Toronto Urban Growers

Greenest City
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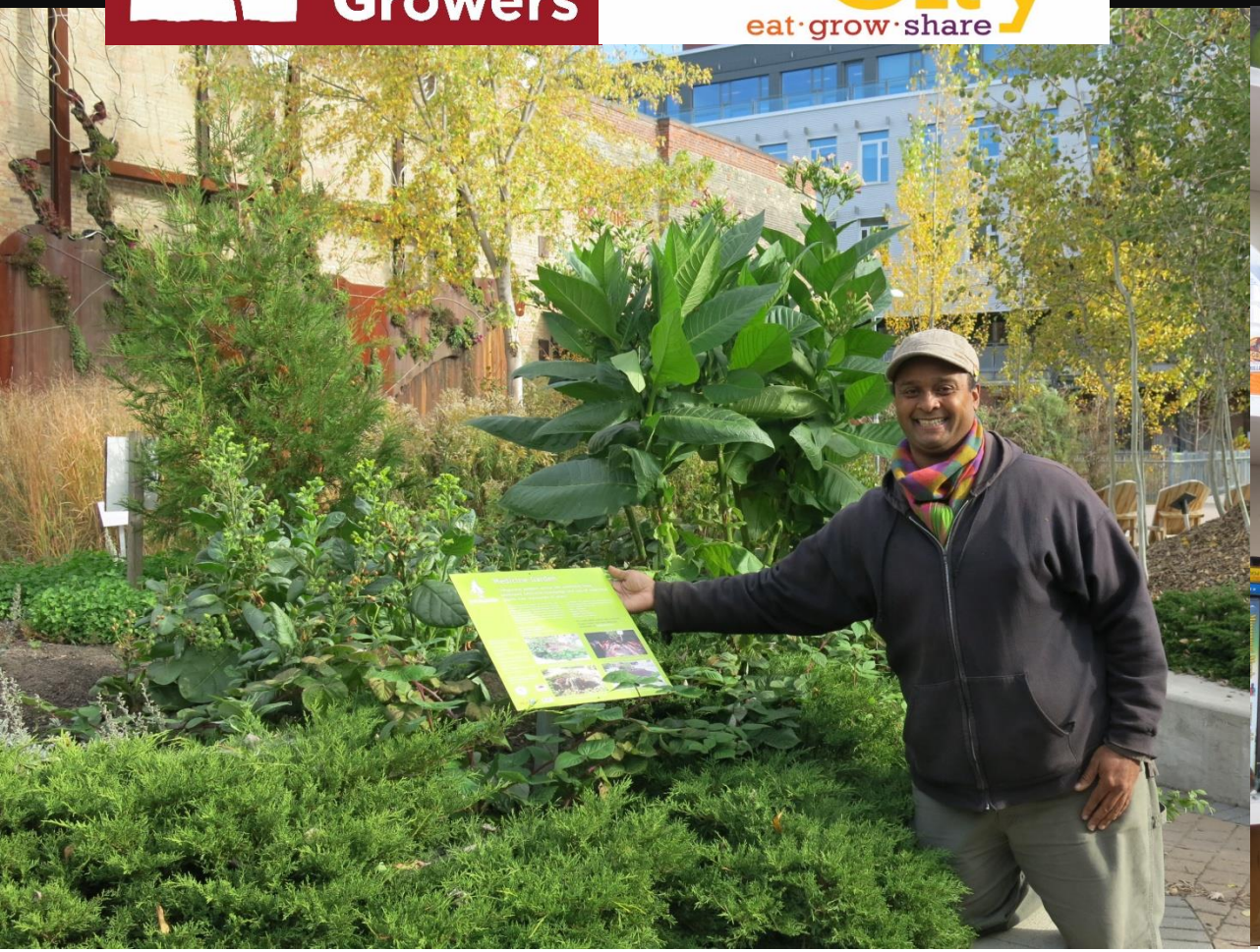
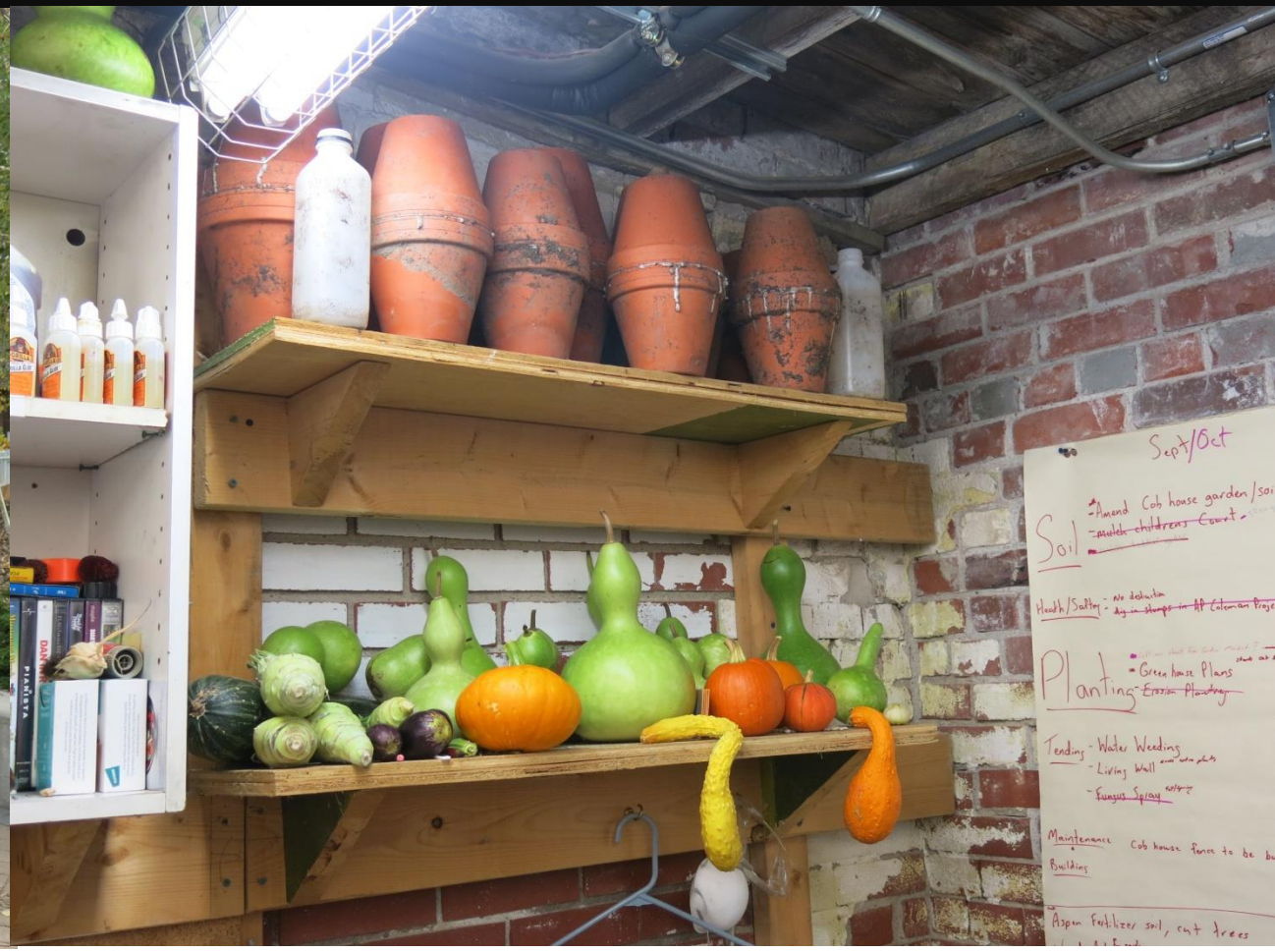
