

NEXTcast Season 1 Episode 2: Alexandra Link and Humber's Sustainable Urban Beekeeping Program

An interview with Alexandra Link, director of Humber's Arboretum, about the new Sustainable Urban Beekeeping Program.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast. My name is Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. NEXTcast is a podcast about teaching learning at Humber College. Every episode we talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation, both inside and outside the classroom. Our guest on this episode of NEXTcast is Alexandra Link, director of the Humber arboretum. We'll be talking to Alexandra about the arboretum's new sustainable urban beekeeping program.

Nathan Whitlock: Hello, Alexandra, welcome to NEXTcast. The Humber arboretum has a lot of, obviously, has a lot of great programs and initiatives going on, but a new one that is really excited is the sustainable urban beekeeping certificate program. How did this program come about?

Alexandra Link: Well, one thing that not a lot of people know is that we have been keeping bees at the Humber arboretum for over 20 years. So like a lot of things at the Humber arboretum, beekeeping was actually started by a work study student and his name was Jack Tynan, and he was working with us in the late 1990s and he was from Humber's journalism program. And he was a beekeeper already at his home, and he asked us if he could start a beehive. And at that time, keeping bees was not as popular as it is now, so our staff had let him keep a hidden hive out in the wildflower meadow.

Alexandra Link: And after he was done working with us and he graduated, he left and the bees were left on their own for many years. And in the 2000s one of our horticulture technicians, named Heather Summers, she took an interest in beekeeping. She'd heard about Jack and the bees. And so, she went off to the arboretum woods in search of the honey bees, and she actually found the hive living in a tree in the wild forest.

Alexandra Link: So, Heather started beekeeping again. And when I got here, five years ago, she mentioned that she was really hoping for some mentorship from more experienced beekeepers. And so, I put her in touch with two experienced beekeepers that I know, who have been keeping bees sustainably for over a decade, and their names are Fran Freeman and

John Coffman, and they are legends in my eyes in the Toronto community in beekeeping.

Alexandra Link: And so, the partnership was a great success. And as we started working more closely together, Fran expressed her desire to share her knowledge around sustainable beekeeping, beekeeping with a heart with students and with the community. So, this was a wonderful fit with the Humber arboretum's purpose of educating and connecting people with the natural environment.

Alexandra Link: And so, the sustainable urban beekeeping certificate was born this year.

Nathan Whitlock: You mentioned that phrase, beekeeping with a heart. Urban beekeeping as been something that's been growing and growing as a trend, as an interest for decades, and there's been other programs, and other classes you can take on it, but what makes the program through the arboretum different?

Alexandra Link: What makes us different is definitely that beekeeping with a heart and beekeeping that really caring for the bees themselves, as well as looking at how bees connect with broader issues around sustainability. Many commercial beekeepers do things like feed their bees white sugar, or white sugar syrup, treat the bees with chemicals or use antibiotics, and that's not what we teach in our certificate. We teach a much more natural style of beekeeping that's focused on understanding the bees and caring for the bees. So, we believe it's better for the environment and for the bees themselves.

Alexandra Link: The other thing that makes our program different is that, as many things are here at the Humber arboretum, we're huge believers in experiential learning and we play a big role in that with the Humber College students. So many people these days, it's become a fad to invent more hands off hives, so these hives are meant for the casual beekeeper who wants honey without a lot of effort, and that's not what we're teaching in the course.

Alexandra Link: In the course we're really teaching people to get hands on, get their hands dirty, understand the bees themselves, so their biology, their lifecycle, their food, their habitat, what they need to survive and the challenges they face, and it's beekeeping based on knowing your colony and caring about them.

Nathan Whitlock: So, as with children so with urban beekeepers. You lay off the sugar and be prepared to get your hands dirty, that's the idea?

Alexandra Link: Absolutely. That's a great way of putting it.

Nathan Whitlock: So, is there anything that you do at the arboretum that helps sustain the bees? Do you have to cultivate certain plants, or do anything extra to keep the bees happy or keep them healthy?

