

Feature Article Summer 2020 Gaia College

In the Heart of it All
Reconnecting with the roots of organic land care
By: Brenlee Brothers

In the words of Astrid Muschalla, "Nature reminds us to be humble. In the face of mystery, we can be reminded to have humility and humility implies a certain level of respect."

We are left with much uncertainty in the wake of COVID-19 ensued chaos. There has been a collective awakening of sorts and a rise in people seeking to educate themselves about gardening and land care practices. With an increase in seed sales across Canada, people have been scrambling to plant seeds, realizing the importance of food independence after witnessing unstable supply chains within communities across the country. "We need to ensure local sources of food are supported and protected," Muschalla said.



Astrid Muschalla planting seeds. Photo by: Lorne McClinton

As the academic coordinator at Gaia College, Muschalla believes the COVID-19 crisis has helped to broaden an overdue conversation. "It has pointed everybody in the direction that our planet is sick and we have got to change the way we do things, so growing things organically, whether it's ornamental or food plants, is really the way forward in the future," she said.

The Organic Master Gardener and Horticulture course has coincidentally higher enrollment than a typical summer semester. "I think there is much more interest and people are really happy they are learning about this stuff, because we can't go on the way we've been going," she said.

Muschalla is a Certified Organic Landcare Professional with over 20 years experience working in her field. She is an online instructor and academic coordinator at Gaia College with her own company, Oasis Garden Design based in Kingston, Ontario. Whether consulting with clients, or guiding students through online courses, Muschalla always finds herself teaching. "My work isn't really that different between the different jobs, it's always the same. I'm always talking about the health of the landscape and how we can improve a site or situation," she said.



Astrid Muschalla shares information about Gaia College and Society for Organic Urban Landcare (SOUL). Photo by Kim Christensen

With a background as a home economist and Red Seal Chef, Muschalla always wanted to know where her food was coming from. "I always had a food garden myself. So to me, that was really important. The growing of the food was just as important as the cooking and eating part."

Now, Muschalla's work is almost entirely focused on horticulture and growing food.

Her wealth of knowledge, gained from many years of learning and practicing horticulture and organic growing, is astonishing and motivational. Muschalla understands everything is interconnected and brings forth this awareness in her work. "Take care of the land and the land takes care of you," she said.

When industrialization of farming took off in the 50s it became a system that seemed to have a lot of promise, Muschalla said. "Oh, we can feed the world and farmers will have an easier life." But it really veered us away from the roots of farming and land care.

"Taking care of the soil - which is the way we used to farm in the olden days - suddenly changed

when we got big equipment, big chemical companies and big soil agronomy that really got a foot-hold by prescribing what the farmers should do." So now, farmers don't have to think about these things because computers made it really easy, she said.

Conventional horticulture, nursery business and landscape trade is anything but organic. They rely heavily on a system that requires us to fix mother nature with inputs like fertilizers, pesticides and insecticides, Muschalla said. "Not having the faith that if we provide what nature needs, things will grow really well, despite our worst efforts."

Fifty years down the line, we see it's not working the way we expected; we have a lot of other problems, she said. "Now we see how so much of those practices have been very harmful to the land and to the water, our water tables, our food quality."

Muschalla believes the damage that's been done can be reversed. "I work on landscapes all the time that are unhealthy and become healthy again, that's just the nature of organic land care," she said.

Now there is science behind organic practices that prove how they work, she said. "We can build soils naturally. We don't need to depend on all the chemical input."

Gaia College provides invaluable knowledge through online courses about organic land care, helping people come back to the land in a conscious, holistic way. Taking a course allows one to connect with people across Canada and in different parts of the world, while developing a network for important conversations along the way.

The Organic Horticulture Specialist / Organic Master Gardener course recognizes soil is the heart of it all; teaching students the relation between soil health, plant health, human and environmental health. "Anybody who's interested in taking care of any kind of land - whether small or big - I always say this is a very foundational course - no matter what kind of landscape you want, or are working with, or live in, or participate in - just knowing how to care for the land in a holistic, sustainable, regenerative way, that's a good feeling," she said. "Because you're taking care of yourself too, at the same time."