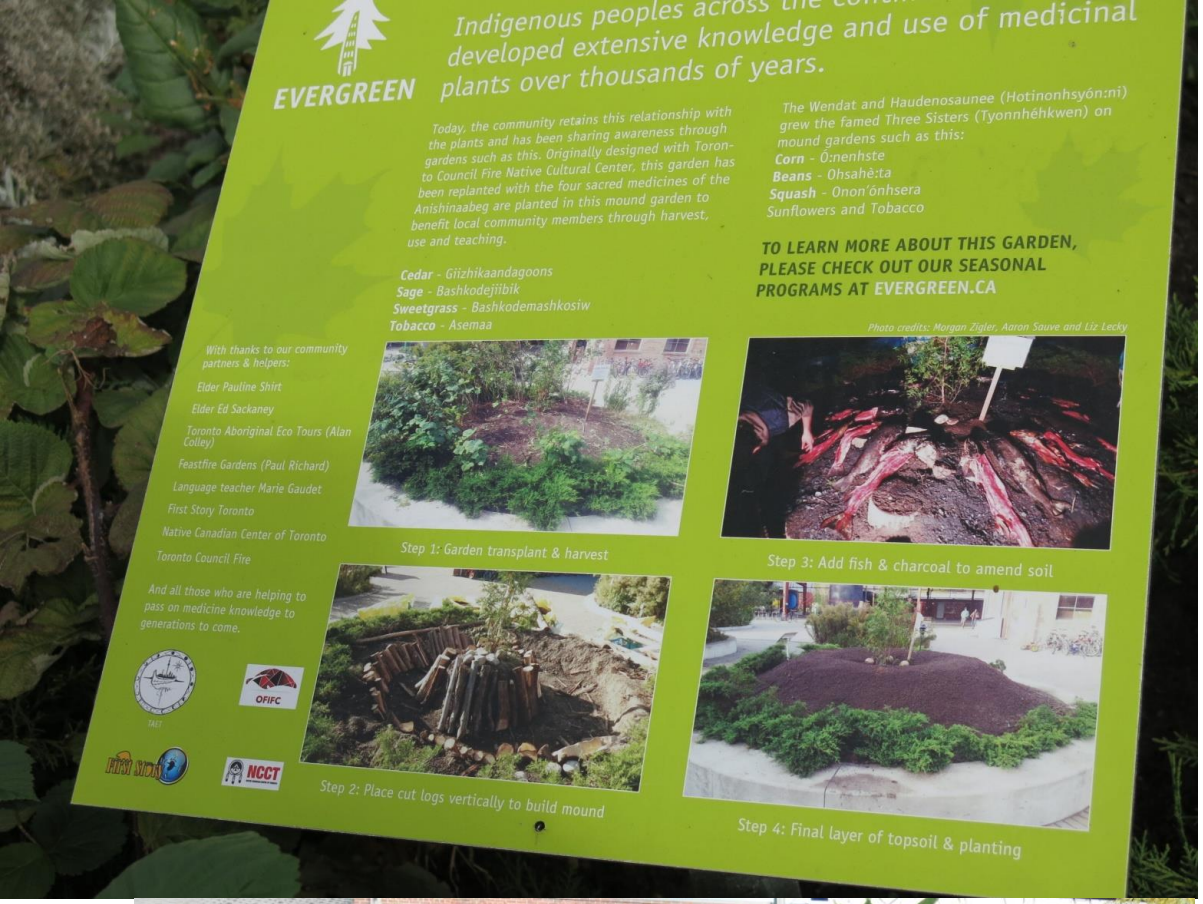
Grower2Grower Project

