

Reinventing the Urban Garden – Ep. 18 listenNpod.com

- listenN: Today in episode 18, I'm talking with Author, environmental activist, urban guerrilla gardener and native plant expert, **Lorraine Johnson**. Lorraine's passion and research has led her to re-examine how we interact with urban landscapes, and re-evaluate what defines native plants. Her gentle spirit and enthusiasm invigorates us with the ethos that what we do matters and when it comes to our garden spaces, we can do something very important in the simplest of ways.
- listenN: Hello Lorraine, welcome to listenN.
- Lorraine: Hi.
- listenN: I really wanted to start by talking to you a little bit about the concept of sort of reinventing the sort of urban garden, because I think that that's something that comes up for me that you are doing.
- Lorraine: Yeah, I that's a kind of great description in a way or like a really great way to kind of summarize. I've often struggled with what is the connection between all these different things I'm involved with, but I think, yeah, reinventing what it means to garden, why we garden, how we garden, for me, all those things are really important. And I guess another sort of key aspect to it for me is that for the longest time, I think gardening has been about aesthetics and maybe that's what draws a lot of people in. It isn't in fact what drew me in, strangely enough. We can talk about it if you want. I came to gardening in a kind of circuitous route, but I think for a lot of people the aesthetics is kind of the appeal.
- Lorraine: And what I'm trying to do in my work is to talk about and really motivate and encourage people to think about all the ways that our gardens can also be places of incredible meaning and beyond aesthetics and how to create places of beauty. But places of beauty that are also doing things in the world, like connecting with the world, and whether that's creating places of positive environmental impact rather than negative environmental impact or creating places of social justice or, however it is at those gardens. And it could be all of those things. But really to think of the garden not just in terms of aesthetics and beauty and even if those are the things that draw a lot of people in, in the first place, but moving beyond that and connecting with the world.
- listenN: I mean, I think of it kind of like some of the other aspects of our lives that are now interwoven with just, let's say, not the functionality of something like a car. Well, I want it fast, I want it pretty or sexy or whatever. Now it's like, is it good for the environment? Are there other aspects of it that start to become equal in the decision making? And I think that's a good point about gardening. I think the majority of people will say first and foremost, it's about the aesthetic aspect. And that's why I say reinventing the garden.
- listenN: You're helping people understand the garden does multiple things and you should think about those as you develop a backyard garden or a balcony or whatever you're doing, even in an urban environment, how do you give back through the choices that you

make? And so, that's what I find so fascinating when I've listened to some of your talks and I've perused through some of your books and I felt like it opened my eyes to, oh, it can still look really beautiful. It's just doing so much more than that flower or shrub or tree that came in from some other part of the world.

Lorraine: Yeah. And our choices can be choices that do these other things, but I think another aspect about gardening that is sort of concerned me is that for so long, okay, so the emphasis on aesthetics is one aspect of it, but then also a kind of disregard for the impact on the planet in so many other ways. Oh, who cares about the long-term impact of these chemicals I'm using or these plants that I'm introducing into my backyard that might be invasive and it really impact on natural areas. I think for a long time, not only were those connections to the world not made and in the sense of what the garden could do in a kind of positive healing constructive, productive way, but then even the kind of downside of some of the longstanding gardening practices were just ignored. Yeah, the dark side.

listenN: Yeah.

Lorraine: I think it's encouraging to me. There's a lot more of an awareness now. There's less resistance. I mean, when I first started writing about this stuff and engaging with this, the world of gardens and landscape about, oh, it's getting on for 30 years ago now. And at the beginning, there was huge resistance to, and it was treated sort of like, oh, this is just a trend. This is just a phase you're going through to worry about pesticides. Don't you worry the scientists or the government is telling us it's all okay. You'll get over it, dear, when you grow up. It was sort of bad attitude.

listenN: Idealistic youth, right?

