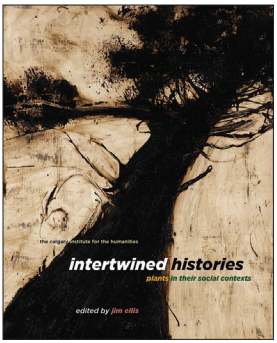
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press



INTERTWINED HISTORIES: Plants in their Social Contexts

Edited by Jim Ellis

ISBN 978-1-77385-091-7

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press
press.ucalgary.ca

Acknowledgement: *We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher,* **re.press**, *and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy* http://www.re-press.org

mike macdonald's butterfly garden

the little garden that could

katherine ylitalo

Artist and videographer Mike MacDonald criss-crossed Canada during the summers in the 1990s, planting more than twenty butterfly gardens. The small garden nestled in the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity is the only one that remains. In an interview with John Grande published in *LandViews*, MacDonald said his interest in butterflies began in north-central British Columbia.[1] He felt unwell; an elder suggested, "When you are not feeling good you go find a butterfly and follow it and it will lead you to a medicine that will make you better." Of Mi'kmaq descent, MacDonald saw the garden projects as sanctuaries for butterflies in the face of environmental degradation, but also as a call to pay attention to Indigenous knowledge and honour traditional ways of living with plants.

MacDonald finished planting the Banff garden in 1999 and passed away in 2006 at the age of sixty-five. He was born in Nova Scotia but lived most of his life in Vancouver. Self-taught as an artist, he created video and installations that were exhibited nationally and internationally and are now in the collections of major Canadian public museums. He was honoured with the 1994 Jack and Doris Shadbolt Prize from the Vancouver Institute for the Visual Arts. His Web-based work "Butterfly Garden" was posted in conjunction with a garden as part of a 1998 exhibition, "Breaking Borders," and a residency, "Ten

Photos, unless noted: Katherine Ylitalo

Little Indians," at the St. Norbert Arts Centre in Manitoba, and earned him the 2000 Aboriginal Achievement Award for New Media. Now, thanks in part to the Mike MacDonald Butterfly Garden at the Banff Centre, there is a renaissance of interest in his work as an artist, and the garden has become a destination.

Most of MacDonald's gardens were planted outside art centres and public galleries; the venues understood the value of the project as an artwork and provided funding. He chose sites that were overlooked, such as the Montreal rooftop of the inner city building that housed the artist-run centre Oboro. When he approached the Walter Phillips Gallery in 1995, he proposed a marginal strip of land between the modern Jeanne and Peter Lougheed Building and Glyde Hall, the long-standing complex of the Walter Phillips Gallery, studios, and workshops. The patch of wood siding on Glyde Hall that had been put up following a fire in 1979 looked provisional then, and still does. The existing vegetation was the popular institutional, low-maintenance ground cover, snow-on-the-mountain.

MacDonald reclaimed the corridor between the tall buildings as a two-part pocket alpine meadow garden. The length along the Glyde Hall side of the wide brick path is shady, a good place for moisture-loving plants like willows, currants, and meadow rue. On the sunny side, he planted saplings, young shrubs, perennials, and self-seeding annuals that thrive with more light and drier soil.

Plants of the region would attract and sustain both resident and migratory butterflies. Twenty years on, the garden has grown into healthy maturity and has become a safe haven for butterflies. The black hawthorn tree grew to be one of the largest specimens in the region, and a host plant for Striped Hairstreaks and White Admirals. A few years ago, we had exciting proof that butterflies and moths were now resident throughout the year. On a fall morning, we spotted plump, brightly patterned caterpillars moving slowly through mountain delphinium leaves. They were the fifth instar of the Purple Lined Sallow Moth caterpillar, their final stage before setting up for the winter in a cocoon. Thistles, asters, goldenrod, and pearly everlasting that MacDonald planted were in bloom when migratory Painted Lady butterflies, which are said to visit Alberta every ten to fifteen years, returned in 2018 for the first time since 2005.

The Butterfly Garden in Banff was commissioned by the Walter Phillips Gallery with support from the Canada Council for the Arts. The gallery accessioned the garden into the collection. It was unusual for a living artwork to have that designation, but the gallery took the responsibility of "conserving" seriously. From the start, master preparator Mimmo Maiolo understood the need for protection and erected a gated metal fence at either end to keep out browsing deer and elk.

