

The grounds of Osgoode Hall

Welcome to Osgoode Hall. My name is Elise Brunet. I'm the Curator at The Law Society of Upper Canada and I'll be your guide for this tour of the grounds of Osgoode Hall.

You are standing on the oldest continuously used institutional property in Toronto. The Law Society of Upper Canada purchased this property in 1828, so it could build its headquarters. It continues to regulate the legal professions in Ontario from here.

Of course, things have changed over time. The plantings have evolved; the walkways and driveways have been altered and resurfaced; even the fence was replaced, then repaired and restored many times. But the grounds have retained their overall character. They are one of the few remaining examples of mid-19th century Ontario institutional landscapes.

Landscaped grounds were always part of the Osgoode Hall vision. When the Law Society purchased its six acres of land, it was planning offices, a library and green space, so law students could get fresh air and exercise.

Unfortunately, building Osgoode Hall was expensive and ground improvements had to wait. In fact, the Law Society was so short of funds that it actually considered leasing parts of the property as building lots. When the Courts moved into Osgoode Hall and helped pay the bills, that idea was abandoned. Between 1844 and 1846, Osgoode Hall gained a new centre range, a west wing, and landscaped grounds. From that point on, every construction campaign at Osgoode Hall was matched by a flurry of gardening activity.

The first designer of the grounds was John Howard, an architect, to whom we also owe High Park and St. James Cemetery. He was hired by the Law Society in 1843, to assess the damage inflicted on Osgoode Hall by the troops stationed here after the Rebellion of 1837. There were few landscape designers in 19th century Ontario and it wasn't unusual to see architects step into that role.

We think that Howard designed the defining elements of Osgoode Hall's landscape: the east-west drive in front of the building and the terraced slope. The drives and paths were direct and formal. They were meant for business, not pleasure. Howard also probably came up with the planting scheme which, from what we can tell, was a broad belt of mixed evergreen and deciduous trees typical of a naturalistic approach. Given that in 1853 ground maintenance consisted of mowing three times a year and hoeing twice, the paths would have been clear of major weeds, but we don't think there were flowers or shrubs.

After the new centre part of Osgoode Hall (the one that exists now) was finished in 1862, the landscape started taking its modern shape. Following Victorian tradition, the grounds contained lawns, a canopy of trees, a carefully organized system of drives and walkways, a boundary wall, and an iron fence with gates. This combination of features provided a park-like setting for the most important façades of the building.

The lawn was one of the earliest landscaping elements at Osgoode Hall. In 1832, Osgoode Hall's "lawn" would likely have been a rough meadow, dotted with construction rubble. Lawns as we know them today need sturdy yet fine perennial grass varieties, access to a municipal water system, water sprinklers, effective weed control and lawn mowers. The Law Society acquired its first mowing machine in 1863, shortly after the first patents for lawn mowers were issued in North America.

The trees are the dominant feature of the grounds and have been the greatest source of garden expenses for the Law Society. Contrary to popular belief, few if any of the trees go back further than World War Two, and there has been a lot of turnover over the years. Life is hard for city trees. Many of our trees, including the lindens, honey locusts, and flowering crab apples, date from 1965, and as time goes on, the tree cover will continue to change. Our current replacement policy favours native species such as the red oak, the Eastern white pine, the American beech and the hop-hornbeam.

The flowers were a late addition to the landscape. In 1885, the brand new beds contained geraniums and verbenas. The current planting scheme, thousands of spring bulbs followed by annuals, was already in place by 1904. Even two world wars and the Great Depression didn't break the pattern. Tulips were the bulb of choice until recently. Unfortunately, our local squirrel population has developed a taste for tulips and we now plant daffodils. In the 1980s and 1990s, plant varieties started to change. The trees were getting bigger and were producing too much shade for the beds. Small conifers, broadleaved evergreens, and other shrubs were combined with shade-tolerant flowers. The borders, which had previously had rigid shapes, also acquired softer outlines. Perennials are slowly being reintroduced in the beds; we know that there used to be perennials — what looked like irises and peonies — along the fence. The East Garden is gradually becoming a perennial garden as well.

Until 1895, a succession of freelance gardeners cared for the grounds, usually in the growing season. Thomas Jones, an Englishman, became the first permanent full-time gardener at Osgoode Hall in 1895. The grounds are currently being cared for by two horticultural technicians.

The fence that encloses the grounds dates from 1867. It replaced a picket fence that had surrounded the property as early as 1831. The shrub border on the west lawn dates from the mid-1930s but would not have been visible from the street until the 1970s when a tall brick wall was taken down. You can still see a small section of the wall at the gate on University Avenue. There is an audio tour just about the fence, if you want more information.

We take the grounds for granted, but they have been under threat numerous times. Very early on, the grounds attracted unwanted attention. Some wanted to turn the property into a public park, others needed the land to widen streets. A parking garage was briefly considered, as were additional buildings for both the Law Society and the courts (including an office tower on the west lawn, if you can imagine that). Lately, our most serious causes for worry come from our neighbours. The construction of commercial and residential towers raises many concerns, especially the impact of their shadow on the trees and plantings of Osgoode Hall.

Our tulip-eating squirrels are not the only wild inhabitants of the grounds. Birds, mammals and insects enjoy the greenery too. Some are permanent residents; others just pass through. Raccoons, skunks, opossums, groundhogs, foxes, cats, mice, rats and chipmunks have been seen on the grounds over the years. The urban pigeon is the most common feathered inhabitant of the grounds, but sparrows, crows, starlings, gulls, robins, hawks, finches, nuthatches, woodpeckers, grackles, wrens, hummingbirds and peregrine falcons have been seen as well. Migratory birds have been known to pause at Osgoode Hall. Mallard ducks and American woodcocks have been seen during the spring migration. A decade ago, a group of five or six rarely seen northern saw-whet owls were observed in pines on the grounds.

That's it for now. Enjoy a moment on one of the benches, admiring the play of the sun through the leaves, watching the squirrels play, or, if you're lucky, spy on one of the many wedding parties that come here to immortalize their big day. I hope you enjoyed the tour.