



EVERGREEN  
COMMON GROUNDS

Bringing Nature to Our Cities

Common Grounds  
Fact Sheet #7

# Designing Community Spaces

Designing a community garden or park involves a number of elements that will give the space character and identity and make a statement that it is cared for. By designing your site to reflect the natural and cultural diversity of the area, you will be creating a “sense of place”—the feeling of belonging that exists between people and the environments in which they live—for your community.

Well-designed community gardens can be designed to perform many functions, including:

- an area for small group socializing;
- an area for large scale activities like community festivals and concerts;
- a focal point for the community;
- a place that can educate people about the area's natural and cultural history; and
- a common space for food growing, gardening, harvesting and cooking.

Local distinctiveness can be achieved through the use of shelter, seating, pathways, signs and community art. Built features can also be art in themselves, adding to the character of your site. Have local artists and craftspeople help with the design of these elements using natural materials from the area.



This fact sheet is part of a series that provides community groups with practical hands-on information for naturalizing parks and other public spaces. The fact sheets are a companion to Evergreen's guidebook, *No Plot is Too Small: A Community's Guide to Restoring Public Landscapes*, which provides the tools to plan, implement and sustain a successful greening project.

The fact sheets in this series include:

1. *Tips and Techniques for the Naturalized Garden*
2. *Prairie and Meadow Communities*
3. *Woodland Communities*
4. *Pond and Wetland Habitats*
5. *Windbreaks, Corridors, Hedgerows and Living Fences*
6. *Community Gardening - Themes and Ideas*
7. *Designing Community Spaces*

# Tips for Designing Community Spaces

- ✦ Study your site to determine where people currently gather and what activities take place in those areas.
- ✦ Invite the whole community to participate in the design of your site. Ask them what special places they value in other areas of the community. Why do those spaces have meaning for them? What elements provide meaning? Include these values in the design of your site.
- ✦ Incorporate different types and sizes of spaces to accommodate a range of group sizes and activities.
- ✦ Incorporate cultural and symbolic design ideas.
- ✦ Celebrate local biodiversity. Use materials (plant and built) that are local to your area to provide a distinct place that celebrates your community's natural identity.
- ✦ Provide protection from wind, sun and rain.
- ✦ Provide a diverse choice of seating and table options, allowing for variety, versatility and creative use of spaces.
- ✦ Incorporate different levels. For instance, provide areas to sit on the ground, on chairs, on informal seats like logs, along elevation changes on berms and on stairs. Be sure to make room for changing positions.
- ✦ Think about the use of hills for gathering and for children to play.

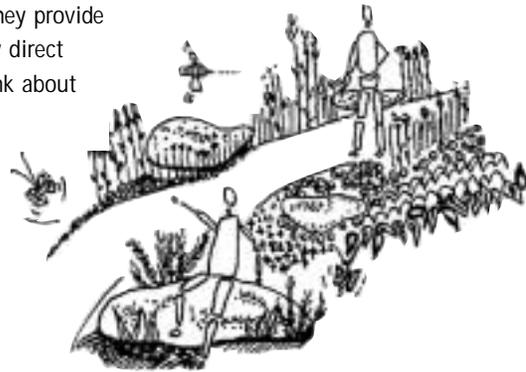
## Building Your Community Space



### 1 Pathways

Pathways help to separate areas that serve different functions. They provide a boundary to areas that should not be walked through, and they direct pedestrian traffic to features on the site. Some key things to think about when designing paths include:

- ✦ Provide a range of path types to accommodate a variety of experiences in your site. For instance, you could use boardwalks along ponds or wetland areas, stone dust paths through vegetable plots, stepping stone paths through wildflower gardens and woodchip trails through wooded areas.
- ✦ Consider using bridges over ditches, small waterways, dry gullies and to span hills to add interest. Work with your municipality or a local expert to help design bridges and to make sure waterways are not adversely affected.
- ✦ Observe where people naturally walk and use these areas for your pathways.
- ✦ Plan for pathways to either lead to, intersect, or run adjacent to activity areas.
- ✦ Create designated paths for bicycles and other forms of recreation.
- ✦ Remember that shrubs and trees adjacent to the path may eventually overgrow it. Plant trees and shrubs well back from the path based on their growth requirements or make your path a little wider to accommodate the growth.
- ✦ Make formal paths, where appropriate, two metres (six feet) wide so two people can pass each other, and so they are wheelchair accessible.