Two photos at bottom right: Alissa Firth-Eagland

The staff has remained dedicated to the garden, beginning each season with a blitz weeding day to take out dandelions, daisies, thistles, and buttercups that come up in the disturbed ground at the edge of the path. Ten years ago, they invited me to help with the stewardship of the garden. I came with the lens of a curator, hoping to understand the artist's intention, and that of a horticulturalist, working toward a sustainable garden.

The first task—to observe, identify, and map the plants—took time because MacDonald left scant notes. In the first two years, I confirmed over sixty species, and the number grew to over a hundred, including trees, shrubs, perennials, self-seeding annuals, grasses, and moss. The biodiversity in that small space is remarkable.

I searched for clues in information about his other gardens. The key was on the St. Norbert website that he designed: "All the native plants that butterflies use also have traditional medicinal uses." Whereas lists of plants that attract butterflies have become easy to find today, as gardening to attract pollinators has become popular, there is less published on traditional Indigenous medicinal use of plants. In the Walter Phillips Gallery files, I found a booklet MacDonald put together about fourteen plants in the alpine butterfly garden. It contained notes on their importance to butterflies, along with their traditional benefits as medicine, food, and dyes as well as other ways the plants were used in daily life. He wrote about saskatoons, for example: "Traditionally, a gift of four Saskatoon berries would be presented when asking a favour. This would oblige the receiver to return the goodwill."

Recently I became aware that MacDonald had a counterpart in Mexico. In the 1990s, Francisco Toledo, a well-known artist of Zapotec ancestry, initiated a garden of ethnobotany as a way to reclaim an evacuated army camp in the heart of the city of Oaxaca, protect biodiversity, and foster support for the collection and preservation of Indigenous knowledge of plants among the many cultures of his region.

After the plants in MacDonald's garden were identified, visitors asked for labels. The horticulturist at the Calgary Zoo offered to generate labels similar to those in their botanical garden. While binomial nomenclature is useful and considered "universal," a garden full of sticks with Latin names did not seem to fit the artist's vision of a free-flowing meadow. Carl Linnaeus' eighteenth-century system of naming organisms based on taxonomy pinpoints plants within Western scientific methods and the premise that plants are single organisms. Given MacDonald's guidance toward understanding the relationships between flora, pollinators, and people, the use of common names and including the languages of various peoples who had inhabited the land from pre-settlement up to the present seemed more appropriate.

Many English common names are colourful and refer to a plant's attributes (stinging nettle), lore (mountain forget-me-not), or use (northern bedstraw). But often a plant has differing common names depending on region and culture. In searching out the names of plants in Blackfoot and Cree, I encountered the same kind of diversity based on locale.

The nuances of translation add a layer of complexity. Often, a word in one language does not have a single equivalent one in another. Ways of living with and knowing about plants are built into languages in various ways.

The simplest system we could devise was to place small green wooden stakes with numbers. First, we placed sticks next to the largest plants, the trees and shrubs, then the established swaths of perennials, and finally, flowering plants that might only be evident for a short time in the course of the summer. For example, tiny magenta shooting stars appear in spring, but the plants practically disappear when the bloom is over. Growth over the summer hides many of the stakes, and some have deteriorated, but we are able to maintain a map for visitors and to monitor change in the garden. The nature of the meadow is shifting as the trees and shrubs flourish and the bank of wild roses doubles in size.

The sequence of blooms unfolds every season. Spring and early summer flowers sprinkle the meadow with colour—blue of mountain forget-me-nots, red paintbrush, yellow columbine. Sweeps of white flowering pearly everlasting, golden arnica, purple fireweed, and deep blue mountain delphiniums are showy in late summer. The stone wall of the Lougheed Building warms the trees and shrubs: a mock orange is deliciously fragrant for one week in spring; a tall black hawthorn with long sharp thorns provides cover for a pair of juncos all summer; the flowers of saskatoons, snowberries, and highbush cranberries herald fruit in the fall. On the sunny side, low-growing rock plants, such as pussytoes and sedum, mingle with a tangle of strawberries in sandy soil beside the path.

