Self-Guided Tour February/March 2024
Plants, Lakes and Bridges
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The end of winter and the first signs of spring are eagerly anticipated in VanDusen. But as we wait for both, there are plants and vistas that are constant sources of enjoyment and interest that often get overlooked or are taken for granted. This tour will stay close to the largest bodies of water in the Garden and focus on plants near to them. As you follow the number and arrow signs, keep your eyes open for those early signs of colour in bulbs and blossoms and budding leaves that tell us spring is near.

The first stop is at **1 - the Swale (officially The Jennifer Eyton Rain Garden)** at the bottom of the Plaza along the edge of Livingstone Lake. This lake is named for Bill Livingstone, who designed the layout, pathways, rock and water features of the Garden. This bog-like area provides a filtering system for run-off from the Plaza. Once the fluffy seeds emerge from the bulrushes at the right end of the swale, hummingbirds come and gather them for their nests. This attracts visitors with cameras who wait patiently for the perfect photo. Just behind the bulrushes you can see the straight, strikingly yellow stems of a **golden-twig dogwood (*Cornus sericea* 'Flaviramea').** We usually think of dogwoods as trees, but this genus contains tree, shrub and ground cover species. This specimen adds winter interest and can be used in floral arrangements for effect.

Turn right to a crossroad and then left and go past the two cedar sculptures by Michael Dennis called Confidence. Enter the path to your right marked with an arrow and follow it straight-ahead through the pine forest to the end. Along the way you may see magnolias and tree rhododendrons beginning to blossom. As you leave the woodland, look across the paved path to see a large planting of **2 - *Helleborus* x *hybridus* Royal Heritage Strain** of various colour-tones. Also called Lenten or winter roses, hellebores are harbingers of spring and bloom February to April. The name comes from the Greek, 'helein' meaning "injures or destroys" which refers to the plant's toxic leaves, stems and roots, all poisonous to humans if ingested.

The body of water in front of you is R. Roy Forster Cypress Pond. It is named for VanDusen's first Garden Curator. He was instrumental in planning the original plantings and the botanical organization of the Garden. The bridge crossing the pond is a unique floating bridge constructed in 1980. This area is a favourite hunting ground for herons. The lakeside to the right and behind the bridge is home to **bald or swamp cypress (*Taxodium distichum*)**, deciduous conifers that will be leafing out in lime-green splendour and provide a stunning backdrop to this vista.

Turn left onto the paved path and look for a **3 - hybrid mahonia (*Mahonia x media* 'Charity')** whose golden, slightly fragrant yellow flowers already started to appear in early January. This is a hardy hybrid whose parents are ***Mahonia japonica***, a Chinese species, and ***Mahonia lomariifolia*** from China, Myanmar and Taiwan. It can withstand temperatures to -15C (5F) which we experienced briefly this winter.

Continue on this path and go over the stream to the crossroads and turn left into the Southern Hemisphere Garden. An often-overlooked plant is the **4 - mayten tree (*Maytenus boaria*)**, an evergreen native to South America, where it is used in traditional medicine, horticulture and reforestation programs. European honey bees produce delicious honey from its small flowers. Oil from its seeds is used in varnish and its hardwood is used to make tool handles. 'Boaria' means "bovine" in Latin, which is appropriate since the leaves are used to feed cattle.

Continue straight ahead and go up the stone stairs to the peninsula. Keep left and look for **5 - box-leaf azara or chinchin (*Azara microphylla*)**. If its small, yellow flowers are out, smell them to see if you can notice a vanilla, cocoa, marzipan or white chocolate scent. This native of Chile and Argentina belongs to the willow family and is pollinator-friendly and deer resistant.

Continue to the bench from where you will have a panoramic view of Livingstone Lake. The green roof of the Visitor Centre is visible from here. The building directly opposite you was the original entrance to the Garden and is now Shaughnessy restaurant. The slope dotted with various ornamental grasses is a planting that replaced a collection of rose family plants that were damaged after a very harsh winter in the early 2000's.

Continue on the path looping around to your right. The strange looking **6 - monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*)** is a female specimen and its long thin seeds may still be visible at the edge of the path. These are edible and fall to the ground in a round basket-ball sized cone that can take months to ripen on the tree. These trees are considered to be "living fossils".

