



Glasshouses need  
imagination to thrive /2

## Description

# Why Westmount Park's disused glasshouses are treasures-in-waiting

By **Wanda Potrykus**

Engaging in greenhouse projects in public parks gets the feeling of achievement and significance of oneself to nature.

– [Greenhouse Emporium.com](https://www.greenhouseemporium.com)

'Green spaces aren't just for nature – they boost our mental health too.'

– [New Scientist magazine](#)

Ongoing exposure to parks and gardens accompanied by active interactions and participation with nature, have been proven to provide mental and physiological advantages that improve mental and physical healing and therapy. Environmental psychologists have shown that surgery patients healed faster and used fewer pain medications when they had access to greenery and more colourful landscapes. Working greenhouses permit the community to enjoy flowers and greenery in the middle of our long white, grey, brown northern winters.



View of the Westmount Conservatory pre-closure – Image: Jaroslava Miler

I've missed the colourful bougainvillea, hibiscuses, azaleas and other flowering plants in our greenhouses that helped my spirits soar in particularly grey and difficult winters past, as well as the incredible spring flower bonanza displays, which never failed to delight, along with the baby rabbits, of course. The City's horticultural 'magicians' worked hard throughout the year to conjure up for visitors a kaleidoscope of vibrant, seasonal marvels. We are all poorer for their prolonged absence, especially the children, the elderly and the ill.

**Kate Douglas**, in the [March 24, 2021 edition](#) of the *New Scientist*, explains "just how vital access to natural space is for our mental well-being – with implications for how we design cities worldwide". The article provides much food for thought and underscores the ongoing need to rehabilitate and maintain year-round access to greenery and green spaces of all kinds. She mentions a [recent study](#) led by landscape architect **Anna Jorgensen** at the University of Sheffield, UK, that concludes that what city dwellers value most in their encounters with nature is variety.





Nature unbound – Image: Jaroslava Miler

## **Benefits of having community accessible greenhouses**

Studies show that horticultural educational programs can be a tool to enhance social connection and be productive in character development and improving understanding of self-image, self-esteem, and ability to succeed in the future.



Greenhouses provide learning experiences for all, especially the young – Image: Zoe Schaeffer, Unsplash

**Greenhouse Emporium**, a provider of educational greenhouses and advice to schools, health facilities, prisons, municipal parks, the general public, etc., was created by ‘Jesse’, a U.S. military veteran who, after finishing his deployment to Afghanistan, began gardening as a therapeutic pastime in upstate New York where, like ours in Quebec, the winters are long and the growing season short.

Luckily for him, a friend had a greenhouse on his family’s farm... and the result is a thriving business. Jesse admits gardening has had a lasting impact on his life. He recognizes everyone has their reasons for being involved in it, whether it’s the joy, peace, serenity or healing, or the hard work and innate satisfaction “digging in dirt” brings.

According to a blog post on their site: “Visits to parks appear to enhance peace and tranquillity, joy, intensity and the feeling of confidence and reduces feelings of depression. Engaging in greenhouse projects in public parks gets the feeling of achievement and significance of oneself to nature.”

## **Our glasshouses would make great year-round learning centres**

Both park-goers and City horticultural staff could benefit from turning the greenhouses into onsite, hands-on



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learning centres, not only for children but for adults too. I can imagine a wide variety of workshops and courses being held here, such as growing edibles in pots (especially in winter months), birding, urban wildlife and protection, mushroom cultivation, mosaiculture, bonsai and/or orchid growing, and seasonal wreath and/or lantern making for Harvest Festivals such as the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, Halloween, and other holidays such as Diwali, [Hanukkah](#), Christmas, Eid and [Ramadam](#), etc.

‘The options for activities are endless and only as limited as available budgets along with persons willing and able to share their knowledge and know-how.’

It’s also high time we began thinking more inclusively as a country, so how about sessions on [indigenous](#) foodstuffs, medicines, mythology, festivals and history? Westmount has a buried [history](#) and connection with first nation peoples who hunted, camped, and indeed some were once buried here.

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“Another interesting Mid-Autumn Festival custom is hanging up lanterns, made from bamboo and with various designs, such as birds, dragons, and flowers... Children especially enjoy this part of the festival, as they can make their own traditional lanterns. When darkness falls, locals place candles inside the lanterns and hang them outside. It is said that the higher the lanterns are hung, the luckier the family will be.”

– [blog.lingobus.com/chinese-learning-resources/culture-how-chinese-celebrate-mid-autumn-festival/](http://blog.lingobus.com/chinese-learning-resources/culture-how-chinese-celebrate-mid-autumn-festival/)

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Some bamboo species can grow outside in Canada  
– Image: Hans Ripa, Unsplash

**Bamboo** is a very fast-growing plant. Wouldn't it be enjoyable one year to have an activity where the children (and their parents or other adults perhaps?) make lanterns from bamboo harvested from one of our own greenhouses? Some **dwarf species** of bamboo can even survive Quebec winters. Instead of candles, the lanterns can be lit with low voltage battery-operated tea lights. With the seemingly ever-growing influx of residents of Chinese and Asian descent maybe it might be illuminating for some of us to learn more about holiday customs and practices from other parts of the globe.

### **Amateur art galleries and nature-themed book walks**

Westmount has a plethora of talented professional and amateur photographers; far more than our existing art gallery space can accommodate, so at different times of the year these spaces could potentially also be used for wildlife and other plant-based art, sculpture and photography exhibits, as well as for a series of nature learning panels similar to those used for the storybook walks in the park.

'It is better to preserve than to repair, better to repair than to restore, better to restore than reconstruct.'