Lorraine: Yeah, although 30 years ago I was not young. But I think it's changed quite a bit. It's been a slow and steady evolution.

listenN: Yeah. And that's why I'm fascinated to talk with you about that evolution because you've been through it. You've been very much active and involved through it. And it is an area that that whole think globally, act locally and it's sort of like, yes, you can think globally about the environment, but the choices you're making in your own backyard are just as important as the other things that you're doing. And that's going to bring up another subject matter that I'm going to ask you in a bit, but I wanted to just take a step back and just sort of, let's go back to how did you get into sort of ... How many books have you written?

Lorraine: I added it up the other day for another reason. And I think if you include the books that I initiated and edited that are collections of essays, but I was behind them, I think it was 12 or it might've been 14. I can't remember, anyway.

listenN: Wow. It's enough. Not enough, but I mean it's enough to establish you as an expert in this field. And I love one of the titles of your book, What Plant Where, because I thought that was so just to the point. Everybody wants to know that in today's world. What should I be doing? And in listening to some of your talks, I didn't even know that there's even like local native insects and things like that that rely on the native plants. So, I wanted to ask you what is a native plant? But I'm just thinking if there are people listening who aren't sure what that means. What does that mean?

Lorraine: Yeah. And we're really talking together at a moment that for me is a time of kind of what I hope or it is definitely a time of expanded learning for me and awareness and understanding and that's leading in really rich and new directions for me. So, I'm actually in the midst of really rethinking the definition of native plants that I have certainly been a part of putting out there into the world, certainly in Canada and saying, hey, so for a long time I talked about native plants as plants that existed in an area prior to European settlement.

Lorraine: And because I've been on this journey, a personal journey since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report came out and really trying to build relationship and as a nonindigenous person to try to think about my treaty responsibilities, all of these things and really build relationship with indigenous peoples and then to think about what it is I do in my own practice because the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, the calls to action called on everyone and particularly on nonindigenous people to think about how these issues connect with their work. So, I write about landscape. I write about garden.

Lorraine: So, that really that reflection, that period of thinking, wow, I write about native plants and I have never connected with indigenous knowledge keepers or read books written by indigenous people about native plants. Anyway, so thinking about this, I realized, okay, the thing about the definition of native plants that myself and others have used forever, a native plant is a plant that existed in an area prior to European settlement.

listenN: Because it's about us.

Lorraine: Yeah.

listenN: Like, it's always about there's before us and then after us.

Lorraine: Exactly. And it completely negates, ignores, erases indigenous agency on the land prior. So, first of all, one, I wouldn't use that word settlement, talking about it I would say minimum prior to colonization or prior to invasion. But then also like how to have a definition that incorporates or acknowledges the incredible land management that was happening here in North America prior to colonization, prior to contact, prior to invasion, however you want to phrase it.

- Lorraine: So, I'm really thinking about that definition of native plants. And I guess where I'm at right now with it provisionally is really the idea and just in strict kind of botanical or biological terms, I think a useful way to think of native plants is as plants that have over a really evolutionary or kind of planetary timescale developed relationships with every other being or creature or aspect, feature of whatever place you're exploring. And that includes the peoples.
- Lorraine: So, anyway, that was a very long answer. It used to be a super simple answer to that question for me. It was a planet that existed here prior. Anyway, there are problems with the definition. I do realize no matter what, but basically, I think ecologically, the idea that they're plants that have developed these complex relationships and adaptations and are part of a very complex web of relationships that like we don't understand. We don't know. There's a lot going on. And so, anyway, that's how I would kind of think about native plants now.
- listenN: Oh, that's great. And you're not the first sort of expert or person I've talked to where I think I have a really simple question and they'll say to me, "Well, I've been rethinking that lately." And I'll go like, "Okay, here we go." But no, that's really touching that the truth and reconciliation commission had such an impact on that, well, one, that you listened to it and took it in because I don't think a lot of Canadians did take it in on that level of how is my work affecting, and I think that that's a really a powerful statement.
- listenN: I remember when it all came out and then the CBC started to abbreviate it to the TRC or something. And I'm like, no, the name says it all. If you start to abbreviate it to an acronym, it takes it away. And so, they kind of stopped. So, I don't know if they kind of came to that conclusion on their own. But it happened for a brief while there and it was really heartbreaking when I would hear it because I like, you're missing the point. But anyways, that's just my opinion.
- Lorraine: Well, and then also the idea that there's been so much talk I guess on the kind of reconciliation end of things and let's name that need for truth, and acknowledging truth too and really like put that at the forefront of all that we do in this place.
- listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with author, urban gardening and native plant expert, Lorraine Johnson, who's sharing the importance of encouraging people that their gardens can be places of incredible meaning while still be an aesthetically beautiful. So, would you say you're self-taught? Big smile. Yes.
- Lorraine: Yeah. I did not study anything to do with botany or biology or the sciences at all. I actually studied literary studies, so, basically theory and criticism in university. But actually, I wouldn't call it self-taught either in that as when I started getting involved with environmental issues and realized that what really resonated most deeply for me had anything to do with the land nurturing the land and cultivation and growing things, so, the whole gamut, this agriculture or everything to do with that relationship.