Descend the stone stairway and turn left. There are three interesting evergreen plants on the right-side of the path leading to the zig-zag bridge. The first is the **7 - prostrate tea tree (*Leptospermum rupestre*)**, endemic to the highest mountains of Tasmania. In alpine areas it tends to remain prostrate, whereas in subalpine areas, it can grow into a large shrub. This more prostrate species is good for inhibiting weeds and is drought adapted once established. The new stems are a red cinnamon colour that fades to grey. In early summer, pink buds open up to starry white flowers. Nearby is **8 -** a **spiderflower (*Grevillea* 'Canberra Gem')**, also drought-tolerant once established. It is generally disease and pest-free and hardy to -15C (5F). In May its display of spider-like reddish pink flowers give it an exotic look. The last is **9 - an alpine bottlebrush (*Callistemon sieberi*).** It, like the prostrate tea tree belongs to the Myrtle family. Endemic to Australia, this plant is not fussy about soil and is tolerant of both drought and poor drainage. Its new leaves emerge pale, silvery pink and its dense spikes of creamy-yellow flowers are prolific and last from late spring to midsummer. They provide copious nectar for birds, especially hummingbirds.

Now go to the bridge and enjoy the view of Livingstone Lake on your left and Heron Lake on your right. Nearby along the shore-lines, ***Gunnera*** are close to breaking out of their leaf-covered shelters to grow into enormous rhubarb-like plants with leaves the size of small umbrellas. This plant is named for the C18 Norwegian bishop and botanist, Johann Gunnerus. It belongs to an ancient group with a well-documented fossil history originating in South America during the Cretaceous period.

Now leave the bridge by taking the path with the arrow pointing right. It will lead you alongside Heron Lake. There are a number of plants to take note of, the first being a **10 - shore pine (*Pinus contorta*)**. This tree is native to western North America. In BC, it grows along the coast and in sub-alpine areas further north. It grows in nutrient poor conditions such as boggy areas and rocky shorelines. On shoreline cliffs it often takes on a bonsai appearance due to constant exposure to salt spray and strong winds. It is sometimes known as black pine and coast pine and is closely related to jack pine.

On your left are banks of **11 - bird's nest spruce (*Picea abies* 'Nidiformis')**. This is a popular landscape planting favoured for its low growth, easy maintenance and deer resistance. It requires little or no pruning, grows in poor soil and is a good northern climate plant as it prefers cooler temperatures. The common name 'bird's nest' refers to the shrub's flattened, rounded shape and concave centre. Picea abies is native to northern Europe and is known as Norway spruce. Also on the left is a **12 - weeping copper beach (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Purpurea Pendula')**. This is a cultivar of the deciduous European beech. The leaves begin greenish in spring and turn copper-coloured as the summer progresses. The "weeping" branches will reach the ground and begin growing roots. The tree has a smooth silver bark which provides winter interest. As you follow the path to the left, you will see an evergreen ground-cover called **13 - kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)**, also called "bearberry" ('uva-ursi' is Latin for "grape of the bear"). This plant is common throughout the Pacific Northwest, growing on rocky slopes and in dry forest clearings and has become a popular ground-cover in gardens. It produces bright red berries which are edible but unappetizing as they are mealy and tasteless and are better cooked. It is used in aboriginal cultures throughout North America including as a diuretic for urinary tract infections and also as a laxative tea.

Continue along the path through the Heather Garden containing **Heather (*Calluna* spp.)** which have scale-like leaves and **Heaths (*Erica* spp.)** with needle-like leaves. The former was used to make brooms in Scotland. This garden area was created after Mr. Roy Forster visited and was inspired by the moors of Wales.

Follow the arrows into the Grotto and turn right after exiting it. Take the path curving through the Black and Gold Garden which features plants with dark and light foliage selected for their contrasting design effect. Continue straight ahead with the view of Livingstone Lake on your left until you reach the Jade Fountain. Beside it is a **14 - silk tassel bush (*Garrya elliptica* 'James Roof')**, a male selection with very long silvery catkins that appear late fall through winter, after which they dry and drop off in

late spring. The species is native to the Oregon and California coast and is extremely drought tolerant once established. It is also deer resistant and can tolerate dry shade. When planted together with a female plant, the latter will produce grape-like clusters of purple-coloured round berries.

We have reached the end of the tour. As a grand finale, look for a native plant, **15 - skunk cabbage or swamp lantern (*Lysichiton americanus*) i**n the stream bed to the right of the bridge**.** It is an amazing plant in that it produces enough heat to melt snow so that it can emerge from frozen soil. Despite the fact that it can cause a burning sensation when eaten, bears will eat young plants when they come out of hibernation to reactivate their bowels. The characteristic yellow spathes make the plant attractive, but the skunk-like smell which deters us attracts pollinators such as flies and carrion beetles. This plant can live for up to twenty years!

You are now back at the Plaza and the Visitor Centre. We hope you will visit the Garden throughout the seasons this year to enjoy all it has to offer.