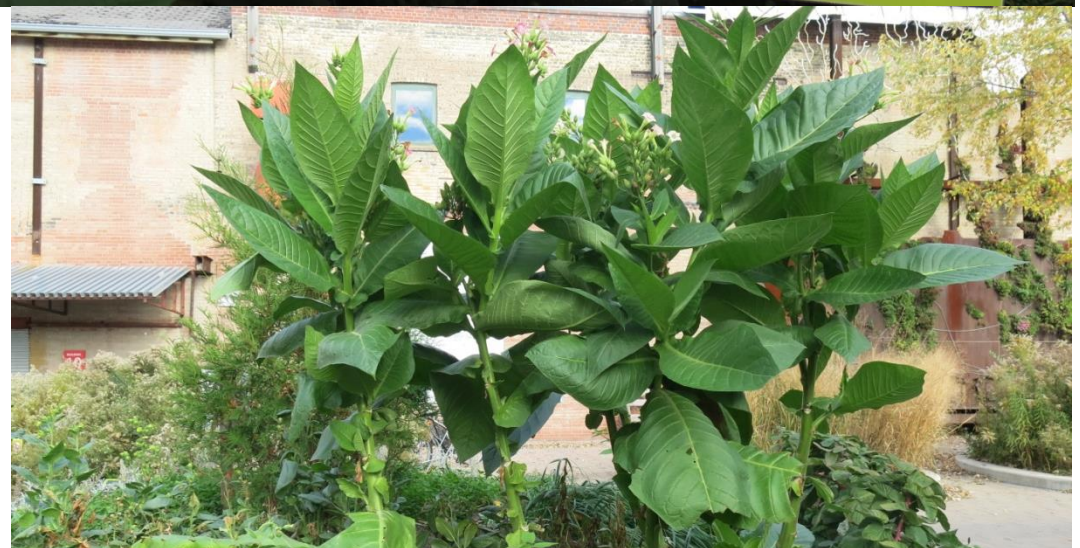




Isaac Crosby
Evergreen Brickworks

by Rhonda Teitel-Payne





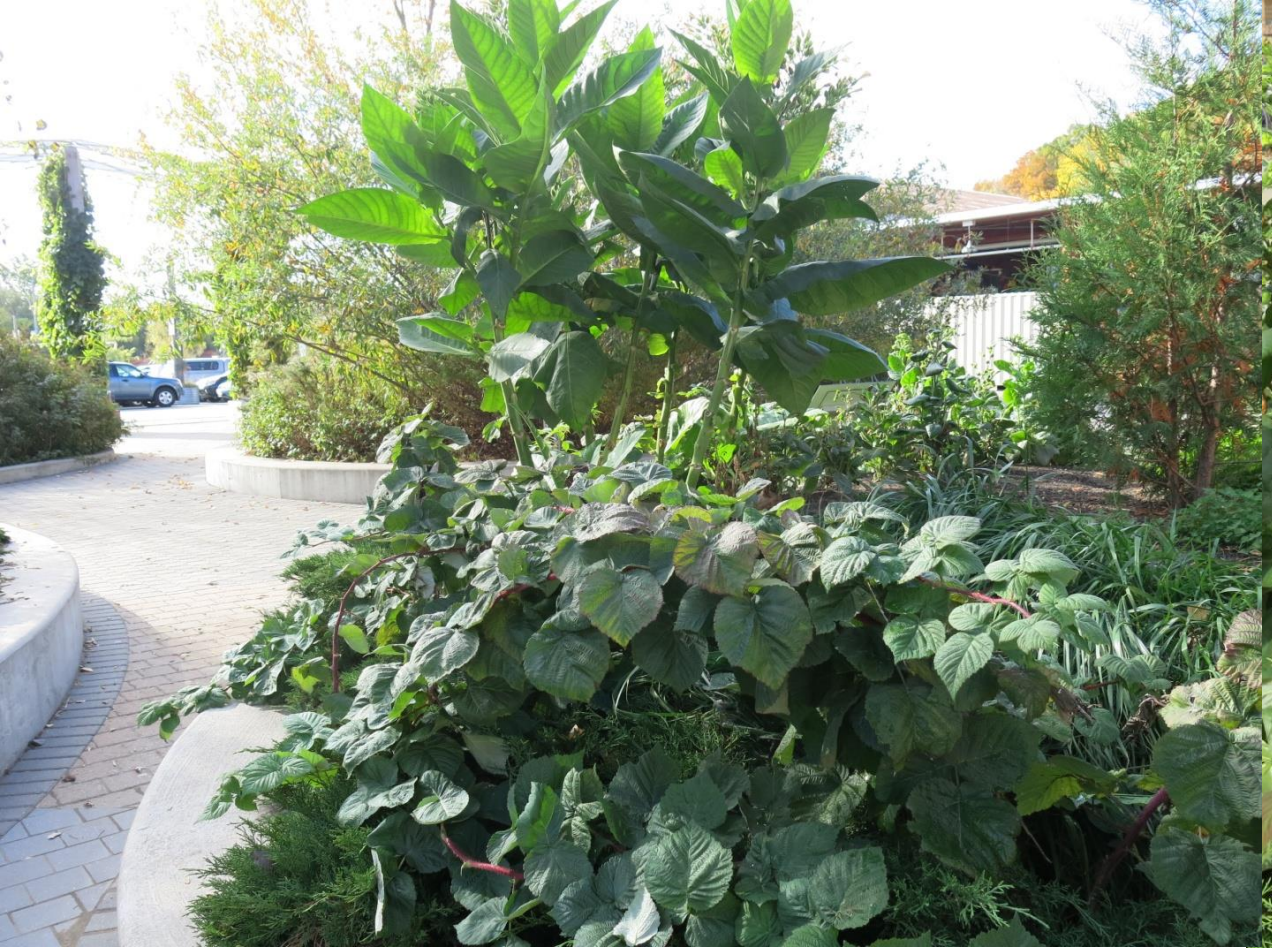
The medicine garden at the Brickworks was constructed last year before Isaac's time, but he explained the process of building the mound following traditional practices.