Lorraine: So, I started joining non-profit organizations actually and getting very involved with a number of organizations. And so, I feel like I learned from the people involved with those organizations, groups like it used to be called the Canadian Wildflower Society, then transitioned to the North American Native Plant Society. But there have just been incredible botanists and very knowledgeable plant people involved with that organization over the years. And they were my first plant teachers in many ways.

listenN: Wow. So, if you were to, let's say, give somebody advice. They live in a small urban home with a small backyard and a small front yard, what would be the one thing that you'd say they should do or where they should start? Because with the Latin names, you can just go into a rabbit hole when it comes to gardening, right?

Lorraine: Yes. Well, I think the place to start actually is maybe with a thought and that thought that I think can really help guide, especially somebody who's a little nervous about it or is not a gardener who really doesn't know where to start, what you do matters and you can do something that is really good and really important in the simplest of ways. And I know I've found that really inspiring in my life and my efforts. And I think it's really true around growing some native plants, whether it's just add one or two to your existing garden.

Lorraine: And what I always warn people about is that you will get hooked, but those plants will matter. They'll matter to the soil. They'll matter to the insects. They'll matter to the passerby who sees them and says, "Oh, that's a plant I don't often see in a garden around here. I wonder what that is." I mean, so you don't have to start big. You can start small. You can start with just one plant on your balcony and a pot, I guess. But I really think that once you start, you do get hooked to it. So, that's a good place to start, starting small.

Lorraine: I also think it's good to, and maybe this just because that's the way I came to it, to search out others who can give you some guidance or help join groups. I really think that this is another way I guess I'm trying to rethink the garden. I know there's a tradition of thinking of the garden as a very solitary place. For me, it has actually been an incredibly social place. It's been the place where I meet people through gardening. It's the place of community. And maybe that's because for a long time, I've been involved with community gardening, so gardening in these social spaces and creating gardens with other people to be a shared space where anyone can join.

Lorraine: So, I often really try to encourage people to find a community of gardeners who can inspire you and help you and share seeds and knowledge and information with. And we're very lucky in that I think across Canada, there are these events called Seedy Saturdays and they're in the spring and they're community events where gardeners come together and share seeds. Their workshops are really grassroots and that's a great place to find community, a great place to really start if you're a bit uncertain, unsure. It's very inspiring community, these Seedy Saturdays.

