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A Master Plan for High Park's Hillside Garden and other Ornamental Gardens: Recommendations from the High Park Natural Environment Committee

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Background

High Park is a landmark park in the City of Toronto and a popular destination for residents and tourists.

High Park has significant heritage features, including natural, historical and cultural heritage.

Almost half of the park (45%) is designated as a provincially protected Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI). It features a continentally rare Black Oak Savannah and Woodlands as well as Grenadier Pond (a locally significant lakeside marsh) and other habitats.

The horticultural areas are adjacent to and surrounded by the ANSI.

The protection and, where possible, improvement of natural areas is a provincial priority and is also supported by Toronto's Official Plan and Parks Plan (see Appendix: Policy Framework.)

The horticultural areas of High Park include a number of formal ornamental gardens. The most significant of these is the Hillside Garden overlooking Grenadier Pond, which features the Rock Garden, Maple Leaf flower bed, and adjacent Sunken Garden and Hanging Garden. There are also gardens near the Training Centre, south of the park offices, and at park entrances and several other locations.

The ornamental gardens were established mainly in the 1950s and 1960s. Since that time, public botanical gardens have evolved to be increasingly focused on conservation, education and biodiversity. While High Park does not operate a full botanical garden (e.g., with related scientific and educational facilities), many of the same principles can be applied here.

There is no formal plan in place to guide the planting scheme of these ornamental gardens. Park management has expressed an interest in setting up a process to develop a master plan for the Hillside Gardens.

Rationale for Input from the Natural Environment Committee

Our committee is a volunteer group that advises the City of Toronto on the protection and restoration of the natural environment of High Park, and promotes awareness and respectful enjoyment of the park's natural heritage.

We believe there are opportunities to strengthen the connection between the gardens and the natural areas and to increase public awareness and enjoyment of High Park as a nature destination.

High Park could serve as a model for other horticultural sites in Toronto that are adjacent to areas designated as Environmentally Significant Areas.

Our recommendations are in no way meant to detract from the ability to retain key ornamental features of the existing gardens or to lay out the beds using principles of garden design such as form and colour, rhythm and repetition.

Key Recommendations

1. Develop the horticultural master plan under the supervision and guidance of qualified professionals who can address the natural, historical and cultural heritage character of the site.
2. Provide for consultation with park staff, park volunteer groups, and local naturalist and horticultural organizations, as well as the public at large; within an overall framework established and ultimately determined by the City and qualified professionals.
3. A key objective of the horticultural master plan should be to showcase and enhance the biodiversity of the park's native flora and fauna.
4. The master plan should recognize and be inspired by the natural heritage features of High Park. Reinforce connections between the gardens and the rest of the park; for example:
 - a. Incorporate features that provide benefits to wildlife and encourage public appreciation of wildlife (e.g. birds, butterflies, other pollinators).
 - b. Incorporate native plants of High Park, particularly plants of the Black Oak Savannah and Woodlands.
 - c. Incorporate small-scale references to the natural heritage character of the site (e.g. sand bluff on hillside slope; water features that mimic natural wetlands or wet meadows).
5. Use the design and operation of the gardens as an opportunity to model and promote sustainability, conservation and biodiversity and to encourage the public to connect with nature; for example:
 - a. Provide signage and/or self-guided tour material (printed and/or online) to reinforce the above-mentioned goals, with references to plants, related wildlife and broader environmental connections.
 - b. Use xeriscaping for dry areas and minimize the need for supplementary watering.
 - c. Use existing sandy soils and other existing materials such as stumps and leaf litter; keep the introduction of other foreign materials to a minimum.
 - d. Use native plants; in particular, use perennials (wildflowers and grasses) and woody plants.
 - e. Leave seed heads and garden beds undisturbed over the winter for wildlife.

