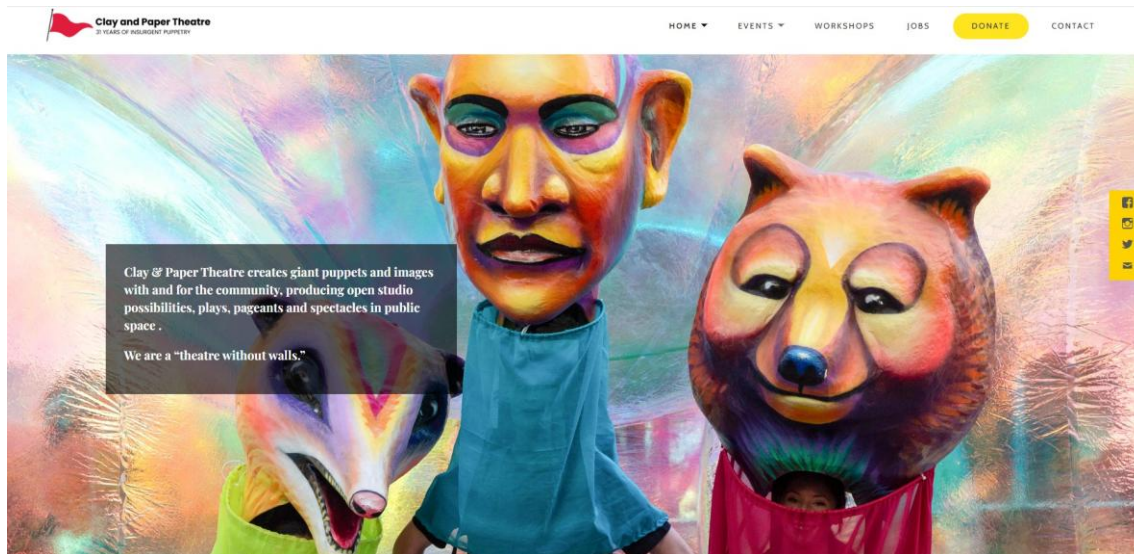
Left: Skylar. Right: Xu Tan, Skylar, and another gardener.