- listenN: That sounds so cool. Yeah. No, that sounds great because I think that that's the other challenge is just once you want to make a difference or do something that matters, you're then so afraid you're not going to do it properly.
- Lorraine: Oh my goodness. And I think that applies to so many things for sure. And I guess, maybe with gardening, I mean, in a lot of the things that we do is there a wrong way to do it? Like I would say a wrong way would be a kind of short-term chemical fix without the wrong way, if you want to put it that way, whatever, a way that's just really not going to take anyone to a good place is if you think short term and you don't think of the garden as a system, but what's going to happen is it just might not flourish.
- Lorraine: So, I mean, there are some, I guess, things that could have more harm. So, let's say as a gardener, you're actually introducing an invasive plant, like a non-native invasive plant that's going to affect natural areas like spread out that, that could be a negative practice or let's say chemical inputs that have an impact on our water, groundwater, et cetera, that could have a negative influence. But for the most part, the "mistakes" that you make just might lead to, hey, things not working out the way you wanted them to work out. And that's a chance to learn more and try again and figure it out and talk to people. Why didn't it work? What did I do wrong? More of this community building that can happen around gardens.
- listenN: Yeah. One of the things that when we moved into our house 15 years ago I think, my wife through chatting with people, like the Seedy Saturday kind of people, found out that in Ontario, or maybe it was just in the city of Toronto, but they would come and do an assessment of your yard and they would actually give you the plants. And so, we got a bunch of small trees and different types of pollinator kind of friendly things free from the city. And we had a gentleman, I don't know what his title would have been, but he came to our house and he gave us the advice on plant this here and plant that there. I don't think anybody even knew.
- Lorraine: Yeah. When I think about how our cities in particular could be transformed by more things like that, exactly, the sort of thing you're talking about. And when I think about what a missed opportunity there is, because we, we as in our governments, our cities, we spend a fortune on really expensive, complex solutions to problems that could actually be handled so much better at a landscape like at a local landscape level. I'm thinking of things like flooding and in cities and there are many across Canada that have these combined sewers so that when there is a storm and the sewers overflow, it means sewage goes into the closest water body.
- Lorraine: Well, some cities are spending billions on engineered solutions to these problems. Like for example, Toronto is building this huge tunnel to store the water, at billions. So, what if instead we had hired people who need jobs and have so much to offer who could go around and teach people about rain gardens. And so that, every, every residents, whether it's an apartment building, a single family home, a seniors residence, every place, a social housing, every place where people lived were landscaped to retain the

water on the landscape and have it filtered down into the groundwater and do what water does in a healthy landscape instead of flowing on our hard surfaces into the storm.

listenN: And into the sewer drain.

Lorraine: Yeah.

listenN: Yeah, yeah. And I mean, I know that because when they overflow like that and they're dumping the raw sewage, the untreated raw sewage into the lake, I think they just dump a bunch of chemicals in with it or something to in order to kind of help curb the problem. So, again, like it's one, they're putting the raw sewage, untreated sewage in, but they're also throwing all these chemicals in because it's seen as a bit of an emergency. And I think that's a great ... I mean, when you say a rain garden, you're meaning what you just described, that your yard absorbs the water that your home produces off of it when it rains.

Lorraine: Yeah. And actually, there are great resources online and there are different things to call the garden, that type of garden, but rain garden seems to have taken off and yeah, that's exactly the idea. They can be sort of made in a low depression area on the grounds on the landscape or you can dig down a little and put in gravel to encourage infiltration and then some soil and plants that are adapted to seasonal flooding like that. And their name, rain gardens are most commonly and I think most sensibly planted with native plants that are adapted to that kind of seasonal flooding and the seasonal flooding as in, oh, it rained a lot.

listenN: Yeah, in a minute.

Lorraine: In a minute. And so, all of the water like from the downspouts, et cetera, is directed away from the house and towards that low area where the plants kind of slow it down and it infiltrates into the ground. It's such a sensible way.

listenN: And then also ... Sorry.

Lorraine: No, I was just going to say such a sensible way to deal like I think so much of what we have to do in our gardens in every way is look to natural models. The answers are out there. Yeah.

listenN: Yeah. And it just puts another shout out or at least it helped me envision kind of a native plant because I grew up in Vancouver where I grew up in Lynn Valley, which it rains, I think it's the third rainiest place in the world or something like that. I can't remember. But it rains all the time. But it would rain for weeks at a time. Like it would just literally like you'd go to bed, get up, it's raining, come home, it's raining, go to sleep, it's raining. And then in Ontario here, when I moved here, I was fascinated how in the summertime, for example, it can be scorching hot and dry and then a thunderstorm comes through,

dumps a ton of water on the ground and a half an hour later, it's sunny again. And it stopped raining.

listenN: And so, those plants have to be able to deal with that, right, the change of well, I get water and I get a ton of it and then I get none of it for a while. And I think that would be so important because if you're bringing a plant that's not native or it comes from a climate like England where it's kind of drizzling all the time and it's getting a nice steady stream of water, it wouldn't do so well here. And then it's going to require fertilizers and pesticides and other things that we use as an excuse to say that's why it's not growing properly, when in fact it's just not meant to be here.