– A.N. Dridon (1839)

The options are endless. I am sure other Westmounters, perhaps with the help of the Montreal Botanical Gardens or the **Biodiversity Centre (IRBV)**, could come up with innovative suggestions for using these precious glasshouses that do not include tearing them down.

Perhaps summer day campers and/or seniors and parents with toddlers can also use them as spaces of shelter during inclement weather. With comfortable seating, they could be light-filled reading, craft, art and picnic spaces on the greyest of days. Or, even a satellite location of the **Mouton Noir cafe** serving coffee and snacks, or a location for the ice-cream bicycle vendor or farmer's market in season.



A light-filled glasshouse cafe – Image: Kayleigh Harrington, Unsplash

‘To thine own house be true.’

– This Old House Journal

Indeed **Mark London**, himself a former Chairman of Westmount’s Architectural and Planning Commission (APC) now called the Planning Advisory Committee (PAC), stated in his 1994 book about the APC: “Its aims for existing buildings are to seek minimal possible intervention (“It is better to preserve than to repair, better to repair than to restore, better to restore than reconstruct”, A.N. Dridon, 1839) and to respect a building’s design integrity (“To thine





own house be true”, motto of This Old House Journal) by preserving character-defining features.”

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“Doorway to broken dreams” greenhouse entry off Lansdowne Lane – Image: Shahrzad Ghaffari

‘We are limited only by our imagination and our will to act.’

– Ron Garan





“City dwellers value variety in nature” – Image:  
Jaroslava Miler

It's a pity that philosophy was not a part of the City's thinking when it allowed this whole area in recent years to become the collection of dilapidated structures that now require extensive work to restore them to their former role in beautifying our parks. Note the heritage features such as the sunburst fanlight above a disused entry door on Lansdowne Lane. They don't make glasshouses like this anymore.

Thus I can think of nothing better for this unused, glassed-in space in Westmount Park than for it to become a hive of activity related to protecting and educating current and future Westmounters and visitors about nature, biodiversity, horticulture and combining that with artistic and other endeavours.

In the words of astronaut, aquanaut, author, fighter pilot, test pilot, and social entrepreneur **Ron Garan**, who has helped bring drinking water to millions in Africa: “We are limited only by our imagination and our will to act.”

## The City promised to restore what was there before

‘The city also plans on re-doing its network of eight greenhouses and modernizing them. That cost isn't known yet...’



– Amanda Jelowicki, Global News, September 1, 2016



View from Conservatory towards 'working' greenhouses – Image: Jaroslava Miler

According to a [Global News item](#) on the outcome of the first of several reports commissioned by Westmount on the greenhouse complex and issued over the subsequent years: “The city says fixing it piecemeal isn’t an option... There are areas that are rotting and are potentially dangerous and it needs to be reconstructed,” councillor **Cynthia Lulham** says. “It’s not a matter of just fixing a few areas.”

“Fixing the conservatory and frog pond alone will cost at least \$2 million. The city also plans on re-doing its network of eight greenhouses and modernizing them. That cost isn’t known yet...” reported **Amanda Jelowicki** in her Global News segment, first broadcast on September 1, 2016.

For those interested, one can still read the [article](#) and see an online video of the greenhouses (as they were then). Councillor Lulham, Commissioner of Parks, is on record as saying: “We are absolutely going to rebuild... it is an iconic part of our city heritage”.

Well, that was 2016, the year after the complex was summarily closed in 2015. Now it’s spring 2021 and it seems





~~the only costs we are aware of are the current \$6.275+ million (it's a huge jump from 2 million to 6+ million) budgeted to repair the Lord & Burnham cascading greenhouse and the adjacent small greenhouse with the Frog aka Cupid pond. What about the rest? Where's the update on the future and, hopefully, repair of the remainder of the complex?~~

## The mystery of the vanished plants and flowers

The [recently published images](#) of the soon-to-be 'revitalized' cascading greenhouse show substantially less area available for growing plants and flowers. Apparently, there is going to be a great deal more open floor, staircase and ramp spaces making it more accessible without a doubt but with precious few plantings available to view. Is this why we no longer need our City horticulturalists and our complex of working greenhouses?



Sketch of proposed Conservatory design – Image: courtesy of Affleck de la Riva

Inside, the hump-backed bridge over the water feature is gone and the former magical fish pools have been reduced to what looks like a token but minuscule in-ground fish depression. All the planting areas have also been scaled down to shadows of their past selves, making this former primary plant house into more of an incredibly expensive gathering or passing through space than the soaring and glorious “food for the senses and the soul” sanctuary it used to be.

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I'm not sure if the writer of the article on the refurbished conservatory was being ironic when referring to the “mystery garden” that will be revealed once the renovations are done and hopefully they aren't simply referring to a view of the storytelling garden already visible from the adjacent library windows.



But it certainly will be a mystery to most return visitors used to the previous cornucopia of blossoms as to where they all went. Maybe the musician featured in the architect's drawing will be serenading us with the Pete Seeger classic *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?*

Thus won't we still need all the growing space and exhibition space we can recuperate from the six former 'working' greenhouses to make up in part for the vanished growing areas in the sorely denuded but extremely expensively renovated cascading one? Or is the 21st century City of Westmount glasshouse philosophy "less is more"?



Springtime in the former Conservatory – Image: Andrew Burlone

## How can you voice your opinion on the future of our Westmount Park glasshouses?

[You can comment on the City website](#) and/or below this article, as well as by signing and/or commenting on the online [NatureScene: Support Nature in Westmount Park Now petition](#).

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Feature image: [Echo Wang](#) on [Unsplash](#)

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***Wanda Potrykus** is a writer, editor, translator and poet. A graduate of McGill, she has spent most of her career in marketing communications, PR, event and media relations specializing in international aviation, telecommunications, education and the marketing of the arts.*



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