

GARDEN JOURNEYS OPEN DAYS 2025 REPORT

Executive Summary

The **Garden Journeys Open Days (GJOD) 2025** event, held over two weekends in August 2025 in Hamilton, Ontario, showcased forty biodiversity-focused gardens to the public. Organized under the auspices of **Halton Region Master Gardeners (HMG)**, the event supports the **City of Hamilton's Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP)** by promoting education, stewardship, and community engagement in biodiversity conservation.

Background and Objectives

In alignment with the City's **Biodiversity Action Plan (2024–2029)**, which emphasizes public education and stewardship, GJOD aims to:

1. **Connect gardeners** who support biodiversity through native and sustainable gardening practices.
2. **Educate the public** on how small, manageable steps can create eco-friendly gardens.
3. **Redefine gardening** by demonstrating that gardens can be both aesthetically pleasing and ecologically functional.

Program Overview

The 2025 event featured **37 residential gardens** and **3 public gardens** (a park, school, and church), all free and open to visitors. Gardens were selected based on ecological principles such as native plant use, organic maintenance, and support for wildlife. The event ran across ten time slots over two weekends, including Friday evenings and daytime sessions on Saturdays and Sundays.

Recruitment of host gardeners was conducted through HMG newsletters, social media, partner organizations, and City of Hamilton communications. Forty-one gardens were initially registered:

forty participated. Funding, provided by HMG and several private donors, supported the production of professionally printed yard signs, posters, and tokens of appreciation.

Outreach and Participation

Event promotion included City Councillor newsletters, the Hamilton Spectator garden column, and community partners such as **Green Venture** and the **Hamilton Naturalists Club**. Despite limited media coverage, visibility improved through signage and social media outreach. Visitor numbers varied but were strongest in clustered garden areas and during morning time slots, with weather conditions influencing attendance.

Feedback and Outcomes

Eighty percent of hosts completed post-event feedback, with **over 84% expressing interest in participating again in 2027**. More than **90% reported stronger community connections** and enhanced engagement with biodiversity-focused gardeners. Hosts valued opportunities to share knowledge, exchange ideas, and inspire traditional gardeners to adopt native planting practices.

Lessons and Recommendations

Feedback indicated opportunities to:

- Consider alternative timing (late spring or early summer) to improve attendance and plant diversity.
- Expand media partnerships and social media presence.
- Recruit geographically proximate gardens to facilitate visitor flow.
- Explore alternative tokens of appreciation and develop a formal **planning toolkit** to guide future organizers and other communities.

Conclusion

Garden Journeys Open Days 2025 successfully advanced the City of Hamilton's biodiversity education and stewardship goals by fostering collaboration among residents, promoting native planting practices, and celebrating ecological gardening. The event demonstrated that public engagement in biodiversity can be achieved effectively through community-driven, volunteer-led initiatives. Continued refinement, expanded outreach, and strengthened partnerships will further enhance the program's impact in future years.

Background

The City of Hamilton has recognized that on both the local and global scale, biodiversity is in a state of decline. In response, the City has developed the five-year Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), passed by City Council in June 2024. This important and well-developed plan brings together multiple partners to guide the collaborative protection and restoration of biodiversity. Multiple strategies are required to protect the biodiversity hotspot that is our city. One approach is that of educating and encouraging the public to recognize and enhance Hamilton's biodiversity (Key Priority 4, BAP)

Residential land occupies a significant portion of Hamilton, and the gardens of these residences and homes can play an important role in supporting biodiversity. Residents can support biodiversity in several ways: planting plants native to our ecodistrict, removing invasive plants, managing rainwater, and supporting native wildlife including pollinators, amongst other strategies. However, naturalistic and functional gardens supporting the ecosystem do not always conform to past notions of pretty landscaping, and misconceptions of “messy” or “weedy” gardens abound. The reality is much different. Gardens supporting biodiversity are managed and attractive in addition to being functional for the ecosystem. Increasingly, home gardeners are recognizing the value of this approach but are not always confident and knowledgeable in how to move in this direction. Fortunately, more and more residents in our city have begun the journey to eco-friendly gardens; however this is often done in isolation and without connection to other such gardens. As well, other more traditional gardeners remain unaware of the importance and the beauty of gardens supporting biodiversity.