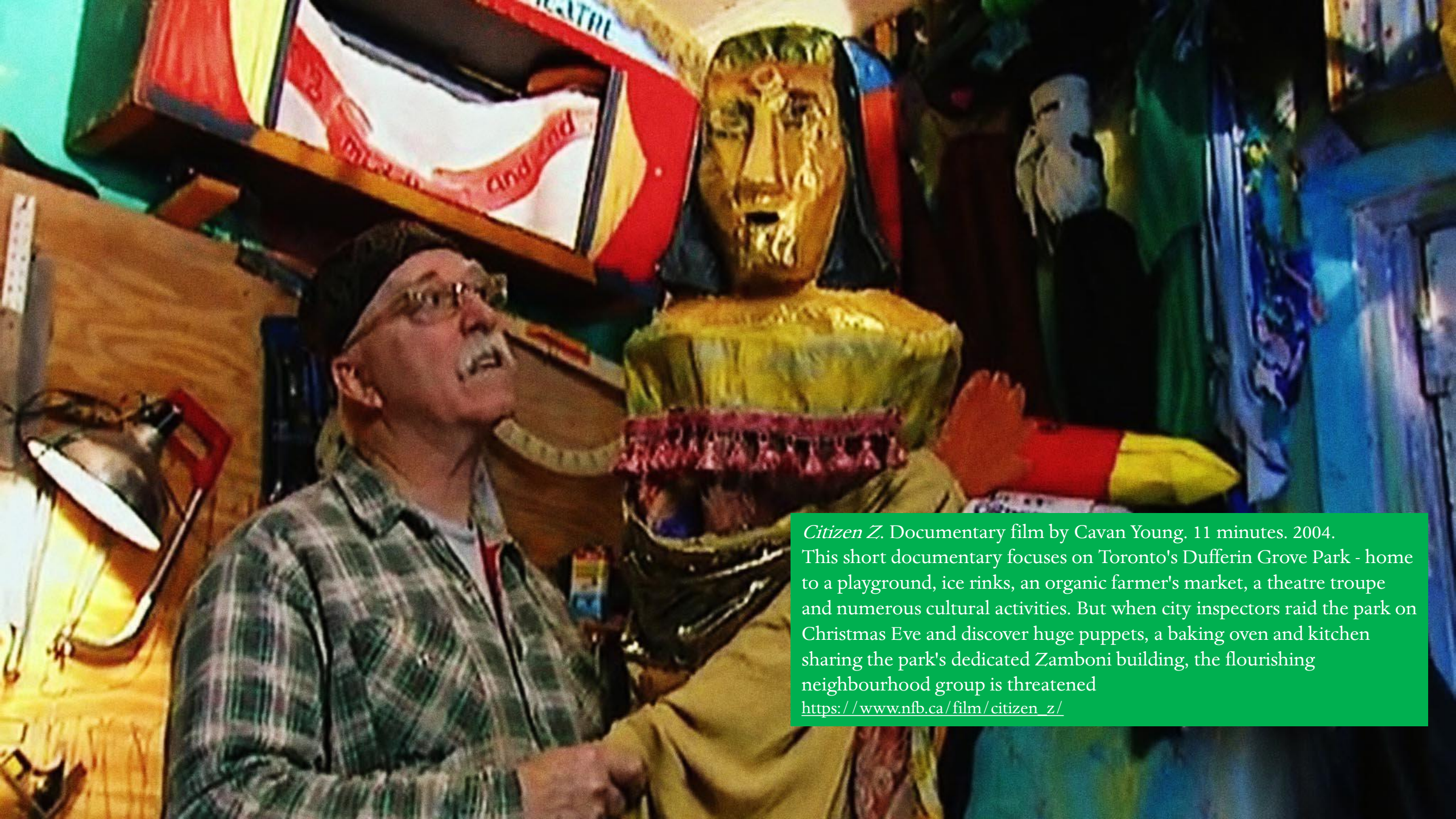




The East Asian People's Theatre and the birth of Grass Stage Theatre

Inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,² and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*,³ People's Theatre emerged in the Philippines and Singapore in the 1960s and spread to East Asia in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴ Several key grassroots theatrical figures in East Asia, including Mok Chiu-yu, Chang So-ik, and Sakurai Daizhou, were inspired by the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA), founded in 1967, and associated theatrical practices in Singapore. They sought to develop their own forms of People's Theatre rooted in local contexts.⁵ In Asian contexts, People's Theatre often combines elements of traditional local folk theatre and avant-garde theatre. In the following section, I will introduce and discuss Grass Stage Theatre's engagement with the East Asian People's Theatre.





Citizen Z. Documentary film by Cavan Young. 11 minutes. 2004.
This short documentary focuses on Toronto's Dufferin Grove Park - home to a playground, ice rinks, an organic farmer's market, a theatre troupe and numerous cultural activities. But when city inspectors raid the park on Christmas Eve and discover huge puppets, a baking oven and kitchen sharing the park's dedicated Zamboni building, the flourishing neighbourhood group is threatened
https://www.nfb.ca/film/citizen_z/



On August 3, 2025. Xu Tan had an interview with Rebecca Catching at Catching's apartment. Catching shared her life story growing up on a farm near Ottawa, her experience and observations of community gardens, society's response to climate change, and environmental protection.

During the interview, Rebecca shared:

In Toronto, there are:

- community gardens (for instance, High Park community garden);
- Business Improvement Association gardens (BIP), for instance: <https://www.toronto-bia.com>;
- People gardening in their backyards, on rooftops, and on balconies.

Challenges: lacking funding, land, unstable or non-professional volunteers, lack of care for plants, stealing, etc.

