

Dufferin County's Youth Climate Activation Circle holds 'Plant Our Future' event

By Paula Brown

A group of young local climate activists are hoping to spark conversations on how native plants can help climate resilience locally with the development of a new garden.

Dufferin County's Youth Climate Activation Circle gathered with community members on June 7 at The Door Youth Centre, located at 9 Centre St. in Orangeville, to plant roughly 240 native plant seedlings.

The native plant garden is part of a project called 'Plant Our Future,' which was developed by the Youth Climate Activation Circle.

The Youth Climate Activation Circle is a volunteer program hosted by the County of Dufferin that looks to engage youth aged 16 to 25 in climate leadership. Throughout the program, participants receive climate change training, connect with local climate champions and organizations, and participate in a job shadowing program. The program culminates in a youth-led climate action project designed to bring tangible, local change to the community.

Over the winter, youth ambassadors in the program, with the support of Shaun Booth from In Our Nature Gardens, learned about native plants, their benefits, and how to design an effective garden.

For the native garden at The Door Youth Centre, a mix of seasonal blooming plants, grasses, and edible species was selected to help reduce the need for watering. The selection of plants also provides food and shelter for pollinators and other insects, essential for biodiverse and climate-resilient ecosystems.

'Native species are a vital part of climate action and resiliency,' says Youth Climate Ambassador Flora Dickison. 'By supporting native fauna, enforcing and stabilizing ecosystems, aiding in mitigation of extreme weather and climate changes, as well as trapping carbon at a higher rate, native plants in Ontario are crucial to climate action.'

The native plant garden is the first of many upgrades to the outdoor space at The Door Youth Centre, a drop-in centre that provides a safe and supportive environment for young people to connect and grow.

The Door is developing an outdoor gathering space for youth and the wider community, including a revitalized greenspace and basketball court. The Door is currently seeking sponsors to bring this community space to life.

'The garden is really just the beginning,' said Kerry Duffield, community director of Orangeville Youth For Christ (YFC), which operates out of The Door Youth Centre. 'We have a vision for beautifying and better utilizing our outdoor space that includes expanded green space, a new and improved basketball court, a gazebo to offer protection from the elements, and an overall bigger, better space for our youth to gather. That's what we're working on right now - really having a space that will benefit the youth of the community.'

Ambassadors in the Youth Climate Activation Program saw firsthand the urgency of their messaging on climate action.

The day before the scheduled event, Environment Canada issued a forecast of 'very unhealthy' air quality conditions as a result of wildfires occurring in Western Canada. In response, the Youth Climate Ambassadors adapted the event schedule to limit time outdoors and planned to supply N95 masks. Overnight winds ended up clearing the smoke in time for the event.

'A wildfire that occurred west of this province affected the air quality and caused changes to 'Planting the Future', which was held the following day,' said Youth Climate Ambassador, Adam Shane. 'This occurrence indicates how climate change can directly

affect initiatives designed for alleviating it.?

The County of Dufferin will be welcoming new volunteers to the Youth Climate Activation Circle in September. Dufferin youth between the ages of 16 and 25, who are passionate about climate action and can commit 60 hours to program activities, are encouraged to apply to the volunteer group. The program runs from September 2025 to June 2026.

Applications can be found on www.joinindufferin.com and must be submitted by Aug. 11.