Lorraine: That's right. And I've noticed in a kind of let's say traditional gardening world, the exotic, the so-called exotic is really prized and the plant that has to be coddled, the plant that takes such work to grow. And those are like for the most part kind of the introduced plants that aren't adapted to the weather, the climate, the other creatures that might want to eat it, et cetera. And so, maybe there's something in the whole, well, traditionally anyway, in the gardening enterprise there's been something about valuing the exotic at the expense of the familiar and the local and the adapted. And I don't know, I think it's a hugely missed opportunity. I suspect that it's connected with all kinds of things that are not actually that healthy or positive.

listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with author, urban gardening and native plant expert, Lorraine Johnson, who's talking about the ecological cost to shaming and bylaw bullying that has turned North America's urban landscape into a monospecies of non-native grass.

Lorraine: Like I think it was basically corporations that fed us this lawn message.

listenN: Oh yeah, I remember the '70s. And then you had the neighbor shaming where like, what do you need to narrate your lawn this year? And we used to use these rakes that you pull the dead grass out with that nobody does anymore. But in the '70s if you didn't do it, your neighbors frowned on you, right?

Lorraine: And when you think of the ecological cost of that shaming and that corporate message of you have to have a green lawn that's a monoculture of one species of non-native grass. And you have to go to the incredible chemical lengths and maintenance lengths and all of this trouble to grow this ground cover and why? What about some alternatives? And like when you think all that we know about monoculture and monoculture being so unhealthy ecologically or all biological systems are based on biodiversity and biodiversity leads to health and resilience, like everything.

Lorraine: And so, what have we done? We've turned the North American landscape as much as possible into a single species of grass. I think the ecological cost has been huge. It's changing. I think there's so much more of an awareness around the need to stop using pesticides, et cetera. But I guess there's still municipal bylaws all over the place and

people who are gardening in a different way, especially with native plants, are trying to naturalize their yards or bring back a little bit of wild, what might be called wildness in the city. Those people are subject to fines and incredible harassment I would say, like sanctioned harassment by the powers that be, or just kind of neighborhood shaming.

Lorraine: And I think that impulse to control how other people express themselves in their landscapes, especially when they're expressing like a nurturing impulse, I think we really have to examine where that comes from and why people, why cities, why governments, why there's this strong tradition of rejecting any alternative expression and in in the landscape.

listenN: Well that's an interesting point because I was thinking about this the other day while I was getting ready to talk with you. And I thought, how far are we away from an educated society who cares and knows enough about, one, the environmental and well, the environmental impact of gardening choices that we are now with the Hummer, where you see a guy drive or a woman drive a Hummer and you think they don't care about the environment. Or you'll see somebody taking plastic bags at a grocery store and you think, well, they don't seem to care. Like can that script be flipped to the point where if you are putting down or where you start to feel embarrassed because of your gardening choices because it shows that you're either uneducated or you don't care.

Lorraine: Well, I know that there are a lot of people, myself included, who would like to see the paradigm shift happen and that flip that you talk about. And I don't mean that in terms of people being shamed for having lawn I guess I mean it more that it would be unusual to have like a lawn and only lawn, like in a whole neighborhood that a whole neighborhood where every single yard would be all lawn. I would love to see that shift and completely reverse so that the kind of near nature that surrounds us where we live would be places of restored habitat.