Xu Tan shared his interest in observing planting, community gardens, and Chinese diaspora communities in Canada:

- Planting and cultural transmission. It involves the relationship between religious beliefs, particularly folk beliefs and plants.
- Cultural interaction between different cultural groups, with a focus on current exchanges.
- Evolving attitudes in the Chinese diaspora in response to shifting political and social conditions in mainland China.
- The historical and current state of mental health in the Chinese diaspora. Present-day practices of planting and spiritual beliefs of the Chinese diaspora.
- Investigate the psychological experiences of women in the Chinese diaspora who have endured suppression, violence, and marginalization under Han-Chinese patriarchal culture.
- I am also interested in understanding whether local people are optimistic or feel a sense of crisis regarding the development of science and technology. Do technological advancements lead to environmental changes, and how do they perceive or respond to these changes?



Katheleen Hearn donated a specially made art book for the Diaspora Climate Bookshelf, based on her work “43.62783, -79.42013 (WEST ISLAND LANDSCAPE)”, which is a visual elegy for the destruction of Ontario Place and cutting over 800 trees there. She is a member of Ontario Place For All activists.

<https://www.kathleenhearn.com/#/west-island-landscape/>
<https://ontarioplacforall.com/>



Bloordale Beach (2020–2021)

How it started

Bloordale Beach opened on May 25, 2020, on an empty gravel lot where Brockton High School once stood, in the Bloor and Dufferin area. Construction on the site had stalled, and earlier in 2020, a local character had removed some fence panels, turning the area into an informal neighbourhood shortcut.

That day in May, I saw a man lying on the gravel in nothing but shorts. The empty space suddenly seemed beachy with this sunbather occupying the space, so I snapped a candid photo and sent it to the fence-remover, saying that the lot should be called Bloordale Beach. He suggested we paint some signs. So we did. That evening, we hung Bloordale Beach signs. Just like that, the beach was born, two months into the pandemic.

A Landlocked Beach

There was no permanent body of water, just gravel and weeds, with a bit of sand around the edge. Still, it became a beach in the minds of those who visited. I added Bloordale Beach to Google Maps, where it racked up over 60 glowing reviews.

Beside the beach was a wide school field. I called it Bloordale Meadow and mapped that too, to help reinforce it as public space—something sorely needed during a time of isolation.

What Happened at the Beach

Over time, the beach grew. I changed the Danger signs into Linger signs. I marked a Sea Turtle Nesting Area, then later made turtle eggs that hatched into 17 plastic babies. Someone built a Barkour Area out of empty bins for dog agility.

For BIG on Bloor Festival, I gave tours that blended fact and fiction. Others joined in on the fun: a rock spiral appeared, a “Bloordale Beach Bar” sign popped up beside a fence-mounted bottle opener, and by spring 2021, a community garden bloomed with herbs, fruits, and flowers.

Bloordale Beach (2020–2021) by Shari Kasman
<https://www.sharikasman.com/work/bloordalebeach-mkh7d>



In Montréal, every family can have a plot in a community garden in their neighbourhood or community.

The man in the photo was a marine scientist in China. He could not find a scientific job after coming to Canada. He loves gardening and planted flowers all along the fences of the community garden.

Community garden in Les immeubles Benny Farm, Montréal. October 2025.





Toronto's Guerrilla Gardeners

Public group · 520 members



+ Invite

Share

Joined



Discussion People Events Media Files



Write something...



Poll



Feeling/activity



Check in

Most relevant



Brenda Dyck

September 2 · 🌐



Saving lettuce seeds to ensure a continuous, renewable supply of seeds to Guerrilla Garden with...just saying!

About

We are a grassroots organization that reclaims public space. We use plants, flowers and seeds to beautify our city and encourage community participation. We are a diverse group ranging from high schoolers to professional business people and all are welcome. JOIN US!

www.guerillagardening.ca See less

Public

Anyone can see who's in the group and what they post.