The City of Hamilton's Biodiversity Action Plan and its annual updates can be accessed here:
<https://www.hamilton.ca/home-neighbourhood/environmental-stewardship/environmental-plans-strategies/biodiversity-action#information-reports>

Goals of Garden Journeys Open Days

1. **Connecting Gardeners.** To bring together and build community for gardeners focusing on supporting biodiversity through their native plant and sustainable gardens
2. **Educate the Public.** To illustrate sustainable gardens and educate the general public that having a garden which supports biodiversity and the ecosystem is a journey which can start with small steps
3. **Re-define “garden”.** To demonstrate the pleasure and beauty of gardens which not only look good but have functional connections with living things, both plant and animal.

Program Description

Garden Journeys Open Days is a biennial event under the auspices of Halton Region Master Gardeners (HMG) and was held for the second time over two weekends in August 2025 in Hamilton Ontario. Gardens were selected based on ecological garden principles such as the use of native plants, organic horticultural practices, and support for native wildlife. Forty gardens were available for the public to visit, free of charge and without tickets. Thirty-seven of the gardens were residential, one was in a public park, a second located in a Hamilton school, and a third at a local church.

The gardens were recruited through the HMG newsletter, social media, and similarly minded non-profit organizations. The City of Hamilton was also instrumental via several city councillors' newsletters to constituents and the Trillium Awards program. In addition, information was provided in the Hamilton Spectator by garden columnist Rob Howard. Green Venture provided significant support in recruiting gardens which had benefited from their "Rain Ready Hamilton" program. A few days after the event finished, host gardeners were asked to complete a feedback form and provide suggestions for future events. Of the 40 host gardeners, 32 completed the feedback form (80%).

The event was coordinated by two members of Halton Region Master Gardeners, and a former member, along with support from one of the inaugural coordinators and an unaffiliated ecological gardener.

City of Hamilton's Biodiversity Action Plan, June 2024

Our city's Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) was passed by City Council in June 2024, and is updated annually. One of the stated goals of the BAP is to "explore, educate and exchange information about biodiversity through partnerships, community science and outreach." Additionally, Key Priority 4 is Education and Stewardship. The BAP partners recognize that everyone must play in protecting and enhancing Hamilton's biodiversity. Public education and awareness of the importance of biodiversity will be enhanced through learning opportunities and hands-on stewardship activities with partner agencies. Through the actions in this key priority, community members and private landowners will be given opportunities to learn and undertake actions to address threats to biodiversity.

Garden Journeys Open days serves to educate and encourage home gardeners to build and maintain home gardens that support biodiversity. A significant portion of the land within City limits is owned and maintained by homeowners. By growing native plants and using organic gardening techniques that are nature-friendly, home gardens can make a significant contribution to building biodiversity in the City. The volunteer efforts of the host gardeners in this event to educate the public and themselves is an extremely cost-effective way to make the necessary changes across the city.

