

## Shoresh program wins U.S. innovation award

Michelle Bitran, Intern, Thursday, November 10, 2011



Students from Robbins Hebrew Academy, Bayview campus, help prepare the soil for spring planting at the Kavanah Garden.

**TORONTO** — Shoresh's Kavanah Garden last month made the Slingshot Foundation's list of the 50 most innovative non-profits in the North American Jewish community today.

Kavanah Garden is the only Canadian organization on the American foundation's list.

Slingshot releases an annual guidebook that names 50 Jewish non-profits to watch, for community members and potential donors. Applicants are evaluated on innovation, leadership, impact and organizational efficiency.

"It was very affirming to find out we'd been selected," said Risa Cooper, Shoresh's executive director, who joined the Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs in 2008.

One year later, she established the Kavanah Garden at the Joseph and Wolf Lebovic Jewish Community Campus in Vaughan, Ont., with support from the UJA Federation of Greater Toronto.

Shoresh's Kavanah Garden is also one of nine finalists in the running for the UJA's Six Points Jewish Venture Philanthropy Fund.

The garden was created to be a working model of Jewish social and environmental responsibility. Each season, it plays host to a variety of programs that give families and school groups the chance to plant and harvest produce while learning about the environment and related Jewish values.

“It’s not just about Jewish learning, and it’s not just about Jewish action. It’s about bringing those two spheres together,” said Cooper.

Through the various programs, community members are invited to help plant some of the more than 100 varieties of vegetables, fruits and herbs, which are organically grown; make treats in the solar oven; use a bicycle-powered blender and plant potatoes in the Chanukah garden bed (to make latkes, of course). There are also nature trail treks and learning workshops for adults.

For parents and children who come to the weekly family drop-in at the Kavanah Garden – Cooper’s favourite of the programs offered – it is very much their own garden. “I think the reason that I adore [the drop-in] so much is that it’s so sweet to build a community of people who come every week and become really connected to the garden and its surrounding spaces,” she said.

Once the hardworking members of the community and volunteers harvest the produce, more than 80 per cent of it is donated to those in need through Ve’ahavta, the Canadian Jewish Humanitarian and Relief Committee, to emphasize the Jewish value of tzedakah.

So far, the Kavanah Garden has been getting rave reviews. “The feedback has been really, really sweet and humbling,” said Cooper. She added that in the last two growing seasons, 3,400 community members and more than 200 volunteers helped out at the garden. Cooper said that the Jewish community is just starting to see the connections between Judaism and the environment, even though the environmental movement has been popular for a while. “We’re realizing that Judaism is so rich in agricultural and ecological wisdom.”

Learning the lessons that Judaism has to teach about food systems and the environment and applying them to help take care of the Earth and the community is what Kavanah Garden is all about, Cooper said. “It makes Judaism really relevant.”

For more information about the Kavanah Garden and Shoresh’s programming, visit [www.shoresh.ca](http://www.shoresh.ca).