

# Harvest4Knowledge

(Homeland of the Lekwungen people)

## Program Model

**H**arvest4Knowledge is an Indigenous plant and traditional knowledge project taking place on the homeland of the Lekwungen people, now known as the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations. The project has set out to bring Indigenous plants and traditional knowledge into the minds and hearts of children and youth. In 2016, School District 61 (SD61) Indigenous Art and Cultural Facilitator, Sarah Rhude, worked with students to create an Indigenous plant garden and camas meadow at Victoria High School. Initial funding was provided by Farm to School BC (F2SBC) and F2SBC's Capital Region Community Animator, Aaren Topley, worked with Sarah to apply for and secure additional funding through the Horner Foundation to expand the project.

## Summary

Harvest4Knowledge by the numbers:

- 6 schools
- 10 community organizations
- 20+ teachers
- 500+ students

## Key Partners and Roles:

**Lekwungen Harvest4Knowledge Coordinator:** Guidance and direction with protocols and cultural safety practices.

**School District 61 (SD61) - Indigenous Education Department (IED):** The driving force behind the logistical planning and implementation of the gardens; supported cultural knowledge and knowledge translation between Indigenous ways of knowing and being and colonial systems/institutions, supported the education development including the signage program.

**Farm to School BC and Public Health Association of BC:** Farm to School BC Community Animator supported background administration and coordination of the project. Navigated colonial systems and institutions for the project's success. Hired and supported Songhees and Esquimalt community members to participate in the project. Provided honorarium to Songhees and Esquimalt community for cultural knowledge and protocol procedures.

**Songhees and Esquimalt Nation:** Provided leadership and guidance with protocols, including language components, and offered blessings for school gardens. Members of the Nation were hired or provided honorarium for time and knowledge.

**Saanich Native Plants Nursery:** Supported the selection of Indigenous plants, offered training for the teachers, supported teachers and students in planting and maintaining the gardens.

**Parks Canada:** Offered their expertise on Indigenous plants, restoration, and ecosystem management.

**LifeCycles Project Society:** Local non-profit which assisted in the implementation of the school gardens.

**Habitat Acquisition Trust (NGO):** Supported the selection of Indigenous plants, offered training for the teachers and students in planting and maintaining the gardens.

**Funders:** Horner Foundation, BC Ministry of Health, Provincial Health Services Authority, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General Civil Forfeiture Grant, SD61 IED.





## Program Activities

The Harvest4Knowledge project was developed through an iterative process and did not flow in a linear fashion. Relationships were the foundation of the project. The F2SBC Community Animator for the Capital Region (ie. Capital Region Animator) began to develop a relationship with the SD61 Indigenous Arts and Culture Facilitator before the full conceptualization of the project. Funding was secured through funders who were participating in a decolonization journey with the Capital Region Animator and other food system actors in the region.



## Granting Process

The granting process was by invite only and schools were guaranteed to receive funding if they completed and submitted a Letter of Intent and a proposal with a garden design by set deadlines. The top six schools were selected based on the following criteria: highest Indigenous student populations, feeder schools to Songhees and Esquimalt Nation's children and youth, and presence of Indigenous Education teachers.

Hereditary Chief Edward Thomas was brought on as the Lekwungen Harvest4Knowledge Coordinator to help ensure Lekwungen teachings, protocol and knowledge was respected during all aspects of the project. Chief Thomas also worked closely with Elder Elmer George during the planning stages. Together, with the selected schools' respective Indigenous Education teachers, SD61 Art and Culture Facilitator, and the Capital Region Animator, a formal Harvest4Knowledge working group was established to begin to learn from each other and develop the project.

Over two years, this group worked on plant selection, garden design and implementation, and plant signage. Each aspect of the project had its own complex and beautiful stories and process; however, one theme was consistent throughout: working as a group was foundational to the project's success. In the second year of the project, Hereditary Chief Edward Thomas passed the torch to Diane Sam who succeeded as the Lekwungen Harvest4Knowledge Coordinator. Both Hereditary Chief Edward Thomas and Diane Sam played a vital role in interweaving Songhees and Esquimalt language and protocol into every aspect of the project. Finally, a video was created to tell the story of the project.

The program was fortunate to have a strong group of teachers, and community support, who were willing and able to meet in person during the development stages of the project. This team approach was critical in supporting the overall cohesion between the visions



for each individual garden and the project as a whole. Additionally, a new group emailing list was frequently used to share events and resources and allow for direct question-and-answer conversations. Before proceeding with major next steps in the program, the working group made a point of communicating their intentions with a representative from the Nations.

## Signage and Website Development

The goal of the signage program was to share the beautiful Lekwungen language with students and to elevate cultural educational opportunities and engage students on a more personal level. The developed educational signage was standardized across the school district, ensuring that teachers who move to another school with a new garden would still feel comfortable engaging students in that new garden. The signs were designed to be interactive; each plant sign includes QR

codes that students can scan to hear the name of the plant in the Lekwungen language.

A large format sign was created by a local artist who collaborated with the team and students to create images recognizing the significance of camas meadows: including plants and animals that live in the meadows and the meadows' relationships to the land and people. Other resources included information related to the seasons and cycles of the plants, a territory acknowledgement, and further information about the project. A dedicated page on SD61's website is currently being created by the District's Indigenous Education Department to house all the information relevant to the project. Once launched, resources will regularly be added to the page, including links to each Nations' websites, partner information, and videos and stories from the schools.



