



Gwaii Trust Society

Old Massett Village Council's Much-Loved Garden Box Program Fights Isolation Through Food

By David Archer

Photos by Christopher Horner

The Old Massett Village Council (OMVC) Elders Centre supplied more than 200 garden box kits to residents during a summer 2020 project funded by Gwaii Trust Society.

In Gaw Tlagee *Old Massett*, “food is culture,” says Christopher Horner. As coordinator of the Adult Day Program at the OMVC Elders Centre, Christopher and the OMVC helped keep local culture alive in summer 2020 with a program that provided hundreds of garden boxes to Old Massett members. The program owes its success to community-wide generosity and an irresistible enthusiasm for building gardens, getting outside, and learning something new during the pandemic.

The Gwaii Trust Society funded the OMVC's garden box program with a COVID-19 Emergency Grant of \$60,000. This grant program is still running in 2021 with a focus on mental health support and reducing social isolation among Haida Gwaii residents.



Graham Wilson

The project stemmed from a simple concept: provide residents, including Elders, everything they need to start a home garden. The OMVC set a goal to do this for half of the 410 households in the Greater Massett area. Each household that participated received a garden box made of cedar, enough soil for eight or nine square feet of growing space, and a kit of seeds and seedlings. The boxes were built and installed by

workers and volunteers, and were designed with accessibility in mind. For example, some were installed as raised beds to meet the physical needs of residents who may be unable to work on their hands and knees.

As the first residents started receiving their boxes, word spread quickly across town, which led to more demand, more boxes, and more budding gardeners. OMVC used social media to tell the community about the program too, and, pretty soon, gardening became a village-wide pastime. “On sunny days outside you’d see everyone cleaning up their yard, working on their garden,” says Christopher. OMVC Elders Centre started with a list of 48 households, but by the end of the project, the team delivered 259 boxes in total - an incredible result. “It was probably the busiest year we’ve ever had.”

It didn’t take long for the project to blossom. “It was really a collaboration of the whole community coming together,” Christopher says. Christopher and the volunteers at the Adult Day Program coordinated with OMVC to lead the project, but many others got involved. Many people whose workplaces closed during the pandemic offered their help. The Council of the Haida Nation (CHN) lent six staff members to the program to assist with the gardens and set up boxes. Volunteers from OMVC, the Health Centre, the Village of Massett, Old Massett’s volunteer fire department, and some village Elders were among those who helped out. The project also received lumber donations from local mills - scrap pieces of cedar that became gardeners’ gold.

The project’s success helped keep spirits up and reduce isolation during a stressful year. “The main thing was we wanted to keep a connection with our clients and with the community.” The garden boxes gave Christopher and his team an easy way to check in with elders and strike up a conversation when they could no longer meet in person. “I think working around food and working around land-based activities really brings teaching and story-sharing,” says Christopher. Gardening helped some Elders share stories and perspectives related to serious events in Haida Gwaii history, such as floods caused by a tsunami, residential schools, or even smallpox epidemics.

Programming at the OMVC Elders Centre is food-focused, but activities have been in flux since the pandemic started. Before COVID-19, the Elders Centre typically hosted Elders for lunch five days per week. Usually between 15 and 30 people would attend. The pandemic forced the program to close, but the Elders Centre switched tactics and decided to deliver food instead. Its list of clients increased too. Before

long, Chris and volunteers were preparing lunch five times a week for 85 community members, with daily delivery. Every Friday, the team would also deliver fresh produce to some Elders in partnership with the BC Association of Farmers' Markets.

The garden boxes and lunches are two examples of a much larger effort to build food sovereignty on Haida Gwaii. The Elders Centre's greenhouse is another place where people learn about food. Students from Chief Matthews School often visit and get their hands dirty growing fresh produce for the community by planting seeds, watering crops, and learning about food production. When it's safe, they meet with Elders at the gardens too. The Elders pass on knowledge and stories, but generational influence goes both ways. Some Elders don't like vegetables, says Christopher. But they watch the Chief Matthews students pick veggies like peas and cucumbers. "When the kids are doing it, the elders want to do it too."



Fresh lettuce and strawberries are among the produce harvested at the Elders Centre Greenhouse



A young helper at the Elders Centre greenhouse

It will be hard for the Elders Centre to follow the garden box success with something bigger and better. With so many participants in the garden box and food programs, it has been a challenge to manage everything while providing individual support to each Elder. Providing more education is a logical next step so that the gardens can keep growing year after year. Christopher hears that people want more garden support, but also knows that more funding and more staff will be needed to maintain a program of this size. "It's almost like we've created a learning lab at [Elders' houses]," he says. Regardless, the Elders Centre and OMVC will continue to provide as much education as they can at the community greenhouse so that Elders can stay connected with the land, community, and culture, and maybe even dream up the next big gardening bee.

The Gwaii Trust Society funded the OMVC's garden box project through the COVID-19 grant program. This program is still available to Haida Gwaii non-profit organizations and governments in 2021. To Learn more about the grant program and find out how to apply visit gwaiitrust.com/grants/covidgrant

For questions about the OMVC garden box program, contact Christopher Horner at christopherhorner@me.com

Travel Assistance Grant Reopens

As travel begins to open up again both on and off Haida Gwaii the Gwaii Trust Board of Directors have voted to re-open the Travel Assistance Grant.

The travel grant for individuals helps residents travel off-island to participate in educational, cultural, arts, sports and seniors' events. This grant can also help with travel costs to bring expertise on-island for educational, arts, cultural, sports, seniors and special needs purposes.

The travel grant for groups is open to all residents of Haida Gwaii, as well as schools and non-profit organizations. This grant helps teams and other groups travel off-island to participate in educational, cultural, arts, sports and seniors' events. It can also be used to help fund on-island travel for school groups.

To Learn more and find out how to apply, use our grant search engine at gwaiitrust.com/grants

Simplifying the Application Process

Exciting news! We've been busy working on updates in our grant management system to make accessing grant funds quicker and easier. In the coming months you will see the roll out of new online follow-up forms which will save you time, as well as several 'how-to' sheets on helpful system features.

In the meantime visit the 'I Need Help' page on our website for answers to frequently asked questions (gwaiitrust.com/i-need-help) or feel free to contact our office with any questions.

Upcoming Deadlines

Arts Grant: Oct 1, 4pm

Youth Grant: Oct 1, 4pm

Due the 1st of each month, 4pm (no intake Aug or Dec):

- Community Innovation
- Arts Workshops
- Arts Mentorships

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