Visible

Anyone can find this group.

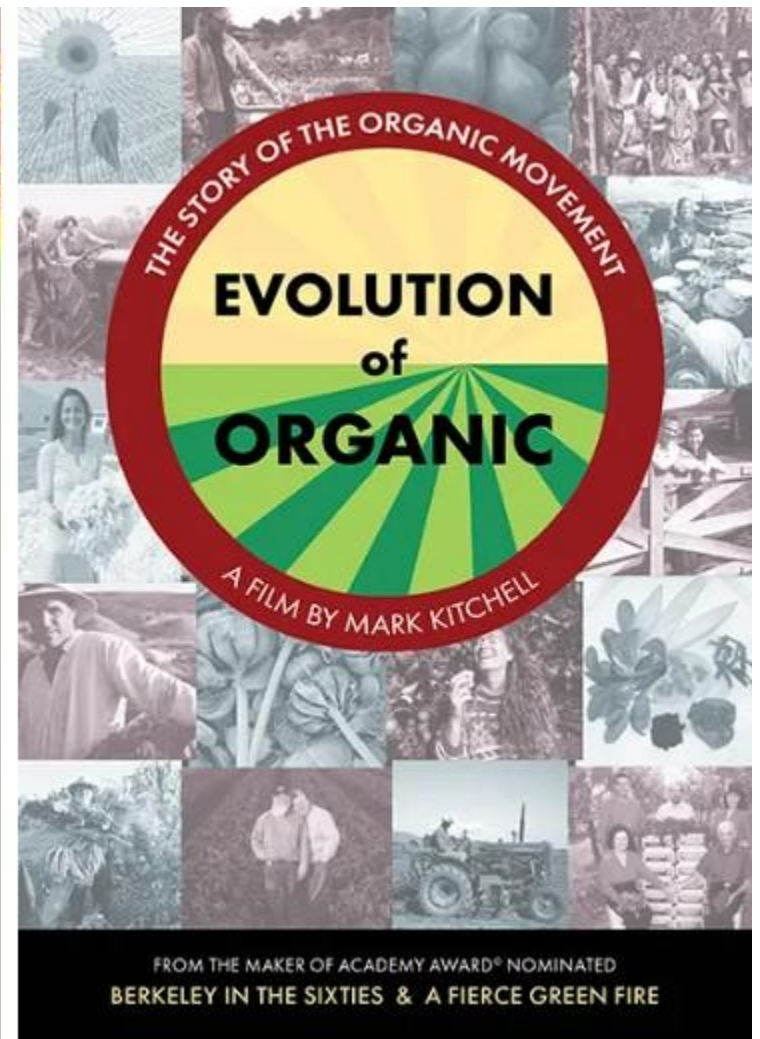
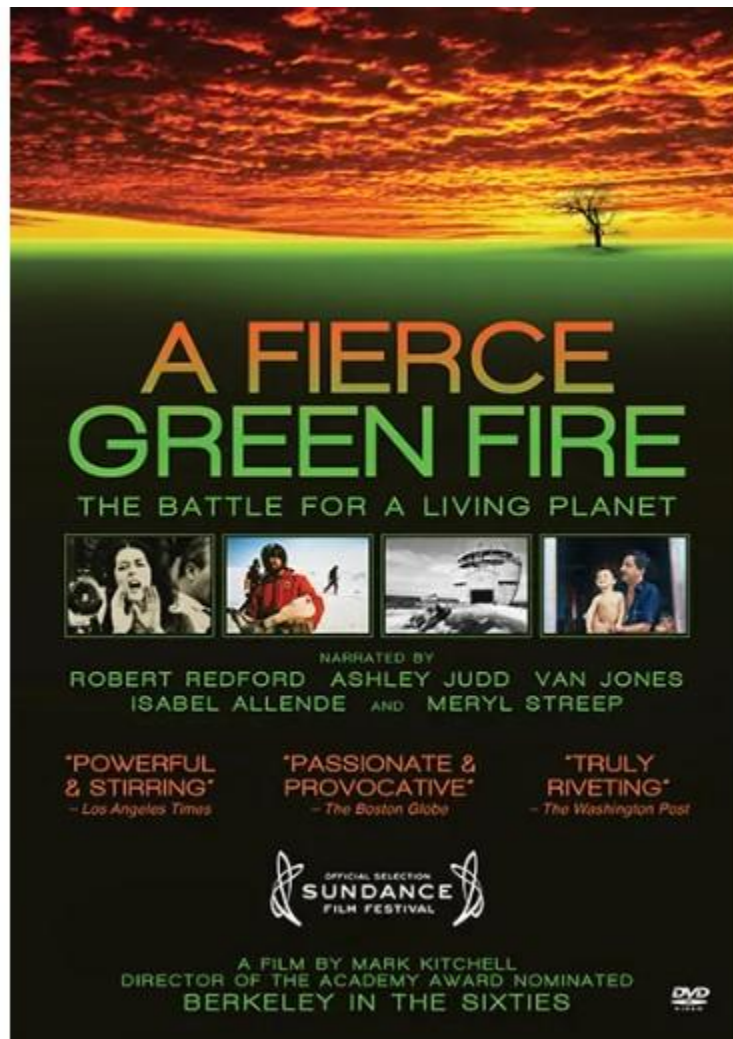
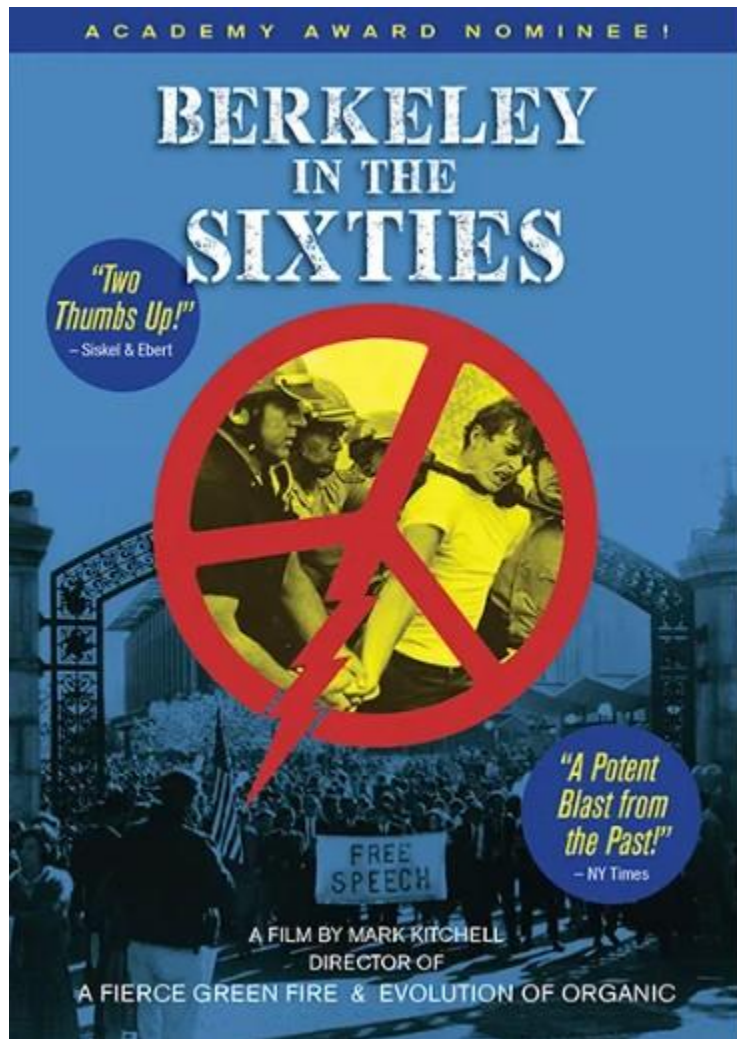
Guerrilla gardening is the act of planting (flowers, food, trees etc) in what is considered public or private space without necessarily asking permission first. Some guerrillas will do this under the cover of night, others transform spaces during the day, as we did. Sometimes it is political as **People's Park in Berkeley, California**, where gardening in the park was a point of contention and later of defiance when the park was barricaded by the American military.

