

# AN ARTIST IN NATURE

After leading the restoration of a native plant garden in the eastern Fraser Valley, Coastal Salish painter, musician and conservationist Carrielynn Victor uses it to inspire local kids

Text and Photography by Isabelle Groc

**I**N THE SPRINGTIME, THE CHEAM WETLAND food and medicine garden, in B.C.'s Eastern Fraser Valley, comes alive. Bald eagles soar in the sky, northern red-legged frogs and northwestern salamanders lay eggs in the ponds, bees buzz in the fields, flowers are in bloom.

This is artist Carrielynn Victor's favourite time of the year to take local schoolchildren on field trips in the garden, awakening their senses to the natural environment, and nurturing their connection to local species at risk. "I ask the kids to open up their senses, slow down, feel where they are, be observant," she says. "I offer them to taste something, be brave and taste it, touch things but be gentle, walk softly because this place is alive."

The Coast Salish painter, musician and practitioner of traditional foods and medicine lives in Cheam, her father's ancestral village in the traditional Sto:lo territory, in the shadow of Mount Cheam, on the banks of the Fraser River near Chilliwack. Victor, who also works for

playing outside as a child and catching frogs. "We had the freedom to run around, look for what caught our interest and make those observations," she says. These memories have since become part of Victor's environmental education work as an adult. "When I am out doing species surveys and I catch a glimpse of a frog, it wakes that same part of you."

Educating the next generation of conservationists is Victor's priority, and the Cheam garden is the centrepiece of her efforts. "We have good conversations in the garden with the kids about our responsibility as stewards of the environment because one day they will be making decisions and I want them to be informed from an early age so it becomes part of their values," she says. "Education and connection to the land are going to be key parts towards conservation."

Victor spent three years leading the restoration of the habitat at the Cheam garden, an effort supported by the federally funded Aboriginal Fund for Species at Risk program. With the help of volunteers and school students, Victor got rid of invasive blackberries and planted 1,400 native plants. Today the restored garden is home to 16 listed species at risk.

This rich environment is the opportunity for Victor to remind children of the ancestral relationship between people and species. "Every species — whether they are a plant or an animal — has a way of speaking to us about how we can be in connection with the land," she says. For example, children learn to observe how dragonflies move and the different worlds they can access through their movements. They learn to consider tree frogs as a calendar for the change in seasons. "Through their awakesness and their sleeping time, frogs teach us to let things go. They teach us to move between the seasons as the seasons come," Victor says.

But the real stars of the garden are the Indigenous food and medicinal plants Victor planted. Their quieter, less charismatic nature means they are often overlooked, and Victor hopes to change that. "Kids walk with the understanding that they can go in any environment they want for pleasure and they don't even think about trampling plants. But when they come to the garden, I introduce them to the history, the value and the potential for relationships with the plants. Plants are alive and can be part of us."

The value of plants in the garden extends beyond schoolchildren to the broader community the garden serves. "Indigenous communities recognize that their wild spaces are being diminished by development, and the concept of the garden is recognized as a potential solution for accessing much needed Indigenous plants for food and medicine," she says.

"I love the garden. I love what's happening here. Some of the plants we wished for just showed up and did their own thing. We see bear and deer tracks, signs of beavers and all the little creatures happening here. Maybe it's good enough for them. If we can help with that, I'm happy." 🐾

**CARRIELYNN VICTOR LOVES WORKING WITH LOCAL SCHOOLCHILDREN: "I INTRODUCE THEM TO THE HISTORY, THE VALUE AND THE POTENTIAL FOR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PLANTS. PLANTS ARE ALIVE AND CAN BE PART OF US"**

a First Nations-owned environmental consulting group, developed a special connection to species at risk from an early age, nurtured by her grandmother, who served as a strong community voice for conservation in the region. She remembers

