

August in the Beach United Church Garden

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By: *Matt Canaran*

This summer, the garden has been tended to by many members of the Beach community. We are especially fortunate to have Sally Evans working on the garden again this year! Sally always gives the gardens the extra bit of love, care, and attention they deserve. Sally, along with all the other members of the gardening team meet most Saturday mornings in the growing season. You are also welcome to attend! If you wish to participate, please email Matt at mattcanaran@gmail.com or Hastings at mchastingswithers@icloud.com, and we'll put you on our email list.

In addition to our old garden favourites we've welcomed a few new plants to Beach this year, including ceremonial tobacco, red okra, and red shiso. Read more about these wonderful plants, and their cultural significance below:



Virginia Smoking Tobacco:

This plant, and related species of tobacco are sacred to many Indigenous cultures across Turtle Island, and are often used for ceremony. We are growing these plants to harvest, cure, and be given as gifts to Indigenous members and partners in the community. Once the leaves yellow, they can be picked and hung to dry in the shed. This process will cure the leaves, turning them a tan colour. Once the leaves become brittle, they are ready to be broken up and shared. As is done by many Indigenous cultures, we may choose to give the Earth a gift of tobacco anytime we add new plants in the garden. The soil is the Earth's skin, and when we break the surface with a shovel, we should offer it our thanks. Below is a photo of the tobacco flowers and foliage at BUC.



Red Okra

Okra is a staple food in many parts of Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. In Toronto, you'll often see the green varieties in grocery stores and on restaurant menus. At BUC, the red variety was chosen to accentuate the colours of the church's doors. The flowers of this plant are especially spectacular. They resemble the flowers of the violet Rose of Sharon that can also be found blooming in the garden. Both are cousins of the more familiar tropical hibiscus plant. These showy okra flowers give way to the edible seed pods, which the plant is most known for. Be sure to pick the seedpods while they're still young and tender – maybe 2-3" long – any longer and they become too fibrous to enjoy. Special thanks to Bretta Barnes for watering these raised beds all summer long!



Red Shiso

This plant is one of my personal favourites. When my husband, Jack and I were exploring the culinary delights of Japan in 2019, we were struck by a distinct flavouring in some of the foods we ate. We eventually asked somebody where that flavour came from, and they pointed us to a plant they called Shiso. When we got back to Toronto, we were pleased to find that many varieties of this plant were available at Asian grocery stores, neighbourhood plant stores, and even sold by local street vendors in Chinatown and Chinatown East. This red variety is often used in pickling and cooking, while the green varieties are often served fresh with sushi, or used like lettuce wraps packed with rice and grilled meat. This wonderfully delicious summer crop will also self-seed and re-generate in the BUC garden on its own. Look out for it again next summer!

Do you use any of the plants on this list? I'd love to hear how you use or prepare them! Send me an email: mattcanaran@gmail.com.

