

Haunted Greenhouse is new spin on Forest tradition

A haunted greenhouse may conjure up images of windowpanes pockmarked by rocks or Morticia Addams cutting the red blooms off her roses for just the right creepy touch. But, like so many things in 2020, that is all set to change as the Town of Aurora transforms its greenhouses at the Joint Operations Centre into the perfect socially-distanced Halloween extravaganza.

Aurora's Haunted Greenhouse, which takes place from October 24 ? October 30, is this year's answer to the annual Haunted Forest. Although the Haunted Forest, which attracts hundreds of young ghouls and goblins to Sheppard's Bush each year, is a no-go this season, the Town wasn't about to let the pandemic get in the way of serving up something spooky.

?Back when we were in Stage 1 and transitioning to Stage 2, we started looking at Halloween, the second-largest holiday celebrated in Canada next to Christmas,? says Shelley Ware, Special Events Coordinator for the Town of Aurora. ?We wanted to make sure there was still something based on whatever condition our community was going to be in by October. Knowing we couldn't do mass gatherings at Sheppard's Bush, we tried to figure out if a drive-thru concept would work, but it came to us we could turn our greenhouses into a haunted experience.?

The Joint Operation Centre's (JOC) greenhouses not only grow the lush seasonal plants and blooms that decorate the landscape during the spring and summer, they are also used to store Yonge Street planters over the fall and winter. With the space available, Ms. Ware and her team were almost overwhelmed by the possibilities on how they could translate the Haunted Forest experience into something indoors and spread over several days.

?We tried to research other similar events and couldn't find any, so that upped the ante of our challenge overall, but fortunately the Town has three connected greenhouses that is going to enable us to package two for a family [experience] and the third where people have the option to go for an extra thrill,? says Ms. Ware. ?Once they exit the scary greenhouse, if they choose to go that route, we will actually have four haunted cabins set up to increase their experience.

?In this Haunted Greenhouse, you may come across an actual full-scale bathtub and you may find Ariel the Mermaid in it. As well, some of the famous displays that are on the Haunted Forest's scary trail and cabin are being reconfigured and brought back with some of the famous characters. On the family side, we're dealing with a slightly smaller footprint, so I think you're going to see the best of the best brought together in a very different sequence.?

Between October 24 and October 30, there will be 12 chances to take part in the Haunted Greenhouse experience, and pre-registration for wristbands is required at \$3 per person and bookable through the Town's ePlay platform at aurora.ca/eplay.

?We want people to be totally comfortable and confident in their safety so people can focus on the fun and engaging aspects we're trying to offer to them,? says Ms. Ware, adding that as soon as registered participants find their places in the socially-distanced lineup outside the JOC the entertainment experience will already be underway for waiting revellers. ?Provincial orders are a minimum standard and we have gone extensively beyond to ensure that we're providing a great experience and one that people can kind of forget that we're in a pandemic and be able to take this kind of joy and experience every element of surprise and enjoyment that has gone into it.

?This likely might be the only Haunted Greenhouse in Ontario. It is right here in your own back yard, so I challenge and invite everyone to come out and to see Aurora's community creativity at its finest as we literally transform an empty greenhouse and turn it into a haunted attraction I hope will have so much traction that hopefully this won't be the only greenhouse next year.

?There are a lot of moving pieces to this, and with the Haunted Forest we went from a one night event spanned over three hours to now a six night event, four hours each night, and there is not a chance we could do this without Marquee Theatrical Productions, the Aurora Scouting Group and the Knuth Family because this has been a huge undertaking.?

For more on the Town's Haunted Greenhouse, as well as their Hallowe'en-in-a-Bag package, visit aurora.ca/hauntedgreenhouse.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter