

Thursday Walk with James Warkentin, March 2, 2017

Contributed by Marilyn Goebel and reviewed by James

Thirty guides braved the rain and cold to hear Garden Superintendent James Warkentin lead our first walk of the year. James noted that he and his crew are facing major challenges because of the severe winter weather and lack of time to work on garden projects November-January. We could hear a chipper in the background as fallen trees, branches and brush were being cleaned up. Some tender plants, especially in the Southern Hemisphere Garden, are damaged and may not make it. James pointed out that this winter's damage follows closely on the heels of the 2015 drought, so plants have been stressed multiple times. They should be power washing the signs, benches, and paving, but it's a low priority right now.

In the Eastern North America Garden, paths are being improved. Some trees that are damaged or duplicates will be removed and will be replaced with a more diverse selection. This will also open up the area to more sunlight. Roy overplanted early on, with the idea that the trees would be thinned later, but that never happened. The understory here is a challenge. They are buying some new plants but also growing some from eastern seed. Former director Harry Jongerden (now head of the Toronto Botanic Garden) has helped with this. The Woodland Garden also requires some thinning, and magnolias that have self-seeded will be removed. This entire area is still recovering from the impact of construction of the Visitor Centre.

As we walked by the Stanley Smith Garden, James said the plans for this area are on indefinite hold. The current focus is to make the best of it as a rockery and not just focus on alpiners. The Alpine Trough Garden next to the Glasshouse will stay the same. James also noted that the willow sculpture southwest of the Rose Garden will likely be removed this year. It was never meant to be permanent and is losing its shape and footing.

As we neared the "Children's Garden," James reviewed the Garden's strategy to attract more birds. This was instigated by the current City bird strategy that ties in with hosting the International Ornithological Congress in 2018. This area will be transformed into a garden with lots of ideas for homeowners to use in turning their own yards into bird sanctuaries. It will include new plantings and trees that are attractive to birds. The little gazebo will be removed, and in its place will be a structure where kids can observe birds at feeding stations and perches to be placed in this area. There will be birdhouses, which may also be on sale in the gift shop. In order to do this work, several things will be removed, including the *Prunus lusitanica*, the pollarded catalpa, the worm topiary, the stone carpet bed, and the jade picnic table. The Ogoopogo topiary will be moved, perhaps to the maze. The hedges will be cleaned up, and the fence upgraded. The tropical beds will stay. All this work will be a challenge, given current staffing. There will be more interpretation here, and also in the natural area near the Ed Centre that has recently been cleaned up to attract birds.

As we walked towards the Great Lawn, James noted that the turf is in bad shape due to overuse and lack of appropriate maintenance. There is more moss than grass now under the beeches, and gardeners will reseed those areas. He is currently talking with a private company to help us. The private company will not take over ongoing maintenance, but they will assist us in addressing the compaction, chafer beetle, and drought issues more effectively.

Some of the trees on the Laburnum Walk are leaning and will be propped up until after blooming. The worst offenders will be replaced, but Bruce thinks that these trees (*Laburnum x watereri* 'Vossii') may be difficult to find. The wet conditions in this area are not conducive to good growth.

There will be hanging baskets in the Lath house again this year.

In the Perennial Garden, James pointed out some new signage about appropriate behaviour in the Garden. The signs are in place now because children can come into the Garden for free during March, and parents need to make sure their offspring do not add to the damage caused by

the bad winter. Staff also hope to remove the old double-post wooden signage and replace it with new single-post signage, but this takes financial resources.

As we walked up through the Cherry Grove, James said that the Vancouver Japanese Gardeners Association will install a new temporary bed before Sakura Days, like they did last year, but on the north side of the path. This bed may remain in place through the summer, depending on how it holds up.

When we approached the Sino-Himalayan Garden, James said that the area took a big hit this winter. A lot of big-tree work is needed, which will have to be done by professionals. Casey will be busy augmenting the understory plantings. Because of the drought in 2015, there may not be many meconopsis this year, and, rather than growing our own, we may be purchasing them. The waterfall and its pond, along with the Alma VanDusen meadow stream, are leaking and need to be patched.

The pine next to the Korean Pavilion is in bad shape after the winter. The Pavilion itself is still fenced off for security reasons because parts of the roof are falling off, and one of the columns is no longer plumb. Its future is unclear. On a happier note, the surrounding pieris and camellias came through the winter without much damage. James asked if any of the long-term guides remember where a time capsule in this area was buried in 1987, as they are unable to locate it.

At the Vegetable Garden, James pointed out that the orchard trees were removed last year, and that area will remain as lawn for the time being. It will take a couple of years to plant more disease-resistant trees. The theme for the 2017 vegetable beds will be international, the same as last year. The Garden Director has found some extra summer help this year for the area. They are also thinking about doing a winter vegetable display. There is some discussion about doing a raised bed display, but probably not this year. They hope to open a small part of the fire-ant-stricken Upper Meadow of the Alma VanDusen Garden this year. James says that the ants are here to stay, so the problem will continue to be managed.

As we walked back along the Rhododendron Walk, James noted that the staffing in this area has not been stable for several years. Asked about replacing the mulberry that was removed last summer, he said there are some in the nursery that will be planted later, but probably not in the same spot.

Despite all the challenges James and his crew face, we assured him that visitors are always surprised to hear how the beauty of the Garden is maintained by so few staff.