Musings of a 'green dream visionary'

Because I'm a gardener in the big city of Toronto, I spend winters indoors pounding away at the computer, scheming, dreaming and waiting for spring—and going stir-crazy. I do, however, have a remedy for my cabin fever: it's called High Park. Every second weekend I trudge out to my Sunday solace—the heart and brains of the park—the greenhouses—where I meet my co-conspirators of the Volunteer Stewardship Program.

Aha, a conspiracy you say. And I say yes, we are conspiring and aspiring to transform High Park to its former glory. We are saving the black oak savannah! We are bringing back the lupines and the Karner blue butterfly, replacing concrete with greenery, caring for small forest or prairie plots while monitoring their health—and counting the birds and critters and noting that some of their numbers are increasing and feeling delicious with joy.

There are many other exciting projects to participate in. There's High Park Watch, planting, seed-gathering, weed-eradication, walks, lectures, festivals, plant sales and much more.

I like coming into the park on Sundays and walk in from different approaches. Sometimes I take the subway to High Park Station, walk down West Road to the Grenadier Restaurant and hang a left on Centre Road, then a right to the greenhouses. Or take the Carlton streetcar and walk down a quiet trail to Centre Road, over Spring Creek going north, then hang a left at the greenhouses. Sometimes a friend drives me right up to the door.

Every visit is different. On foggy days the oak are obscured in mystery and the sounds of the city are barely heard. On sunny days the winter sun glows pale through the trees and I enjoy the textured silver and black of the trunks, the red of dogwood, the gold of dried grasses. Last Sunday I saw and heard crows overhead. They were scolding a hawk that was dodging them hither and yon. It provided a lesson on the effectiveness of group strategy.

On sunny days I like observing the passing parade. There are cyclists, runners, lovers, old folks with a cane, or parents with their tots in prams and the older children running about, climbing on everything, hugging trees, jumping, swinging, shouting: "Look at me, Mom, look at me!" Then there are dog people with their friends on a leash. I can tell the dogs are happy to be in the park. They walk with a sweet, self-important gravity, their tails wagging and they're smiling in that sappy, lovable way that dogs have.

Before I know it, it's 10:30 am. Passing the service yards, I enter the door of the greenhouses. Walking down a long corridor with glass walls on the right and light streaming through, is a long row of potting benches. Between them are glass doors to various greenhouses where tropical flowers like scarlet hibiscus and pink tradescantia cheer away my winter blues.

Oh, I'm happy and excited to be here meeting my fellow green dream visionaries and feel privileged to have access to this magical place. There's no pressure about attendance. You come when you can; the kind friends and gentle people of the VSP are always happy to see you.

The past few Sundays we've been discussing the ethics of restoration in the Victorian looking lunchroom where the...
Dancing and swirling fog,
Mysteriously gray,
All day yesterday,
Whispering ominously.

Promising winter,
By tomorrow.

Bitter and raw wind,
Sharp and cutting.
All day today,
Piercing and penetrating.
Promising winter,
By evening.

And now, snow,
Softly and silently.
All night tonight,
Patient and gentle
Promising peace,
By morning.

Tom Maccagno

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Dagmar Baur is a Community Garden Co-ordinator in Toronto. Programs run throughout the year. Further information about various volunteer programs or winter walking tours: 416-392-1748 or 416-392-6916 (Cahorne Lodge) or High Park Citizens Advisory Committee.

www.toronto.ca/west/techservices/involved/outreach/vsp/index.htm