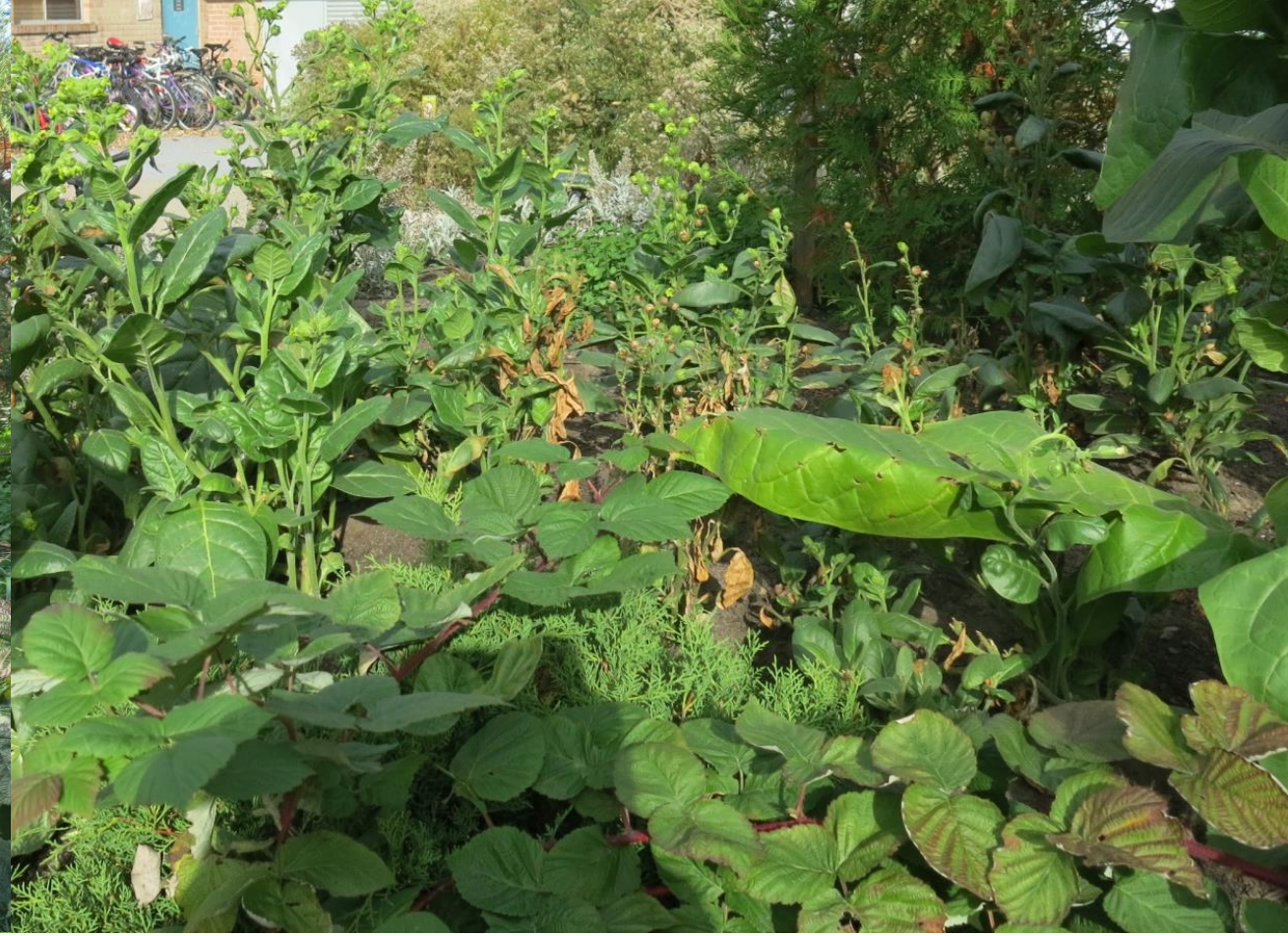
Cedar logs are stacked at the base of the mound to wick up water and salmon from the Humber is added to provide nitrogen. I asked about raccoons, but Isaac uses salmon in his container gardens at home and doesn't have any problems with digging critters.

That led to a discussion about the annoying squirrel habit of taking one bite out of vegetables, then leaving them. Isaac's grandfather said that the squirrels do this because they're thirsty. If you leave water out they'll leave your vegetables alone. Isaac says it works!

The garden is planted with the four key medicines – cedar, tobacco, sage and sweet grass. The sweet grass was started late (June) from just 7 plugs and has now spread happily. Sweet grass likes water, so they're using clay pots for watering. Isaac said that if you pull it up by the roots when you harvest it, more will grow back. Sweet grass is called "Hair of Mother Earth."