Additional Comments

The potential to attract wildlife (e.g. birds and insects) to High Park's gardens is much better here than at other City park gardens which lack surrounding natural habitat to draw from. Also, with High Park's proximity to Lake Ontario, it offers both north-south and east-west corridors for migrant birds and insects (e.g. butterflies). The topography of the Hillside Gardens area is also an attraction (e.g. hilltops for butterflies to find mates, sheltered slopes for migrant birds).

The use of native plants that have historically grown in High Park is to some extent dependent on the availability of plants from High Park's own seed source. If necessary, production at High Park's greenhouse could be increased to supply plants for ornamental use in High Park; this need should reduce over time once perennials become established (although there may be ongoing demand for locally sourced native plants at other City projects).

Native plants from High Park seed source that become established in the ornamental gardens could themselves become a convenient source for seed collection in the future. For example, some of the showier savannah species that have declined in the park could be grown in mass plantings as ornamentals and then provide seeds for reintroductions into the natural areas.

Where High Park-sourced plants are not available, choose plants that do not negatively affect the High Park gene pool (non-native species may be preferable to native species from inappropriate sources). Such plants should be identified as an interim measure, to be replaced with native species when available.

Non-native plants and/or annuals may still be used where they serve a specific purpose (e.g. to achieve other nature-related objectives such as attracting pollinators or birds, or for a continuous strong show of colour in a particularly high-profile location such as the Maple Leaf). Where possible, simple/original varieties of such plants that attract pollinators, etc. should be given priority over hybrids that do not offer such features. However, native plants should be given preference if they can satisfy the same purpose.

Thank you for considering our input on this important subject. We would be happy to meet with you to discuss this further and to provide additional input and reference sources on request.

High Park Natural Environment Committee

References

The Evolving Role of Botanical Gardens: Hedges against extinction, showcases for botany? *BioScience* (2011) 61 (10): 743-749, Fred Powledge
<http://bioscience.oxfordjournals.org/content/61/10/743.full.pdf+html>

Botanical gardens and conservation, Espace pour la vie, Montreal
<http://espacepurlavie.ca/en/botanical-gardens-and-conservation>

The Dry Garden, Beth Chatto <http://www.bethchatto.co.uk/>

Attachment: Policy Framework

APPENDIX: Policy Framework

Provincial Policy Statement 2014 under the Planning Act, Section 2.1.2

The diversity and connectivity of natural features in an area, and the long-term ecological function and biodiversity of natural heritage systems, should be maintained, restored or, where possible, improved, recognizing linkages between and among natural heritage features and areas, surface water features and ground water features.

Natural Heritage Reference Manual, 3.4.6.1, Existing Built-up Areas

In existing built-up areas, ecosystems have tended to become degraded and divided, leaving component parts—that is, natural heritage features and areas—increasingly isolated due to their enclosure by surrounding urban land uses. Once an area is built up, opportunities to design a connected natural heritage system are considerably reduced. In such situations, while a natural feature or area may be retained, the functions that the feature or area performs may become impaired. Efforts in such cases should concentrate on protecting the remaining significant features and their functions and connecting features or improving them wherever possible, through redevelopment and infilling opportunities, rehabilitation of existing open areas or other land stewardship opportunities, as may be appropriate. (page 34.)

Toronto Official Plan, Policy 3.4.1

To support strong communities, a competitive economy and a high quality of life, public and private city-building activities and changes to the built environment, including public works, will be environmentally friendly, based on...

b) protecting, restoring and enhancing the health and integrity of the natural ecosystem, supporting biodiversity in the City and targeting ecological improvements, paying particular attention to:

i) habitat for native flora and fauna and aquatic species;

...and

iv) natural linkages between the natural heritage system and other green spaces

Toronto Parks Plan 2013-2017, Section 4.3

Increase staff knowledge and skills to better manage environmentally sensitive lands. With the addition of newly identified Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs), natural area management principles and practices need to be integrated into day-to-day park management and maintenance. Strategies to achieve this include staff training, and the review of park standards to ensure alignment with natural area management principles and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) sustainability guidelines.