



Planting Small Forests

By ROB MILLER

THE SCENT OF TOBACCO, SAGE and sweetgrass drifted across a field in Calgary's Bowmont Park as Elder Marilyn Shingoose provided a blessing and smudge ceremony before 125 eager volunteers. Young people, seniors and families with small children had gathered to plant a tiny forest in a ravine near Silver Springs. As they planted over 200 trees and shrubs, the group bustled with activity and spirited chatter. The energy was infectious.

The effort was led by the Calgary Climate Hub, a volunteer-driven non-profit organization that brings Calgarians together to support local action on climate change. I joined the Climate Hub after Greta Thunberg's "How Dare You" speech moved me to tears. A year later I was hooked on climate activism, and I retired to devote more energy to the cause. Kenyan forester Festus Kiplagat shared a post on LinkedIn describing the benefits of Miyawaki forests and this led me to pitch the concept to Calgary Parks. Coincidentally, they'd just started a Miyawaki pilot project and wanted to talk to me about getting community volunteers to plant trees.

The Miyawaki method is based on the work of Japanese botanist Akira Miyawaki, who pioneered a process incorporating soil preparation and amendment, careful selection of native plant species and community involvement in forest planting. The Miyawaki method makes it possible to grow a healthy forest about the size of a

tennis court in just 10 years. The forest density encourages rapid growth and creates a small ecosystem that attracts birds, pollinators and other wildlife.

Along its river valleys, Calgary is home to some magnificent forests, including stands of Douglas fir that are several centuries old. Walking the trails through these ancient forests is a wonderful way to connect with nature and reduce stress. But much of the city was developed on grasslands beyond these natural forests. City planning and urban forestation created the tree canopy in older communities. This tree canopy provides cooling shade on the hottest summer days, as well as shelter from wind, rain and hail.

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The smallest seedlings we plant today will grow tall and be loved by future generations. In Bowmont Park, I witnessed young children thrilled to be putting a tiny life form into the ground and shovelling dirt over its roots. People laughed and chatted with strangers as they passed potted shrubs along a self-organized bucket brigade. This was a working example of the community spirit that is often lost in our modern society. There is no online equivalent to

such an inspiring connection between community and nature.

The Forests for Calgary initiative was put in motion when Angela McIntyre, the Calgary Climate Hub's new director, saw an opportunity for the Hub to apply for a grant from Alberta Ecotrust. Two months later we had funding to plant 10 Miyawaki forests and create a Calgary-specific guidebook for communities, schools or businesses that want to embark on their own tiny-forest journey.

The leadership team seemed to serendipitously fall into place. Sandra Mills is the founding member of the Hub's Nature Group and co-creator of the BirdNerds website. Heather Addy is a recently retired University of Calgary professor and biologist who studied plant-fungal interactions. Heather Morigeau is an artist and founder of the Indigenous-led organization FoodScape Calgary, which focuses on restorative landscaping and healthy urban ecosystems.

With the help of Calgary Parks, the Hub's Forests for Calgary project completed its first planting event at Bowmont Park in 2022 and has accepted community partner applications for the 2023 planting season. Our goal is to engage community leaders across the city and kick-start efforts to increase the tree canopy in underforested communities. ■

Rob Miller is a retired systems engineer and volunteer with the Calgary Climate Hub.