#### **GUIDELINES FOR WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE PATHS**

- ✦ **Minimum width of 110 centimetres (44 inches) for single use to 220 centimetres (88 inches) for two wheelchairs to pass.**
- ✦ **No changes in level that exceed 60 millimetres (1/4 inch).**
- ✦ **Maximum slope of five per cent (1:20), although one to two per cent is ideal.**
- ✦ **Surfacing must be of non-slip materials (e.g. asphalt, stone dust).**
- ✦ **A 185 centimetre (74 inch) wide "passing space" must be provided every 30 metres (100 feet).**
- ✦ **Headroom of at least 200 centimetres (80 inches) must be provided along the entire length and width of the path.**



# 2

## Seating



Key things to consider when designing seating include:

- ✦ Consider whether you require shelter for various seating areas to provide protection from wind, sun and rain.
- ✦ Make sure the seating you provide is accessible to everyone. This may involve providing a pathway to seating areas.
- ✦ Think about the material used for seating. Consider reused or unwanted materials. These materials provide creative, as well as cost-effective seating options. (However, keep in mind the safety and durability of the materials you choose—make sure they meet the approval of your municipality's safety standards and will not be prone to vandalism.)
- ✦ Allow for seating in a variety of sizes, shapes and arrangements to suit all users, from small children to the elderly.
- ✦ Consider opportunities for incorporating seating with existing or new built features such as container gardens, steps, fences or walls. Using these areas can add versatility to your site.
- ✦ A variety of seating in different locations is just as important as the types of seating provided. Consider opportunities to overlook gardens and play areas and seating that provides protection and recluse from active areas.
- ✦ Use heavy lumber and timbers to reduce repair and maintenance of seats. Two- to three-inch thick boards that are a minimum width of six-inches work well.

# 3

## Shade Shelters

With the growing concern about the harmful effects of the sun's rays, the need to provide shade is at the forefront for designing safe, outdoor environments. Shade is most commonly provided by large shade trees. However, as trees typically take 20 to 30 years to mature, they are not a short-term solution. Built structures, both permanent and temporary will help you achieve your shade requirements.

- ✦ Consider the purpose for your shelter. Is it to provide protection from just the sun or from the wind and rain as well? Each may require a different solution—a solid roof and full or partial walls for rain protection, a slatted roof or pergola with plants for sun or one structure that satisfies all the requirements.
- ✦ Consider the location. Study your site to determine where the sun is for most of the day and where shelter is most needed. Consider areas where children are playing and parents are sitting and watching.
- ✦ Provide a variety of shade features in a number of areas in your community park. This is especially important around asphalt and sand surfaces, which reflect much more UV radiation than grass.
- ✦ Consider permanent structures such as pergolas, gazebos and pavilions, and temporary structures such as awnings, tents and umbrellas.
- ✦ Consider adding elements to existing structures to provide shade and shelter. For instance, an awning or pergola can be attached to the wall of a pavilion, shed or community centre.
- ✦ Take into account water run-off from roofed structures to avoid problems later. This could be a great location to include a water barrel to collect rain for irrigation.
- ✦ Incorporate murals or community art on the walls of your shade shelter.

## did YOU know...

*Skin cancer has emerged in epidemic proportions in North America. Health professionals have long recommended that Canadians seek shade as a means of reducing excessive exposure to the harmful rays of the sun, yet there is not enough shade in public spaces. Your community group can help by encouraging your municipality to provide shade trees in all appropriate public spaces. Let them know that your group will help plant shade trees and install structures as long as they provide the support and equipment to do it. Build a sun-safe partnership today!*



St. Martin de Porres Catholic School, Scarborough, Ontario  
Photo by Cam Collyer

### Shade from Trees, Shrubs and Vines

Providing shade using trees and shrubs should be considered in conjunction with built structures. Here are a few guidelines to help select the best shade options.

- ☛ Deciduous trees are better than coniferous for offering protection from the midday sun. The rounded form of deciduous trees casts a shadow over a larger area than the conical shape of most evergreens. Keep in mind that deciduous trees only perform this function when their leaves are fully out—other forms of protection will be required at other times of the year.
- ☛ Spreading (i.e. oak, maple, beech, ash) and weeping (i.e. willow) deciduous trees provide more shade than more upright varieties (i.e. poplar).
- ☛ Grouping trees provides more shade in one area than planting single trees in a number of areas. This planting pattern may better reflect the way people use the park, such as gathering as a group to play or talk. Plant groups of trees in a circular shape or an alley to achieve this effect.
- ☛ Vines and shrubs can be used along arbors, trellises and pergolas to provide additional shade.
- ☛ Provide seating under existing shade trees.



# 4

## Signs, Gates and Fences

Signs, gates and fences help direct people through a site, provide information and define boundaries. Signs are also a great way to build support for your project and to recognize and thank all those who contributed.