Lorraine: And if for whatever reasons someone or a family wanted some kind of ground cover to run around on and grass is really good for that, then sure, have a section of something, some ground cover, whether it's turf grass or something else, but turf grass is pretty good at that. But have a small area to actually use in that way for games or sunbathing. I don't know, whatever people do on lawns, I don't know. And then, but the majority of our near nature experiences in our cities would actually be places of habitat. And ecological functioning and that would mean pretty much native plants. Although again, I don't want to shame people or like-

listenN: I think shame was the wrong word. I didn't mean to say shame.

Lorraine: I know what you meant.

listenN: I meant more just where you just feel a little bit self-conscious. So, it's not that people are looking at you, even though I worded it that way, I'm sorry to all the Hummer drivers out there, but anyways, I didn't mean to shame you. But yeah, like where it just

becomes the sort of norm where you know what, you really just have to. If you want to be seen as somebody who's making a difference, then you're going to do some things a little bit differently. Because I think of those suburbs where there's just as you say, you drive down the street and everybody's yard is grass.

Lorraine: Yeah. I'm a big proponent of just really questioning and thinking about deeply, well, any choice that you make in your landscape. And that will lead you to a good place, if you think about it deeply. And so, let's say you think about it deeply and it takes you to a place of, you know what, I don't have time to garden. So, what should I do? Well, that might lead you to all of the community groups that are out there who are trying to match people who have land they can't look after with people who want to look after a land.

Lorraine: So, there are just so many new and good solutions and ways that we could interact with the places that are around us that can only lead to good things if we think about it, if we think about it. And I think we get into trouble when we don't think about it and we just do the automatic thing that I don't know, we see advertised on TV or whatever we feel shamed into doing. Like, whoa, everybody's got this so-called perfect lawn, which is actually, it's weird. We call it perfect because it's super unhealthy and vulnerable and takes a lot of work.

listenN: Yeah. I mean, in Ontario when we have the dry hot summers and it all turns brown and people have to water it because god forbid they have a brown lawn, but it's like, well, because it goes dry and that's what happens. I mean, we don't have anything in our backyard because when we moved into our house, it was very shaded by a lot of trees. A number of those trees have fallen down or come down because they've gotten diseased or they're old, but there's still a number of trees. And so, we were never able to grow anything like grass, which was something that was kind of there when we moved in. And so, we churned it all up and so we just left it go wild.

listenN: And at first it was mostly clover. We didn't start with it. It just was there kind of sprung up. And then what my wife started to do with all the ... And I didn't even know she was doing this, but she said, "Yeah, the seeds you get from the real estate agents. Every spring they'll bring you around like a little packet of native seeds or whatever." And she goes, "I just kind of like throw them out into the yard. And I let nature decide where they end up and how they end up and what happens."

listenN: But over time, we've gotten all of these really beautiful flowering plants that come up and when the backyard gets way too full that you can't walk through it, I'll have to go and I'll cut it down and then it'll grow up again. So, twice a year, or sorry, once a year, I cut down the backyard, usually in the middle of the summer and then it grows back again. And then in the winter or in the fall, it just all dies and collapses and whatever. But over time it's become very beautiful and very kind of a natural. But we still get that odd people come over to the house or the neighbors look over the fence and they're like, huh, what's going on here?

Lorraine: I'm hoping that we start to shift our idea of what is beautiful and we start to rethink aesthetics. So, that something like what you're describing, which to me sounds really interesting. There's I'm sure a lot of life in what you're describing. There must be a lot of activity, like life force encouraged and nurtured in what you're describing. And I hope that we can somehow move to a valuing of that as beautiful. So, value function as a kind of beauty and aesthetic value. I really hope we get there.

listenN: Yeah. I mean, our front yard has a lot of wild flowers. It has some Echinacea in there and it's fascinating, the bees. Like you'll come out of the house sometime and you'll stop and you'll look and it's not a big front yard. It's probably like 20 by 20 kind of thing and there'll be 10 to 30 bees at any given time hovering around these plants. And you're just shocked because you don't even see them anywhere else and then all of a sudden, you'll just see them all in your front yard and well, it's just so rewarding. Yeah.

