

Garden provides those living with dementia a feast for the senses



By Brock Weir

In 2014, the Alzheimer Society of York Region moved from Newmarket to Aurora's newly-minted Cartwright Centre to increase capacity for clients they serve and be part of a community health care hub; now they are growing again – literally – with a new sensory garden.

In the last year alone, the Society's Social Work team helped over 2,220 families in York Region navigate their journey with Alzheimer's Disease and dementia in over 35 different ethnic communities, while hosting 100 clients a day, six days a week at their unique adult day programs.

These clients will soon be able to experience their own moments of earthy Zen with the construction of the sensory garden, which is now underway.

Dignitaries assembled at the Cartwright Centre, formerly Canada Law Book on Edward Street, which now serves as home to not just the Society, but also CHATS (Community and Home Assistance to Seniors), and York Support Services Network, to help the Society break ground on the new garden, which is the final stage in their planned expansion.

“Research indicates that sensory gardens are an effective therapeutic activity that can stimulate sensations in the care of persons with dementia,” said Loren Freid, CEO of the Alzheimer Society of York Region. “While every garden is unique, all share certain features that stimulate fond memories of days gone by and provide a sense of security and comfort.”

Once complete, garden features will include a wooden fence between the garden and the parking lot so it becomes “a quiet oasis,” a raised flower bed for planting vegetables and herbs that can be harvested for clients to share, two separate garden plants with several “sensory plants, bushes and flowers” to offer a variety of scents, feels and, in the attraction of birds and butterflies, sounds designed to stimulate the senses, a pergola for shade and seating areas, and a circular walking path.

“People with Alzheimer's disease often experience anxiety and stress, sometimes caused by not remembering where they are, or who they are with, or where they are going,” said Mr. Freid. “Having a circular walking path allows them to release stress and feel less anxious by walking through the garden, looking at – as well as touching and smelling – the beautiful plants and greenery. They will also enjoy the fresh air in a comfortable and unencumbered area for casual strolls without raising anxiety about the destination.

“As a result, the garden becomes not only a beautiful and calming destination, but a fundamental and essential outdoor program area adjacent to our day program. It will enrich the experience of hundreds of clients and their families here at our Aurora D.A.Y. Centre. The new garden represents a component of our vision for a new centre of excellence in dementia care here in York Region to address the rising tide of dementia in all stages of its progress.”

The Society's Sensory Garden project has been made possible by donor support from the J.P. Bickell Foundation, Commonwell Mutual Insurance Group, and Dr. Allan Carswell and the Carswell Family Foundation who matched all donations.

Construction of the Sensory Garden will be completed by the end of October, thanks to the work of Newmarket's Atlas Landscaping.