### a) Signs

Think about the features on your site and how you want people to move through and use it. Here are a few tips to consider when creating signs:

- ☛ Provide signs at the entrance to your site, at intersections and at points of interest.
- ☛ Use homemade or professionally created signs depending on your budget and project goals.
- ☛ Use interpretive signs to educate people about plants and wildlife.
- ☛ Use signs to label trees, shrubs and wildflowers. Using trail-marking tape, print the common and botanical name on the tape and tie it to a tree branch for a quick and simple sign that can be easily replaced. Or, attach an aluminum nameplate sign to an aluminum stake and attach it to a brick buried underground.
- ☛ Include, where appropriate, signs that engage people. Some examples include signs with hands and dials, "you are here" markers, signs that present different options to follow along a trail or signs that can be changed seasonally with different activities for the community to participate in.
- ☛ Don't limit yourself to just text on the sign—pictures are really worth a thousand words



Ossington Old Orchard Public School, Toronto, Ontario

### Making Your Sign Readable

- ☛ Place signs within an easy range of vision and reach. People should be able to approach within 7.5 centimetres (three inches) of signs.
- ☛ Place signs so that they are not obstructed by vegetation or built features and where they cannot be walked into or knocked over.
- ☛ Place signs at a comfortable height for children and adults to read or touch. The standard mounting height for children is 120 centimetres (48 inches) or lower depending on their age. The standard height for adults is 150 centimetres (60 inches).
- ☛ Maximize readability by using appropriate colours, font styles and sizes.



Broadacres Junior School, Etobicoke, Ontario

### Vandalism of Signs

Unfortunately, signs tend to be one of the most targeted features for vandalism. They can be broken, scratched, painted on and even removed. Here are some measures you can take to try and prevent your sign from being vandalized.

- 1) Have community members build and paint the signs for your project using plywood or found materials. This builds a sense of ownership and responsibility, reducing the chances of vandalism.
- 2) Have durable signs professionally made on thick wood or graphic panels that cannot be broken. For instance, Folia, a company in Quebec, produces imbedded graphic panels that are durable and allow paint or marker to be washed off. The cost is a little higher than conventional signs (\$600 to \$800 dollars), but they are professional and withstand vandalism.

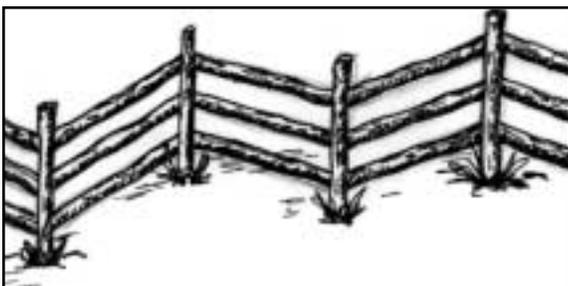


Where Edges Meet, St. James Town, Garden Sign, Toronto, Ontario  
Photo by Anne Marie Lewis



### b) Gates and Fences

- ☛ Use gates to highlight the entrance to your site.
- ☛ Use temporary fencing to protect new plants, or permanent fencing to protect trees and shrubs that could be damaged.
- ☛ Include colours, varied textures, peepholes, murals and mosaics to make gates and fences aesthetically appealing.
- ☛ Place fence rails at chest height. This provides a comfortable area for leaning or sitting.
- ☛ Modify the fence line and height to make it more interesting. Include nooks, perches and hang-outs by zig-zagging the fence line.



- 3) Use anodized aluminum signs on large boulders placed in the garden. Attach the signs using a concrete drill, or purchase a boulder from a local quarry and have them attach the sign plate.
- 4) Create sign boards with Plexiglas covers so a paper sign can be inserted behind the Plexiglas. This way either the sign or the Plexiglas can be replaced should damage occur.

**Try making natural fences out of willow slips to line planting beds or pathways. Cut willow branches to a length of 30 centimetres.**

**Plant the cut ends in the ground, 45 centimetres apart, and loop the tops together. Plant in the late spring so branches will root and anchor the fence.**



# 5

## Community Art

Art can help capture the character and uniqueness of a local space and it can be an enlightening process for both artists and community members. Working collaboratively, artists can help to create a vision for your site that incorporates the knowledge, experience and ideas of your community. In return, community members have the opportunity to participate in a creative, hands-on expression of what their space means to them.