Jessica Lemieux. Guerrilla Gardening. July 6, 2011.

<https://spacing.ca/toronto/2011/07/06/guerrilla-gardening/>



Rebecca. Guerilla Gardening – The Search for Nature in Urban Cities. May 8, 2025.
<https://www.gardenstead.com/guerilla-gardening-the-search-for-nature-in-urban-cities>



The Films of Mark Kitchell

<https://markkitchell.com>; <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgVOzAPWeqlqL34csSLIW6Q>

An Interview with Filmmaker Mark Kitchell. Bioneers. May 4, 2021. <https://bioneers.org/interview-filmmaker-mark-kitchell/>

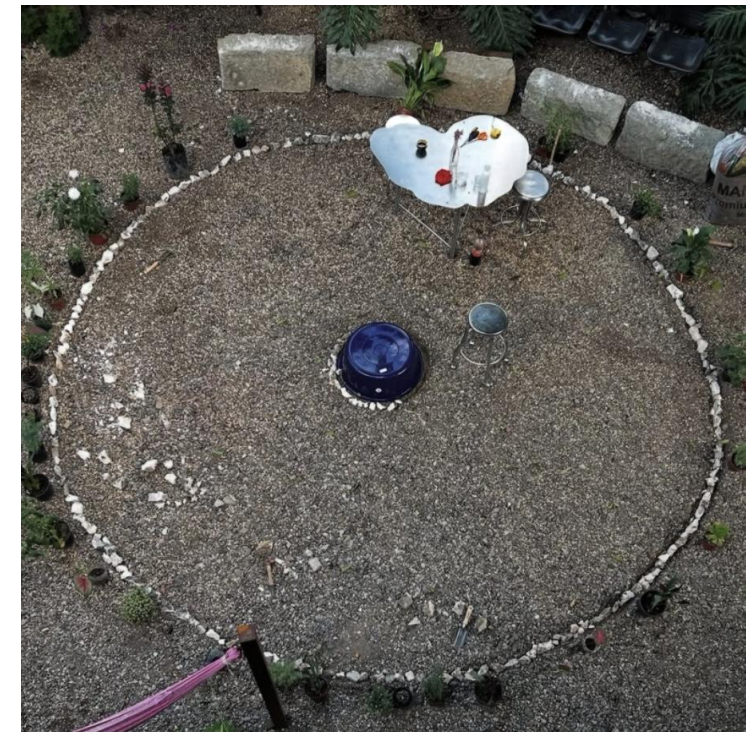
W. J. Rorabaugh. Berkeley in the Sixties. <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/berkeley-in-the-sixties/>



Built a garden with the local community in Oaxaca. Mexico.

Yam Lau. The Pendulum Garden. La Clinica. Oaxaca. Mexico. 2025.

Yatai Oaxaca is a portable display unit made for @laclinica.art. Traditional Yatai was used by a solo vendor to sell ramen on the street in the pre-modern Edo period Japan.



24



Liked by yan9670 and others

china_town_man Today is the beginning of "Pendulum Garden" at @laclinica.art I marked out the parameter of the space, have the plants arranged at the circumference as witnesses. I then used a pendulum to perform a ritual, asking the space how it would like to present itself. I am thinking of Artemis' (goddess of Nature) "no mortal has ever lifted my veil" and Herclitus' "Nature loves to hide". I received a diagram from the movement of the pendulum. Tomorrow I will inscribe it into the garden.

2 days ago