Organization

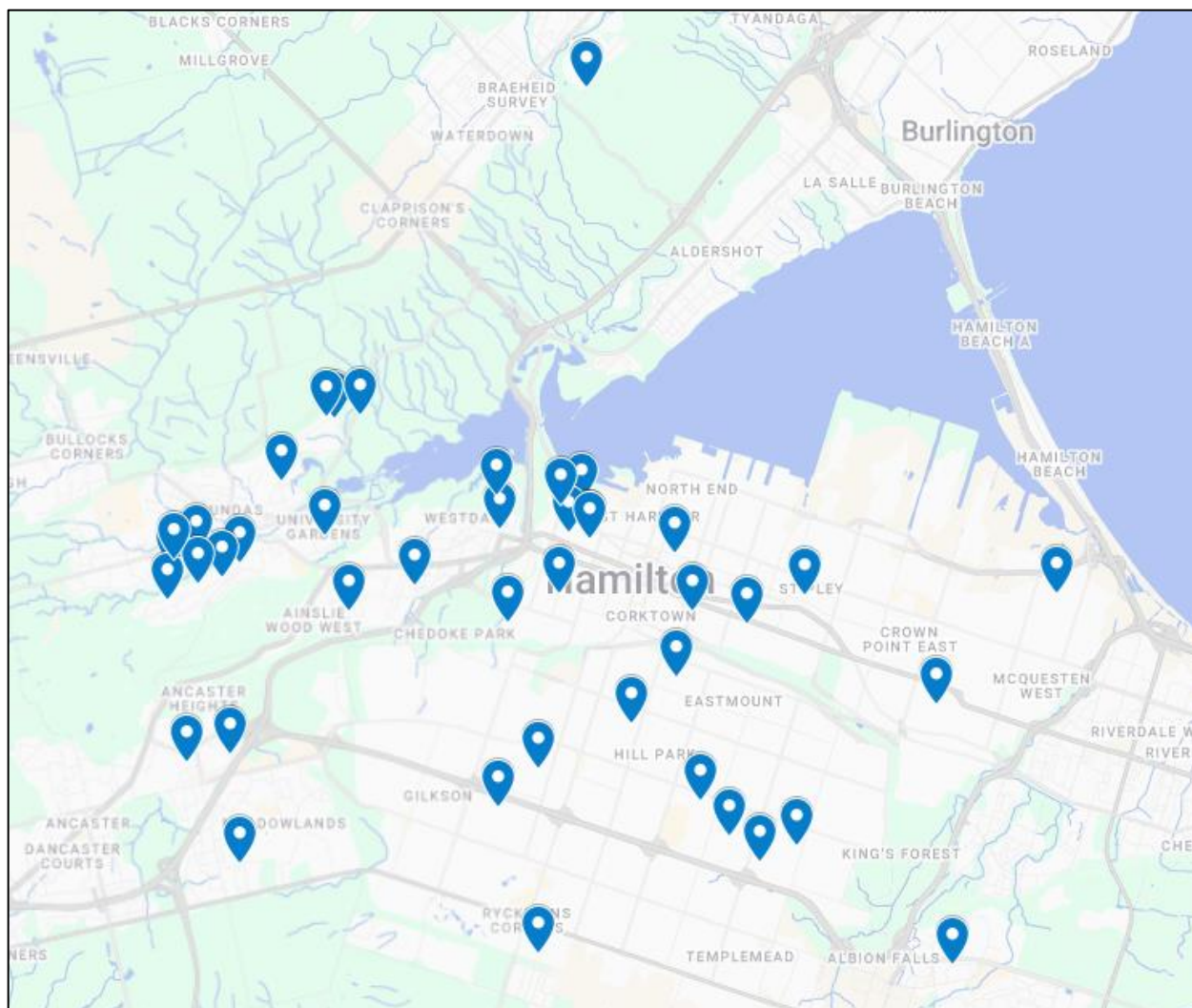
This year's event was held over two weekends – August 8, 9, 10, and August 15, 16, 17, with 10 time slots, including Friday evenings, Saturday and Sunday mornings and afternoons. The August dates were chosen to avoid conflicting with long-standing open garden and garden tour events, which typically are held in the late spring and early summer. As well, native plant gardens tend to stand out in late summer when more traditional gardens are often past their prime. There were two types of gardens: hosted gardens with the gardener present to explain and discuss their garden's journey supporting the environment and "sidewalk showcases" which could be viewed from the street at any time during the event without a host being present. Host gardeners chose which time slot they would open their garden and if they offered a sidewalk showcase. Five gardeners offered a sidewalk showcase only, including the three public gardens. They were encouraged to visit other gardens on the tour during other times. This marked a change from the 2023 event, when hosts were required to select 5 time slots. This change allowed the hosts more time to visit other gardens and was in response to host feedback in 2023. The Friday evening time slot was shortened to 6 to 8 pm, with recognition of the usual sunset at that time of year. The Thursday evening slot of 2023 was discarded in 2025.

Number of Gardens Open, dates and hours

Date	Evening 6-8 pm	Morning 9am-12 pm	Afternoon 1- 4pm
Friday August 8	14		
Saturday August 9		16	12
Sunday August 10		14	15
Friday August 15	15		
Saturday August 16		15	14
Sunday August 17		14	15

Location of Open Gardens

Dundas	12
Ancaster	3
Flamborough East	1
Hamilton West	4
Hamilton South	4
Hamilton North	6
Hamilton East	2
Mountain South	1
Mountain S.E.	6
Mountain North	2
Stoney Creek/Vineland	1



Host Gardener Recruitment

Emails were sent to individuals and organizations identified as having an interest in promoting biodiverse and native plant gardening. They were asked for suggestions and for promotional help by distributing information about the event to their contacts. Hamilton City Councillors and appropriate staff members were also contacted. Individual gardeners who had previously received a Monarch Award for their biodiverse home gardens were asked to consider participating. Social media via Halton Region Master Gardeners (HMG) accounts also promoted the event and encouraged gardeners to apply. HMG newsletters, website, and community advice clinics provided information about the event. Those who had participated or evinced interest in the initial 2023 event were also a natural group to recruit. Interested gardeners were asked to complete an online form to ensure that their garden was a good fit with the goals of the event. Forty-one gardeners successfully completed the assessment form to enroll their garden. One had to withdraw prior to the event for personal reasons, and forty gardens were open during event.

