



YOUTH EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCE

Success Story

Residents collecting their seedlings at a Neighbourhood Distribution Day in the Fernwood neighbourhood in the spring of 2023.

Urban planning student learns importance of food security

WHEN TIM ROSS BECOMES AN URBAN planner someday, he is going to keep one thing in mind for the community: make sure there is dedicated space, accessible to the community, for growing food.

“In urban planning, there tends to be an emphasis on housing affordability and economic impacts – which kind of detracts from that community element,” says Ross, a third-year urban planning student at the University of Waterloo. “It can be easy to get away from things that are more practical and connected to the community – like food sourcing and food security.”



CITY OF VICTORIA,
BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Jeremy Dillon and Tim Ross (CPRA Program Assistant) load up the City vehicle with Get Growing, Victoria! Seedlings.



Members of the Compost Education Centre, the educational partner organization of Get Growing, Victoria! supporting a Neighbourhood Distribution Day with gardening resources.

Ross learned this important lesson during the summer of 2023, when he worked as a Growing in the City Program assistant with the City of Victoria. This job was made possible thanks to funding from the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association's Youth Employment Experience (YEE) program. This program, funded by the Government of Canada, is designed to build skills and remove barriers to employment for youth. The program further builds capacity in the parks and recreation sector by providing mentorship support to each youth throughout their work experience.

In his role, Ross helped deliver Victoria's city-wide vegetable seedling distribution program 'Get Growing, Victoria!' Started in 2020, this program offers free vegetable seedlings and soil-building materials to residents who face barriers to accessing fresh produce or gardening materials.

"This job really reinforced the importance of food security, and how having a resilient and localized system for sourcing food is vital – not only from an environmental perspective, but from a social and economic one as well," he says.

Ross adds that the job itself was a unique experience and gave him hands-on skills – such as communication skills – when corresponding with community partners, horticulture staff, and contractors.

He also helped improve the program's booking systems, and collected data for written reports that were important for the program's success.

"This wasn't a standard desk job," he says. "It was much more collaborative, hands-on, and impactful. This opportunity gave me skills that helped me grow not only professionally, but personally as well."

Alex Harned, Food Systems Coordinator with the City of Victoria, was Ross's mentor and describes Ross's support for the program as "invaluable."

"We're a very small team for the output of what we're delivering," Harned says, adding that since 2022, over 100,000 edible plants have been grown each year for households across the city. "It was incredibly valuable to have a full team to support this program, not only for me and our staff at the City of Victoria, but for the public as well."

Harned shares that residents who use the program truly felt the impacts of Ross's work.

"Our neighbourhood distribution partners are just so thankful, especially for Tim and his work ethic, timeliness, and always greeting them with a truck full of seedlings and a smile," she says. "A lot of people are growing their food for the first time, and each little step we take to improve their overall experience helps them succeed."

Harned adds that residents who use the program also felt the impacts of Ross's work.

"Our neighbourhood distribution partners are just so thankful," she says. "A lot of people are growing their food for the first time, and we want to help them succeed."

Ross says he was also personally impacted by the experience he gained with the City of Victoria, and that this opportunity will help guide his approach to urban planning in the future.

"This job taught me to be more critical about different aspects within the built environment – and to look at how things like food security, water management, and economic development initiatives can be sustainably achieved as we shift to a more climate-conscious world," he says. 🍁