Lorraine: And I think that that's what happens with native plants. Basically, whether you just plant one or you plant a bunch and then you start to see it becomes not just some strange theory. Oh yeah, those plants are adapted to the place and there are all these incredible relationships among all of the creatures in that place living and nonliving features of the place. And when you see it literally happening in your front yard or when you walk out the door or at your community garden or a school, at your neighborhood school, because schools are doing so much planting and naturalizing.

Lorraine: When you see that, wow, those plants really do kind of create these relationships so that the bees are there and the other insects and a vast array of flies and beetles and all of these insects that we have been taught as gardeners to think we have to eradicate rather than, wow, we should be encouraging this incredible web of connections because that equals resilience. Biodiversity equals strength. So, we shouldn't be getting rid of these so-called bugs. We should be encouraging them.

Lorraine: And when you plant the native plants, you're providing the habitat for them. You're nurturing those relationships. And, as you've just described it, you can walk outside and see it in action. You can really see it. And then that's why I think even if you just plant a couple of native plants, you'll get hooked. Because once you see that happening is like, I love this. And it kind of snowballs. There's a snowball effect because I know that for a long time, especially in the early days of writing about gardening with native plants and talking with gardeners about native plants, there was so much fear and worry around, and understandably if people have anaphylactic reactions to bees for example.

Lorraine: But then there's also this sort of kind of process to go through of talking about, well, you know what, okay, so it's only certain types of bees that sting. The vast majority of our native bees are solitary. They don't sting. All these sorts of just ways that we can expand our understanding of the world and how it works and who these creatures are and how they interact with each other and what our place is in that whole web. I think native plant gardening is a really good way into all of those questions and issues. And really amazing things for people who are interested in gardening.

- listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with author, urban gardening and native plant expert, Lorraine Johnson, who is sharing how she is leveraging the foraging and foodie trends to introduce people to the conversation around edible native plants. I wanted to ask you a bit about sort of edible because again, I was watching one of your talks and you were talking about sort of the native edible. I think some of them were fruits from trees and things like this. And I thought that that was a very interesting concept because you were saying about some of them like, well one, people don't know that they can eat them. But two, no one's even commercialized them.
- listenN: But meanwhile, you would think that they would do just much better in this environment, and therefore, they should be able to produce a better crop and et cetera. Where's your thinking around that, like this is sort of a question more, but like what's the future look like for you and do you see yourself helping us move into that area? Because you know, like as people say with food we're going to end up eating insects one day because of the shortness of food. And I go, well I'd rather just learn about some of these edible trees and plants.
- Lorraine: Yes. I'm really interested in edible native plants and I've been talking about it a lot with people. Mainly, I think my motivation for doing that is that I'm just always looking for ways to kind of sneakily, I guess, almost like a sneaky way to meet people where their interest lies and present this idea of native plant gardening wherever they're at. So, I don't know, 15 years ago, everyone was interested in drought tolerant plants or low maintenance plants. So, I talked about native plants in that way because they are adapted to the conditions. And so, if you plant the native plant in the habitat, if you put the plant in the right place, it's not going to need a lot of supplementary watering and all those things. So, right now, there's a lot of interest in food and food growing and-
- listenN: Foraging.
- Lorraine: Yeah, all that stuff. And so, I try to encourage people to instead and actually I try to discourage a lot of active, definitely not digging up native plants from the wild in anywhere near most cities. The natural areas just could not survive the kind of growing interest in-
- listenN: The onslaught of the-
- Lorraine: The onslaught, yeah, yeah.
- listenN: The new trend.
- Lorraine: Yeah. But having said that, I think there are definitely inherent rights around indigenous harvesting of plants. But what I tend to focus on for a gardening audience is, hey, you're interested in growing some of your own food or trying an unusual new plant or have you thought about, and then introducing that gardening audience to the array of really

delicious, unusual edible native plants that they can be growing in their own backyards or community gardens or shared social spaces, community places.

listenN: Yeah, no, that's great. I met you or I saw you for the first time at the David Suzuki.

