

# north shore news

## Reaping the benefits

### North Shore Recycling Program Drop-Off Depot staff get growing

Erin McPhee / North Shore News

August 2, 2015 05:00 AM



Depot attendant Mario Aiello and working supervisor Kevin Skett tend to their vegetable garden grown in pots and containers dropped off by the public at the North Shore Recycling Program Drop-off Depot. The project speaks to staff's interest in getting more involved in the community, as well as setting a positive example about diverting waste. photo Cindy Goodman

Kevin Skett just can't help himself.

It seems wherever he works, he feels compelled to start a garden.

From creating a plot in front of the building at his last workplace, a large waste management company in Coquitlam, to his current role as working supervisor of the North Shore Recycling Program Drop-Off Depot, the 59-year-old North Vancouver resident is continuing to reap the benefits of incorporating gardening into his day job.

"It just takes you away from the daily grind," says Skett, who's going into his third year at the North Vancouver depot.

The recycling centre is located in an industrial corner of the North Shore — a concrete plant to the east, the traffic-clogged Ironworkers Memorial Second Narrows Crossing visible to the west, and the North Shore Transfer Station just around the corner.

Despite its location, at 29 Riverside Dr., the depot is showing increasing signs of greenery thanks to the dedicated handiwork of Skett and his staff, who for the last two years have been ramping up their efforts at the site.

More than about grounds beautification, the team's collective effort to plant and maintain flower and vegetable gardens, as well as make other landscape improvements, are viewed as a means of bettering their work environment as well as getting more involved in the greater North Shore community.

In addition, they're interested in setting an example for the public, encouraging residents to consider whether there are alternative uses for items before discarding them for good. "There's a second life to everything," says Skett.

To that end, the landscaping efforts undertaken by the recycling depot staff have largely been made possible as a result of drop-offs made by the public.

Old pots and containers, for instance, have been used to grow decorative plants throughout the depot, and serve as vessels to

house their lush, bountiful garden, currently boasting an array of crops from zucchini to basil.

Dropped off decorative lawn items — a metal frog, a couple of pigs and the classic garden gnome — are also placed throughout the grounds to the delight of staff and community members alike.

“Now that people see it, it’s amazing how many people actually bring their old plants and everything down to us and drop them off and want us to bring them back to life ... It’s pretty cool the reaction of the public,” says Skett.

The team’s efforts are widely supported. A banana tree suns its glossy fronds amongst items from the District of North Vancouver’s parks department, including plants and a sign reading Plants Are Recyclable.

“I’m trying to create an atmosphere where the guys are happy to come to work every day and they are. That attitude just spreads to the people that come here,” says Skett.

Six people work a variety of hours at the NSRP Drop-Off Depot — five men and one woman. Employees are invited to munch on the veggies during their shifts, or take items home for dinner.

Depot attendant and knowledgeable green thumb Mario Aiello, 62, has proven to be the most passionate about the project. “Once I started the garden, Mario just got right into it and that’s why the garden is the way it is today — because of Mario,” says Skett.

Aiello comes to work a half-hour early every day to tend to the plants. “The people like to see some green stuff when they come here. Before, they’d come here (and) there were no plants, no flowers, no nothing,” says Aiello.

The garden speaks to staff’s overall work ethic and interest in going above and beyond the call of duty in terms of their regular depot-related responsibilities.

Skett is dedicated to ensuring things run smoothly, are kept neat and tidy, and he puts a lot of effort into providing a positive consumer experience, guiding community members to the proper container. All staff work to raise awareness of what can be recycled.

“We get a lot of people coming back again because they just like visiting here. It’s really become — to some of the regulars — a social thing. They meet their buddies here. I just want to get the depot more involved in community projects and (get) more people ... aware that we exist, and that they have very good options ... with their recycling materials,” he says.

Staff see some interesting things in the run of a day at the depot. “You get a lot of seniors that are downsizing and they’re throwing away a lifetime of memories and they stand over by the paper bin there and it takes them hours to throw all these things away,” says Skett.

“I think we’re much more than just a recycling depot. We do good things here,” he adds.

In addition to the garden, the recycling drop-off depot has become a collection centre for the Harvest Project and staff have also taken responsibility for the cleanliness of Spicer Road through the District of North Vancouver’s Adopt A Street program. Once a week, staff head up to the roadside to pick up any litter.

Skett is grateful for the support of his managers.

“I was really blessed to be able to get this job and to work for people that let me make the changes that I wanted to make and support me through it. My bosses are the best people in the world,” he says.

Jenn Meilleur, assistant manager of the North Shore Recycling Program, the recycling and waste reduction department serving the three North Shore municipalities, is incredibly proud of staff’s efforts at the depot.

“Kevin, he is so committed to always making things better. He cares about people so much and wants to do good work. And so I think he’s just created an environment where the staff can follow their passion and he’s created a great space for the community. It’s wonderful,” she says.

“It doesn’t matter where you work, you can find a way to bring your passion into it and everybody benefits,” she adds.

Meilleur feels the employees are setting a strong example for the community at large.

"We're often very focused on recycling ... with the recycling drop-off depot, but the people who work there and work at North Shore Recycling Program are also really focused on 'reduce and reuse,' which is supposed to be what we do first before we get to recycling. I think a lot of what they do down there is showcasing (those ideas)," she says.

When it comes to reducing, residents should consider what they're buying.

"I think we all would benefit from taking time to consider what will happen to items that we buy at the end of their life," says Meilleur.

For example, if an item has too much packaging, maybe something else should be chosen, or the consumer may decide to write a note to the manufacturer or retailer to encourage them to rethink their packaging. A consumer might consider if an item could be bought second-hand, meaning less resources are used.

Or, if it's an item that will be used only a few times and will end up sitting in a cupboard for the rest of its lifespan, maybe it could simply be borrowed from a friend.

The concept of reusing is often overlooked as well.

"I think the big thing is, before people are thinking about recycling or disposal, to really consider whether or not it could be used by somebody else," she says.

Meilleur has also been impressed with the recycling drop-off depot staff's food growing efforts, describing them as "phenomenal." Those efforts speak to another of the recycling program's focuses. "I just think it's great for people to grow food and connect more closely to nature and food growing.

Everybody should do that if they can," she says.

North Shore Recycling partners with the Edible Garden Project, Lynn Canyon Ecology Centre and Cultivate to offer the low-cost GardenSmart Workshop Series.

Workshops are focused on growing food, reducing waste and supporting local ecology. While the spring and summer workshop sessions have wrapped, Meilleur encourages community members to check out a new crop of workshops set to spring up in September.

For more information on programs and services offered by the North Shore Recycling Program, visit [northshorerecycling.ca](http://northshorerecycling.ca) (<http://northshorerecycling.ca>).

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