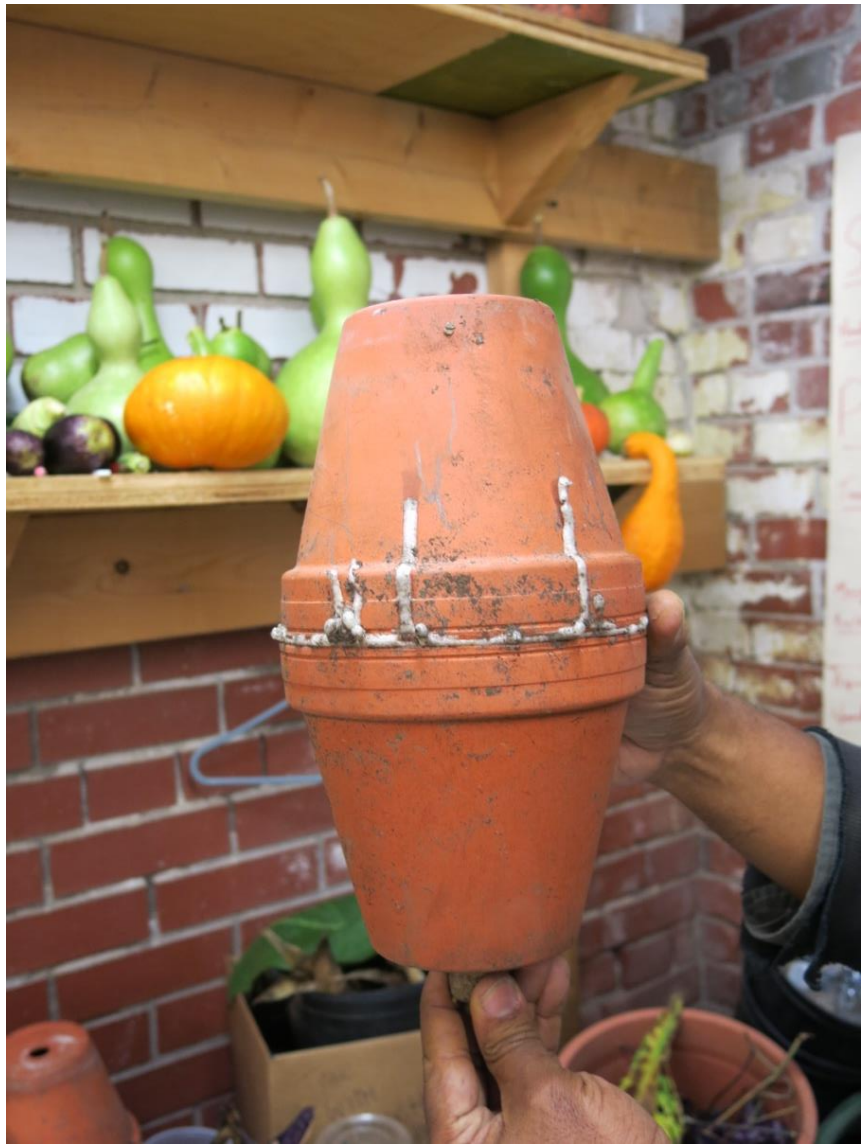
White sage likes it dry. In the mound, sweet grass is creeping in below the sage, where the water collects at the bottom.





There are two kinds of tobacco pictured here, the taller Virginia tobacco (left) and the lower, more traditional variety (right). Both are used as medicine.

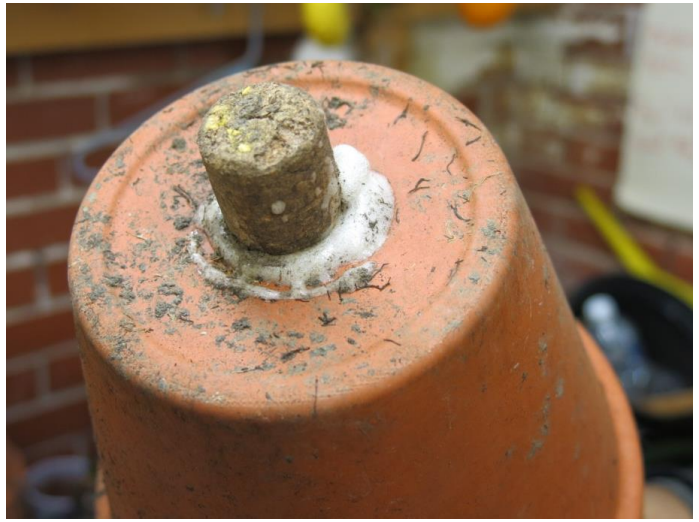
The garden is also planted with juniper, which is good for stomach ailments.