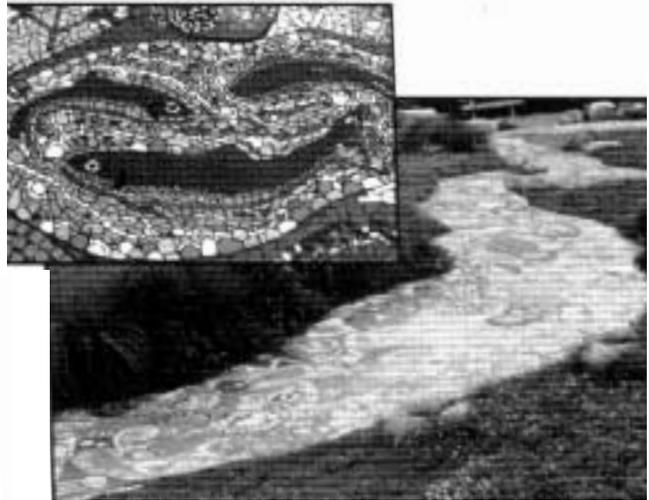
There is no right or wrong way to embark on a work of community art, and the expressions can take on many forms from murals on walls and asphalt to mosaic stepping stones, sculpture and totem poles.

# Case Study

## Mosaic Creek Park Vancouver, British Columbia

Mosaic Creek Park was developed by a community that envisioned public green space in the place of three vacant lots. Originally, community members indicated a desire for a stream to run through the park.

When this proved impractical, a stream of mosaics was proposed that would form a pathway. The community worked with local artists to design the shape and connective pattern of the mosaic pathway. Over 300 community members created individual mosaics to complete the path. The community has also added a pebble mosaic bordered herb garden, wooden benches with text scrolled into them and a granite block play area.



# 6

## Focal Points and Gathering Places

Any or all of the elements described above can be used to create a focal point for your site or an area for gathering and group activity. Depending on your site and the needs of the community you could create any number of the following:



- an amphitheater or stage for community plays and events;
- a small seating area for games and small group activities;
- an area for cooking and enjoying the bounty from your gardens;
- a spot for meeting friends; or
- a symbol that denotes your community space.



# Case Study

## Woodland Park Vancouver, British Columbia

Woodland Park is located within the Grandview-Woodlands community, a community that is characterised by its cultural diversity. In 1997, residents of the community met and discussed and visions for their park and community, including a native planting, a community garden, a new playground, an art installation and a community project that would celebrate the diversity of the area and bring the community together. Because of the strong First Nation's presence in the area, a Circle Garden was designed based on the symbolism of the medicine wheel. Using only native plants, the Circle Garden provides a link to the biological heritage of the area, as well as providing opportunities to learn more about habitat restoration and ethnobotany. A totem pole was then added to the garden. A First Nation's artist was commissioned to carve a totem pole and community members were involved in designing and carving two sculptures. A traditional pole-raising ceremony was held to raise the Eagle Bear totem pole. The ceremony is a celebration to honour cultural tradition, family and community. At the end of the ceremony the Eagle Bear pole belonged officially to the community and to the park, and is used as a central feature along with the Circle Garden where groups or individuals in the community can gather.



## Where to go from here?

### Sources for this fact sheet

Canadian Dermatology Association. *Sun Facts*. Fact sheet. Ottawa, Ontario. 1998/1999.  
Available from the Canadian Dermatology Association, 1-800-267-DERM.

Herrington, Susan. "Playgrounds as Community Landscapes." *Built Environment*, Volume 25, Number 1, 1999.

Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation. *Guide to Some of Vancouver's Community Based Art*. A brochure. 1999.

### Example projects

Dufferin Grove, Toronto, Ontario: (416) 392-0913

Mosaic Creek Park, Vancouver, British Columbia: (604) 257-8495; [www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/parks](http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/parks)

Trout Lake Community Centre, Vancouver, British Columbia: (604) 257-8495; [www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/parks](http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/parks)

Woodland Park, Vancouver, British Columbia: (604) 689-0766

### Organizations

Folia Industries Inc.: 450-264-6122, [www.folia.ca](http://www.folia.ca)

## Published by Evergreen

Evergreen is a national non-profit environmental organization with a mandate to bring nature to our cities through naturalization projects. Evergreen motivates people to create and sustain healthy, natural outdoor spaces and gives them practical working tools to be successful through its three core programs: **Learning Grounds** (transforming school grounds), **Common Grounds** (working on publicly accessible lands) and **Home Grounds** (for the home landscape). We believe that local stewardship creates vibrant neighbourhoods, a healthy natural environment and a sustainable society for all.

## Evergreen's Common Grounds Program

Common Grounds brings land-use planners, landscape architects and community members together to restore public land. By supporting community greening initiatives, Common Grounds enriches ecological diversity, fosters healthy, sustainable communities and increases environmental awareness.

## Part of the Tool Shed Series

The Tool Shed is an integrated collection of resources designed to inspire, educate and guide students, teachers, planners, community groups and individuals through all stages of a school, community or home naturalization project. The Tool Shed series includes guide books, instructional and inspirational videos, fact sheets, case studies, newsletters, research reports and an on-line registry. For the latest information on Evergreen's Tool Shed resources, check out our website at [www.evergreen.ca](http://www.evergreen.ca).

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