

## TREE OF THE SEASON – Spring 2013

Hybrid goldenchain tree - *Laburnum* × *watereri* 'Vossii'

The Laburnum Walk, one of the most beautiful and most photographed features at VanDusen Botanical Garden, begins blooming around mid-late May. Planted before the Garden opened in 1975, the Walk consists of a curving pathway with *Laburnum* × *watereri* 'Vossii' planted on either side. These trees are hybrids of two European *Laburnum* species, and their bark, leaves, seed pods and flowers are poisonous. When in bloom, their branches dangle yellow chain-like clusters of flowers over the heads of visitors, with contrasting purple alliums planted beneath.

The Walk was designed by former Garden Curator and Director Roy Forster. He got the idea for the Laburnum Walk after a visit to Bodnant Garden in Wales, where they have a 4.5 m wide, 55 m long Laburnum Arch. The Arch, made of *Laburnum* × *watereri* 'Vossii' mixed with *Wisteria*, was planted in 1882, and is perhaps the oldest known Laburnum Arch. The trees in the Arch are grown along a curved metal frame, and their branches are trained to meet in the middle of the arch. For his walk at VanDusen, Forster let the trees grow naturally with only a little pruning to keep them neat.

Originally, thyme and lavender were planted beneath the VanDusen laburnums, but these herbs didn't survive the winters well, so Steve McNamara, Kew-trained Foreman and Head Gardener in the early 1990s, suggested planting alliums instead. He may have been inspired by the work of Rosemary Verey, an English garden designer and writer who, in 1964, created her own laburnum walk on the grounds of her home, Barnsley House, in Gloucestershire. She was inspired by a book by a famous English landscape gardener named Russell Page, called 'The Education of a Gardener'. In it, Page mentions the Laburnum Arch at Bodnant Garden, and also discusses the beauty of pairing yellow and blue flowering plants. In this quote from her book 'The Art of Planting', Verey discusses the effect of yellow and purple in the eye-pleasing Laburnum Walk:

"My most striking early June effect is created by the mass of round-headed *Allium aflatunense* which have increased many-fold since I first planted them twenty years ago under our laburnum walk. This is a strong clear yellow and pale mauve picture, interspersed with plenty of green; the magic is that they are both at their best for the same two or three weeks. I can claim credit for choosing the alliums, but not for the fact that, being darker than the laburnum, they act almost as shadows, with the laburnum as the lighting overhead. (If you were to reverse these colours, with purple wisteria above and yellow alliums beneath, the glow would be lost.)"