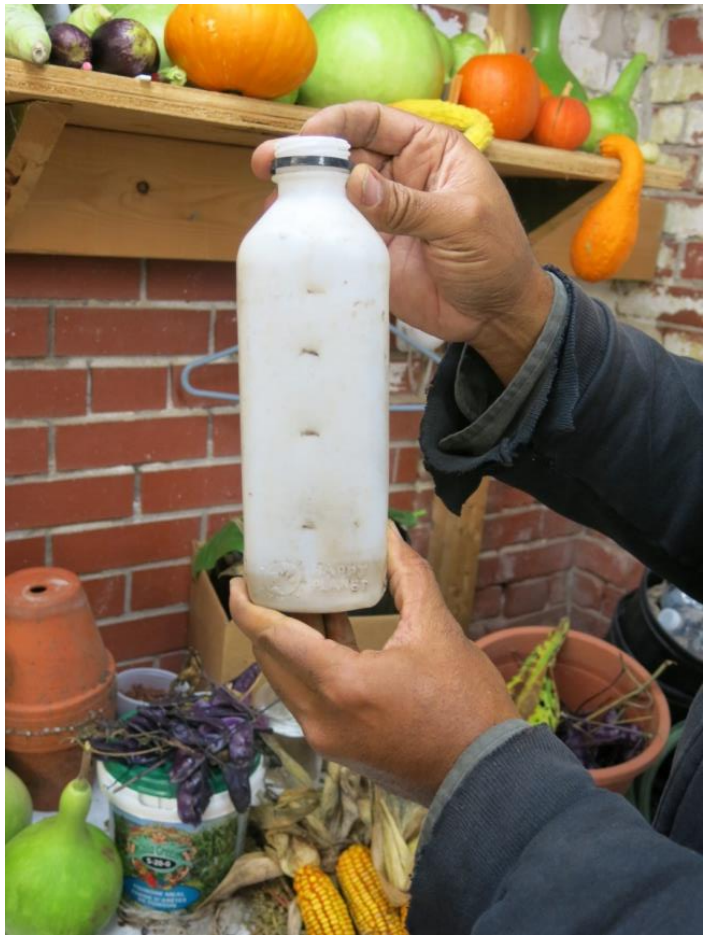


Clay pot watering systems

Isaac explained that, as water bills are going up and growers need to adapt more and more to conditions brought on by climate change, clay pots are a great tool for managing water. Indigenous people would traditionally use the abundant clay in the soil to make pots to sink in the earth. When you fill the pot with water, it slowly releases the water according to what's needed. Isaac learned this method from his grandfather.

Starting with unglazed terra cotta pots, you glue two pots together with an enviro-friendly glue like Gorilla Glue. Plug the bottom hole of the two pots with a cork so the water doesn't leak out too fast.





Once the glue is dry, bury the pot so that the hole is still visible. In the picture above, the hole is too small, so it takes patience to pour the water in!

The water in a clay pot will last for about three days. Isaac has also tried plastic BPA free bottles that hold water for two days.

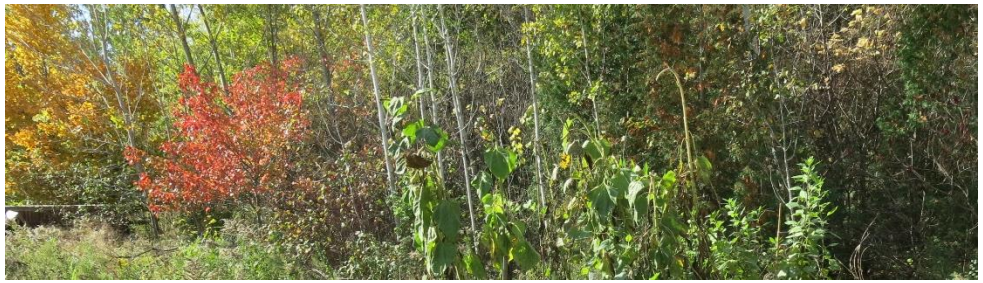
Most people know the Three Sisters mound (corn, beans and squash), but Isaac wants to show people that there are other traditional ways of planting. Symbiotic mounds can also be planted with sunflowers or sunroots (a.k.a. Jerusalem artichokes or sunchokes) as the first sister. It's best to choose one of corn, sunroots or sunflowers for each mound because they are heavy feeders.

"The sunflower starts off as the small sister, and ends up as the grandmother." Plant sunflowers in the middle, they will be the first to pop up. After about three weeks you plant beans around the bottom of the sunflowers. Squash goes in last, one month later.

You can see Isaac has put up wire cages to keep animals out. Traditionally you would use twigs, but Isaac didn't place them close enough together and squirrels got through!