Above the spreading mare's tail on the shady side, the furry willow catkins signal spring and wide-leafed cow parsnips emerge like giant fiddleheads. In early spring, the tightly curled balls are edible for about three days and then the plant becomes toxic to touch. Brushing against it can render skin so sensitive to sunlight that a severe rash or burn can follow. It's a reminder of the care that should be taken with plants, and the respect that is due those who have learned how to use them. There are reports of traditional medicine using various parts of the cow parsnip collected at specific times in the season for salves, teas, and washes to treat inflammation, pain, cancer, and colds. The right amount of poison in the hands of an expert can be medicine.

As I began to identify the plants, I quickly realized that MacDonald was freewheeling in his selection, often drawing on garden-centre plants, like chives and St. John's Wort, that he had used in other gardens across the country. He also found a variety of St. John's Wort that is native to the Kananaskis country of Alberta. The two varieties, valued by cultures in both Europe and North America as an antidote to anxiety, grow next to each other in the garden.

The status of the garden as a work of art allows for leeway in plant selection at a time when both the Centre and Banff National Park are encouraging people to plant only native plants. The gallery is mindful of the park guidelines and works to contain plants that are considered weeds. An informal volunteer group, the Friends of the MacDonald Butterfly, made up of visiting artists and staff at the Centre as well as gardeners from Canmore and Calgary, has helped with the annual work of keeping the most aggressive plants in check. The butterflies need a few thistles and dandelions, but we remove the invasive oxeye daisies and buttercups.

Institutional protection has been invaluable over the years in buffering the challenges of public opinion as well as the actions of grounds maintenance crews. When the plants were barely established, the garden was derided as "the Butterfly Garden that butterflies don't come to." It disappointed some visitors who had other expectations of a garden. To them it looked untended and overgrown. One summer the facility maintenance crew had directions to drive heavy equipment across the garden to repaint areas high on one of the buildings; that work was halted at the last minute.

Throughout the early years, the gallery staff remained committed and found support from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. A small amount of funding for annual educational public programs made a big difference. The leadership of the gallery fostered understanding of the garden and supported its conservation—two pillars that proved crucial for the survival of the garden. Pollinators such as bees, beetles, butterflies, and moths are now regularly seen at work, welcome indicators that the ecosystem is flourishing. Nuthatches nest in the wall of Glyde Hall. Tiny calliope hummingbirds gather nectar from the fireweed before their journey back to Mexico on a migratory path that includes Oaxaca.

People take time to enjoy the gentle beauty of the garden and often use it as a meeting place. It was a focus for artists who came to the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity to work with Diane Borsato, co-leader of the residency "The Art of Stillness." When she returned this year for the residency "Outdoor School," an extraordinary event demonstrated the esteem people from near and far have come to feel for both the artist and the garden.

T'uy't'tanat-Cease Wyss, artist, activist, Indigenous plant diva who works with the Coast Salish community, and long-time friend of Mike MacDonald, came from Vancouver with Anne Riley, a young multidisciplinary artist who is Cree and Dene from Fort Nelson First Nation. They are working together to reclaim gas stations in Vancouver as gardens with the project "A Constellation of Remediation." On the first weekend in August, they brought gifts to the garden in Banff—sacred water, soil, plants, seeds—and organized a gathering: a ceremony with tea.

They invited an honoured guest, Una, a matriarch from the nearby Ĩyãħé Nakoda Eden Valley Reserve, who smudged and spoke to us of courage after tragedy. She radiated a true sense of wonder at how caring for plants had brought her to this moment. Cease and Anne introduced the additional gift of their own artwork, "Soundtrack for the Radical Love of Butterflies," an audio tape with a prescription: "We ask that you listen to this Soundtrack with responsible hearts. Each of these contributors has generously shared with you a part of their Butterfly Medicine. This Medicine is powerful and to be handled with care."

The poetics of Mike MacDonald's Butterfly Garden reside in the grasses, flowers, shrubs, and trees that sustain the life of butterflies, but also in the spirit of healing. The small garden that began as a gentle plea for care and understanding has become a haven for resident and migratory butterflies, a quiet spot in nature for meditation and fellowship, and a beacon for visitors who appreciate Mike MacDonald's vision.

notes

1. See Grande, "Mike MacDonald: Healing Garden."

bibliography

Grande, John. "Mike MacDonald: Healing Garden." *LandViews: An Online Journal of Landscape, Art, & Design*. https://www.landviews.org/articles/mikemacdonald-jg.html.