Lorraine: Oh, you were in there.

listenN: Yeah. But it got me thinking, he's been such a strong sort of focal point of environmental practices in this country. And who do you see presently as maybe in the younger generation that's coming up or has it diversified to it's just all of us that are becoming the advocates for, or the people that are speaking about? Have we gotten to that point where it's now diversified down to being like everybody can be an environmental advocate by speaking and talking and doing?

Lorraine: I do think that the kind of environmental activism, awareness, worry, concern is more broadly based than ever now. And I think there's also broad array of voices tackling different aspects to a problem that I think is kind of at its core about a really dysfunctional relationship with nature and the earth and a terrible impulse to control and dominate that at its heart is over these ideas of our monetary system and what has value, et cetera. So, those are the core issues I think that are leading to and it has to do with dominating people as well as we have seen through this country's colonial or the colonialism that is at the heart of Canada, both historically and is expressed in the current day in so many of our structures and institutions.

Lorraine: So, I do think that the kind of tackling of those issues is coming from all kinds of different kind of points and points of view. And I think that's a good thing. I mean, there's diversity in the environmental movement and even to say in the environmental movement, there's diversity in the ways that everybody or a lot of people are going at the things that need to change in order for our species to last into the future.

listenN: So, you've dedicated your life to something that's sort of outside the mainstream. What drives you? How do you keep your passion alive? Is it just that, that you're seeing this evolution happening before your eyes? Because I mean, it's hard to be outside the mainstream. You've been doing that for a very long time. You're one of the pioneers. And so, I'm just curious like what drove you and also what drives you as you move forward?

Lorraine: That's a hard question in some ways because when it's just the way that you are, it's sort of hard to ... Like I think I know where it comes from in my own life. You've basically described my dad, outside of the mainstream for sure, very unusual, eccentric, had his own way of doing things, and question things and question convention and taught me to question convention. So, it's just been part of my DNA from day one I guess.

Lorraine: But also, and maybe because it's so much a part of ... I can't see a downside to questioning convention and that doesn't mean that we throw out all conventions. Like,

all kinds of conventions make good sense for all kinds of reasons, but there are all kinds of conventions that don't make any sense and are actually harmful. And let's really question it all, keep the things that do actually help people and help everyone, like help everyone meet their needs. But the conventions that are actually only benefiting a few, let's do everything we can to be not only outside of those conventions but dismantle them. Because the things that are only helping a very few, that's just wrong.

listenN: Yeah. No, and I think that we're coming to a phase in our history where that is going to get turned upside down. And I think it's thanks to people like yourself and all the hard work you've done over the years to bring people's awareness to the importance of the choices they make when it comes to gardening.

listenN: So, Lorraine, thank you so much for being on listenN. But before we go, I just wanted to ask you, how can people get in touch with you if they're interested to learn more?

Lorraine: Oh, well, the best way to get in touch with me is via Facebook. So, I'm very, well not super active on Facebook, but I look at it all the time, so I would get any message that anyone sent to me via Facebook. That's fine. I'm old school so I still haven't joined Instagram or Twitter, any of those things. Every year I say that's going to be my project and I still haven't done it.

listenN: Well, it's so funny to go, "I'm old school. I have Facebook," which is still a social media, which it's not that old. So, is it just Lorraine Johnson at Facebook?

Lorraine: I think so.

listenN: Yeah.

Lorraine: Oh dear.

listenN: Well, you know what, if they type in Lorraine Johnson and somebody else comes up, well, if she's not got pictures of gardening on her Facebook page, it's not you.

Lorraine: Yup. You'll find me that way. I used to joke because I was the only Lorraine Johnson in the Toronto phonebook who had my phone number listed, so I felt very easy to find that way, very publicly accessible. But now that I am not exactly on all of the social media platforms that most people are, but Facebook, Facebook works.

listenN: Yeah. Great. So, thank you so much for being on listenN and I really appreciate your time. Thank you.

Lorraine: Thank you for the conversation. I enjoyed it.

listenN: Oh, you're welcome. Bye-bye.

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Lorraine: Bye.

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