Funding

While the 2023 and 2024 events were run without funding, this year's event received donations from several interested host gardeners as well as from Halton Master Gardeners. The funding was used towards yard signs, posters, and tokens of appreciation for the hosts.

Donations	
W.O.	\$200.00
A.W.	\$200.00
L. C.	\$200.00
J. J.	\$200.00
V. M.	\$200.00
Halton Master Gardeners	\$100.00
Expenditures	
Athens Printing (posters, signs)	\$313.59
Monika Pottery (thank you gift to hosts) 40 40 @ \$16 + tax	\$723.20
Staples (lamination, plastic page protectors)	\$ 40.61
Dollar store gift bags	\$ 13.56

Outreach to the Public

Publicizing this event to the public is a challenge without funding to place notices in the local media. However, in 2025 we received sufficient funding to have posters and yard sign professionally printed, which did help with public awareness. The Hamilton Spectator garden columnist, Rob Howard, made mention of the event in his column. There was no response to outreach to local media reporters. Following recruitment of 40 gardens, action switched to promoting the event to the public by Halton Region Master Gardeners, along with supporting organizations including Green Venture, Action 13, and the Hamilton Naturalists Club. Several City of Hamilton Councillors included information of the event in their newsletters.

Support to Host Gardeners

Host gardeners were provided with a variety of aids to help them with their participation in the event. This included a professionally printed weather resistant yard sign with the logo and space to write in open hours, posters for posting in their neighbourhood, periodic email updates from the team with suggestions and advice for hosting an open garden event, a spreadsheet with contact information for the other gardeners, and an interactive map of all the gardens. A token of appreciation was available to the hosts during and after the event. The professionally printed signs and posters were new from the 2023 event (which was unfunded). Feedback from the host gardeners was very positive for all these aids. The yard signs in particular received positive reviews from the hosts.

Visitor Numbers

As this is a free and unticketed event, visitor numbers can only be estimated. Host gardeners were asked to keep track of visitor numbers but this wasn't always possible when multiple visitors were present or when hosts were distracted or forgot. Generally, Friday evenings had the fewest visitors; however this time slot was shorter, at 2 hours instead of 3. Saturday and Sunday mornings were busiest with some gardens having over 20 visitors during that time slot. Some gardeners did not have any visitors in a timeslot. An informal observation is that when gardens are clustered geographically, they have more visitors, and when a garden is at considerable distance from any other garden it is less likely to be visited. Another consideration is that this event was held during a period of high heat and little rain. This likely contributed to the higher number of visitors in the mornings (9am-12pm) with fewer in the afternoons (1pm-4 pm).

Feedback from Host Gardeners

Following the event, 80% of host gardeners responded to an online feedback and suggestion survey. It is very encouraging that over 84% of respondents indicated they would participate in a future GJOD in 2027, with another 12% indicating "maybe". Only one participant indicated they were not interested in opening their garden in the future. Most hosts indicated their interest in participating in an open garden event for past host gardeners, with 75% of respondents indicating they were interested in participating, and another 22 % indicated "maybe".

As one of the goals of this event is to build connections and community between gardeners focused on biodiversity, it was encouraging to see that over 90% of host gardeners found this event to be helpful in doing so.

Suggestions from Host Gardeners for Future Events

A free text section of the feedback form asked host gardeners for suggestions and comments about what went well, what needed improvement, and suggestions for their own and/or planners in future. Some host gardeners indicated changes they would make in their own garden or hosting practices, including such things as a garden map, print outs of their native plants, and being more aware of when visitors arrived. Some found visitors appreciated viewing books and other material on eco-friendly gardening. Specific feedback for future planning included the following suggestions:

- Consider a different time of year – suggestions included late spring and early summer. Gardening interest is high amongst the public at that time of year; it could avoid the heat and drought experienced this year; a different variety of plant blooms would be on display.
- Consider adding a weekday timeslot – several visitors indicated it would be good for those who are retired.
- More city coverage of the event by the City of Hamilton generally, and the local media would be helpful.