Alexandra Link: We're very conscious of all our pollinators here at the arboretum, including honey bees, butterflies and native bees. In Toronto there are actually over 350 wild bee species, and we think it's really important at the arboretum to educate and take care of them.

Alexandra Link: So, one of things we do, we have a beautiful wild meadow in the arboretum and we really educate children and students and the public about the importance of having these wild spaces, and of the plants that grow in them. And this wild meadow at the arboretum is the main place where the bees get their food from, and it leads the beautiful and unique taste of our honey. We also have pollinator demonstration garden outside the Centre for Urban Ecology, which have native plants in there that are really important for pollinators, and we see that as a really great way to educate people about plants that they can plant in their own home gardens that will help the pollinators in the city.

Nathan Whitlock: And how does this actually work? I mean, you did mention that there's a lot of hands on work. You don't avoid the hives, obviously. What's the actual mix of in class and hive work?

Alexandra Link: For anyone who wants to complete the full certificate, we have eight core courses and two electives, and these core courses have three in class courses which are an introduction to the bees, their needs and what can go wrong for new or, even, experienced beekeepers and solutions for how to address those challenges. And those are the more theoretical courses, and then we get into the three experiential workshops that take people out to work with the bees at three different times of the year. And those courses include actually building hives, techniques used to harvest honey, and then taking part in a real full day harvest.

Nathan Whitlock: There's quite a range of classes, and there's quite a range of courses in this program. When you were putting it together, did you envision it as something for people who were just curious about the idea of urban beekeeping, or people who really wanted to get involved and wanted to start, or were already doing it and wanted to learn new techniques?

Alexandra Link: So there's a bit of both, actually, for people who are new to beekeeping or people who've been at it for a while. Overall, the vision for the

program is to take a dedicated new beekeeper through the steps of their first beekeeping year. The first three in class courses are a great introduction for the curious, and some of the electives about honey harvesting and byproducts could be of interest to people who have no desire to keep their own bees. But overall, it's designed for people who wanna get out there, who wanna keep their owns and who wanna get really hands on and get to know the bees themselves.

Alexandra Link: And, for instance, bee hive building, it's something people who aren't that interested in keeping bees probably don't want to build their own hives. But people who are and who want that hands on, connected type of course, this is for them.

Nathan Whitlock: We keep using the term hands on, because that's a big part of the program, obviously, but that obviously has a very particular residence when you're talking about beekeeping and bees. So I have to ask, what kind of reactions do the students have when they first start working with the bees directly?

Alexandra Link: Well, it's a mix obviously, because of the different people involved. But overall, I'd say there's a mix of curiosity and excitement. And the most notable thing, for me, in chatting with people about their connection and their reaction to the bees is that some people really express a personal connection to the bees. In fact, that heart opening experience where people feel a sense of caring and really awe at this hive consciousness that they experience.

Nathan Whitlock: And do you have any plans to expand this program or to add similar programs to this one?

Alexandra Link: Well, we're finding ... So, we launched it this year as a pilot but the program is so popular that we are considering expanding it and offering more courses in the year ahead, and we are also very open to people's ideas about courses we can offer and share with them, so I really encourage people to get in touch with us if there's something more they wanna learn about the bees and anything else we can offer them.

Nathan Whitlock: Thank you so much for being on NEXTcast, Alexandra.

Alexandra Link: Thank you for having me.

Nathan Whitlock: Nextcast is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at The Centre for Teaching and Learning at Humber College. Special thanks to Puneet Wagh, Santino Pannozzo, Allison LaSorda, Darren

Richards and Eileen DeCourcy. To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast or to let us know what you think, email humberpress, all one word, at humber.ca. That's humberpress@humber.ca.

Nathan Whitlock: To learn more about the workshops, teaching certificates and other support offered through The Centre for Teaching and Learning, and to read issues of NEXT magazine, go to humber.co/centreforteachingandlearning. Thanks for listening, see you next time. That's not a pun.