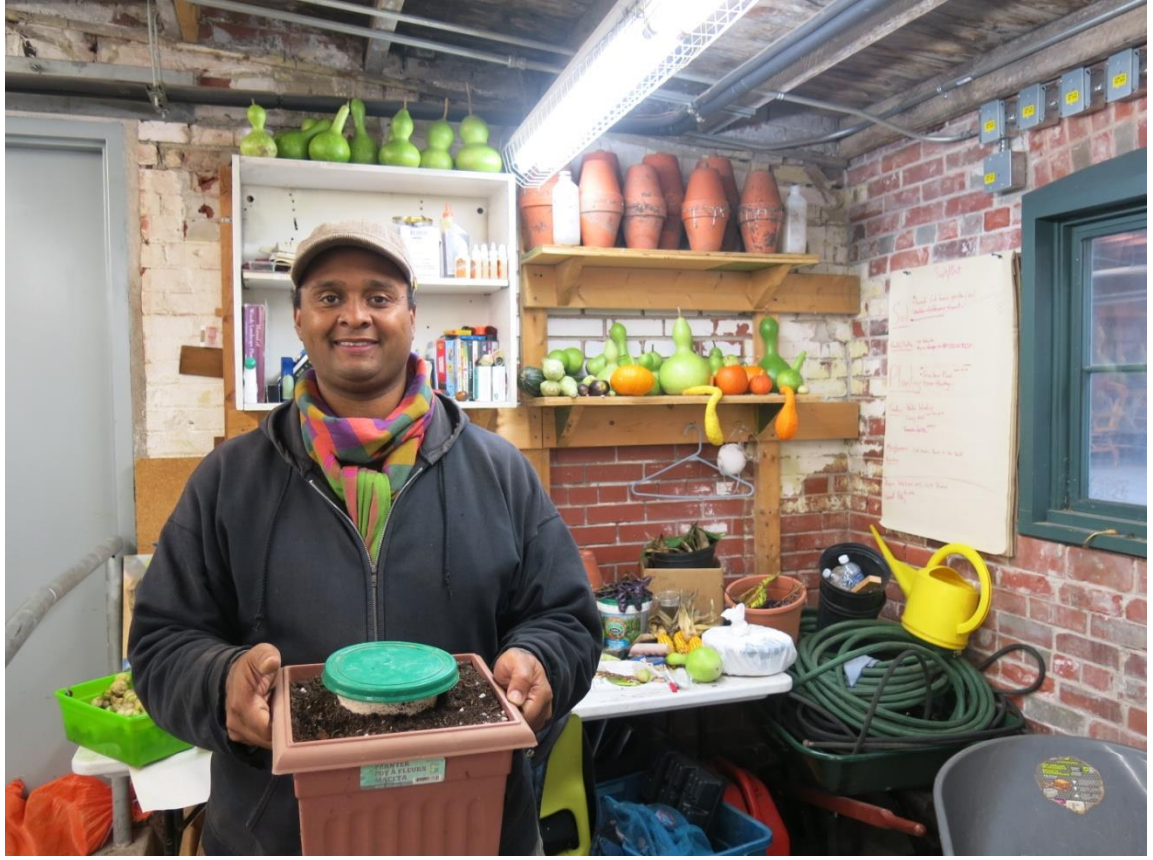
These photos were taken in the fall, when it's time to trim some of the flowers off of the sunroots to direct energy back down into the tubers. You can also tilt the stems a bit and gently smush the soil down with your foot. Once you harvest sunroot tubers, you can keep them for 2 weeks- 1 month in cold storage to reduce inulin (the carbohydrate that causes gas). Sunroots are good for stabilizing blood sugar for people with diabetes.

Isaac's tip for increasing bean production is to pull off the end two leaves and leave the middle third leaf. Squish up the leaves you pulled off and put them in the soil at the base of the plant to turn into compost.



Rather than cleaning up the garden completely, Isaac likes to leave some plants in the ground. That "gives some back to nature" and creates overwintering habitat for insects.

Isaac is quick to attribute his knowledge of growing plants to his grandfather, and frequently references his family's Shawnee, Anishnaabe and Black ancestry. His grandparents, now in their 90s, have been married for 68 years and have 18 children. They still live in Harrow, a small town south of Windsor. Isaac sees the melding of Indigenous and Black farming traditions as an example of a story that's not often told – how people from non-European cultures interact with each other in Ontario.



Thanks to:

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For more tips and stories from urban growers in Toronto, see www.torontourbangrowers.org/grower2grower