- Increase the social media coverage – one single hashtag and postings in across the most common social media. Pay to have the postings “boosted”, e.g. in FaceBook.

General Comments

Most host gardeners commented very positively about the event and its organization. Over 30 hosts commented that talking about native plants and biodiversity was a highlight for them – both with “like-minded” gardeners and those who were new to the concepts. The following quote captures the spirit of the comments:

“I really enjoyed Garden Journeys Open Days for a few reasons. It was such a good chance to connect with other native plant gardeners and trade stories, tips, and even seeds or plants. I also loved chatting with more traditional gardeners who were curious about the benefits of native plants—it felt great to share what I’ve learned. On top of that, it gave me the perfect excuse to get my yard looking its best, and I walked away with plenty of fresh ideas for next year’s garden.”

Future Planning

Written feedback from host gardeners and reported informal comments from visitors are very useful for future events. Key areas of exploration include the following:

1. **Timing of the event.** The August dates in both 2023 and 2025 were chosen to avoid conflicting with other garden events, particularly the very large Hamilton Spectator Open Garden Week event which for many years has taken place at the end of June. This well-established event is also free and unticketed for visitors, however it will not be run in future years. This does provide opportunity for Garden Journeys Open Days to consider moving its dates.
2. **Week-day time slots.** Evening dates are somewhat problematic in August as the days are shorter, and it appeared that the Friday evening times were less popular. However, this differs from the experience in 20023 when both Thursday and Friday evenings were available, some of which were quite popular with visitors.
3. **Garden Recruitment.** There has been no difficulty recruiting biodiversity friendly gardens for this event; however, visitor numbers may be increased to some gardens if future recruitment focused more intentionally to identify multiple gardens in the same neighbourhood. Visitors seem to prefer visiting when they can quickly walk, cycle, or drive to multiple gardens within the same area. While host gardeners were encouraged to identify near-by gardens, this could be made much more deliberate and could be supported with flyers to be delivered to potential host gardeners.
4. **Promotion of the event.**
Funds received from donors and from Halton Region Master Gardeners this year make it possible to have professionally printed yard signs and posters. They were designed by a HMG member at no charge. Feedback from host gardeners indicated that the yard signs

were very helpful not only in flagging their gardens for visitors but also in letting neighbours and passers-by know about the event. Posters were distributed by the hosts themselves, and many found it difficult to do so due to regulations etc. Recruiting a team to distribute posters may make this more successful in future. Funding this year was limited and there were insufficient lawn signs for all the gardens. With additional funding, sufficient could be printed to ensure an adequate number.

Social media promotion is challenging this year. The HMG social media accounts are relatively inactive, although the event was posted on Facebook. HMG members were encouraged to post information on their personal social media accounts, although several hosts commented that they did not much activity. Identifying a lead team member for social media promotion may be helpful as none of this year's team members are active social media users. With additional funding, "boosting" on social media may also be helpful.

Mainstream Media was more difficult to access this year. We were unable to interest reporters from CHCH TV and the Hamilton Spectator in reporting on the event. With the loss of many smaller community papers, it was difficult to identify reporters from the small online community newspapers who had been helpful 2023. The Hamilton Spectator does have an event page; however we did not have sufficient funds to run any notices.

Various like-minded Hamilton organizations were asked to promote the event but the extent to which this happened was difficult to assess. Persistent follow up of these requests may result in additional reminders.

Tokens of appreciation

This year a pottery flower posy made by a local potter were offered to the host gardens as a token of appreciation for their efforts. This was thought to be an important way to encourage on-going participation in the event. While this was appreciated by some, it may not have been necessary to encourage participation. It may be worth exploring the cost of other tokens such a small and attractive sign that could be mounted in the garden to commemorate participation.

Developing a Planning Package

Planning for an event such as this requires significant time and human resources however it can be made easier if the developmental steps and the potential pitfalls are recorded. One host gardener noted that many out-of-town visitors lamented the lack of such an even in their community. A "how-to" guide would be helpful not only for future GJOD events but also for other community groups.

Final Words

Garden Journeys Open Days is an open garden event designed to demonstrate that gardening for biodiversity is a journey, and like all journeys, begins with a single step. Encouragement and education are key elements in building a city-wide community of eco-gardeners. Volunteers make this event run, and fortunately there is enthusiasm and deep commitment to building this event and improving its outreach each year.