## Reflection

Many hours over the two year development phase were invested in learning, discussing the goals of the program, for whom it would be beneficial for, and why. A key challenge of a district-wide program is the need for long-term support and coordination, a challenge if funding is limited. As well, the current structure of the public education system, led to challenges with process and practice.

The initiation of a program of this scale across other jurisdictions or school districts would benefit greatly from the support of paid staff who can assist in the planning and communication to all the partners and teachers involved. Connection to the classroom is pivotal for long-term success.

## Learnings and Observations:

### FUNDING:

Sufficient financial support was crucial to the success of this program. It is important to budget honoraria for project consultation and First Nations engagement. The total budget for the first two years was \$65,000.

### RELATIONSHIPS:

Building relationships with the local Nations was essential to the program development. Improving existing relationships with the Nations greatly benefitted the evolution of the program.

### SCHOOL DISTRICT CHAMPIONS:

Having support at different levels of the school district was vital, as many people were involved in transforming a garden from a sketch, to a living, growing learning environment. Champions included teachers, senior management, the Indigenous Education Department, facilities management, and more.

### CULTURE SHIFTS:

Decolonizing the mindset around foods and land is a process worth investing time and funds into. Consider reaching out to a local cultural sensitivity training organization to see if they can offer a group training.

“Focus on the process, rather than the outcome.  
The relationships are more important than deadlines for the program.

- Aaren Topley, F2SBC Capital Region Animator



## Shoreline Community Middle School

“Land is an entry point for learning about Indigenous culture.”  
- Emma Milliken, Teacher, Spectrum Community School



### Garden Description

These gardens are ultimately about decolonizing and their very essence is about the reclaiming of space. These gardens give us the opportunity to connect to the land, and reflect upon the relationship of the plants and people since time immemorial. The Harvest4Knowledge gardens are about building relationships with plants, the land, and the community - and yourself!

This garden included:

- Camas meadows
- Medicinal and fruit bearing plants
- Split rail cedar fence surrounding the garden
- Lekwungen language signage at the garden entrance and within the garden itself



### Engaging with Indigenous Plants and Pedagogy

Before the gardens were planted each was blessed by a local Elder. This blessing was the beginning of our positive engagement with the garden. All actions in the garden (e.g. planting new Indigenous plants, weeding out unwanted plants, or building pathways) involve students from the school. Some teachers use the garden space as an outdoor classroom and have tied the plants and garden to the curriculum: including Science, English, Biology, Social Studies and Art. Although the most vital way of engaging with the

garden, according to Sonya McRae (Teacher, Shoreline), is to simply spend time in it, getting your hands dirty, and observing the seasonal changes. Telling stories in the garden has also become popular activity among students and teachers, especially when discussing First Nations culture and history.

As the seasons change, students continue to support the maintenance of the garden. In the first year of the gardens, a great deal of manual labour was needed to build the beds and plant the seeds and seedlings. Each spring requires work to weed the gardens and keep the pathways visible, while each fall the garden is put to bed for the winter season. During the winter months students continue to engage with the garden by working with plants they may have harvested during the summer months. This might include drying the plants for teas or making salves. As the winter rolls into spring, students visit the garden looking for which plants will offer the earliest signs of green - indicating the plants survived the winter and are beginning to grow again.

Some of the key plants that Shoreline planted in the beginning were: camas, barestem desert parsley, seablush, june grass, nodding onion, miners lettuce, woolly sunflower, thimble berry and salmon berry. Other schools in the district planted medicine gardens of sage, sweetgrass, and tobacco, which holds a ceremonial role for some First Nations.

“The gardens elevate Indigenous voices and histories, these spaces are facts on the ground.”

- Emma Milliken,  
Teacher, Spectrum Community School





## Impact on School Community

- Significantly increased student awareness of native plants, Indigenous cultures and history, and ecosystem biodiversity.
- Students have immensely enjoyed spending time alone or socializing with fellow classmates in a space that is intentional and quiet.
- Teachers in the program expressed pleasant surprise related to the behavioral changes they were seeing in their students, especially those who found normal classroom settings challenging. Many of the students who appeared disinterested in classroom activities, would show a strong willingness to engage in the gardens and sometimes proved to be the most reliable students supporting the garden.
- The sturdy split rail cedar fence surrounding the garden and educational signage have made the garden a welcoming spot for local community members, some have been seen pausing during their weekend dog walks to admire the garden.

**“Learning in the garden is more direct than a textbook, it’s tangible and immediate.**

- Sonya McRae, Teacher, Shoreline Middle School

## Learnings and Observations

The willingness to engage in the garden and curiosity of its contents has been growing within the student body, as observed by multiple teachers in the school.

However, teacher engagement has not always been easy when integrating the garden into the wider school culture. Education and confidence building among staff is crucial, as many teachers feel intimidated and are worried they might damage the garden if they do not carry enough knowledge about the plants. Hiring someone to manage the garden is highly beneficial, as it is challenging for teachers to take on this responsibility without releasing other duties required of them.



**“Start small, incorporate the garden into school culture, and be clear about your needs to the community.**

- Sonya McRae, Teacher, Shoreline Middle School