

Bare Bones and Skeletons

Winter Seasonal Self-guided Tour, 2008

VanDusen Botanical Garden

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Follow the directional arrows and numbers for this seasonal tour which begins at the pavilion sun-deck.

“Gardener, if you listen well: plant for your winter pleasures, when months dishearten....”

Vita Sackville-West, 1892-1962

The beauty of bare limbs in the winter garden is subtle. The absence of beguiling foliage opens up new vistas never noticed before. Hedges come into their own. We're more conscious of silhouettes formed by stalwart evergreens. It's winter when we become aware of berries, rose hips and colour and texture of tree bark. There are even unexpected fragrances.

To reach the first stop, leave the deck by the stairs on your left. Walk straight ahead under the stone arch and along a gravel path through the Children's Garden to reach the Rhododendron Walk just beyond the wooden archway. Exit left and continue walking straight ahead until you come to an intersection. On your right is the **1 - dove or handkerchief tree (*Davidia involucrate*)**, named after Pere David, the 19th century French missionary who located it in China. This tree is most often admired in May, when its bracts waft handkerchief-like around each flower head. But its imposing stature speaks out in winter as its dark and stolid, undulating limbs reach upwards to 12 meters (40 feet) or more.



Continue to walk along the Rhododendron Walk until you are struck from both sides by the sweet scent and pink flowers of the hybrid **2 – Bodnant viburnum (*Viburnum x bodnantense*)**. An edge-of-the woodland shrub, its twiggy branches form a thicket particularly suited to birds for winter protection and nesting. The viburnum genus is large with 150 species, many of which have brightly coloured fall and winter fruits.

Farther up the walk, on both sides, the **3 – Chinese witch hazel (*Hamamelis mollis*)** can't be missed. It is recognizable by its structure: wide spreading from the base branches

growing horizontally and close to the ground. Once most of its large, rounded and hairy leaves have dropped, we can appreciate its frame – one that invites an under-storey of woodland planting as well as a dark canopy of evergreens. Its softly scented, yellow blooms are an extra bonus during long winter months.

The **4 – tall stewartia (*Stewartia monadelphica*)** in winter, may be the best example of natural sculpture in VanDusen Gardens: from the trunk through to the end of each branchlet, note the flaking, cinnamon-coloured bark. Its fall foliage repeats the colour.

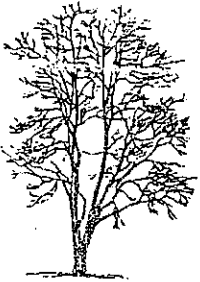
Tree bark colors are not usually bright. Their impact is most often in their texture. Bark may be furrowed or smooth, polished or peeling. It may be silver, purple, brown, striped, mottled or deeply black. The age of the tree, season and ambient light all affect our appreciation.

A little farther along on your left, you will see a **5 – paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*)**. This is a beautiful tree, easy to grow and valuable in all seasons. Native to China, the paperbark maple has peeling bark hanging in shreds or flakes that reveal orange-coloured new bark below. This unusual bark glows with the sun behind it.

Stop at the top of the walk and on your right find the most frequently planted larch in the Pacific Northwest **6 – Japanese larch (*Larix kaempferi*)**. With needles to rival pumpkin orange and cones, which start out oval and turn to rosettes, this native of Japan is typical of the larch genus. While it loses its needles in the late fall, it retains its slender silhouette, with gracefully drooping branches peppered with cones like notes on a musical score.



Now walk straight ahead keeping the Korean Pavilion on your right. One would hardly think to look at the **7 – rose-of-Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*)** outside the Meditation Garden in winter. What's to appreciate without the typically, showy, bell-shaped August blooms? The effect of a stiff, pale-gray screen that this massed planting presents. In winter the *Hibiscus* bark creates a contrasting hedge against Douglas fir, It creates a separation, but not exclusion from the interior garden – a theatre scrim in winter, an opaque curtain in summer. *Syriacus* is misleading: *Hibiscus* is native to Eastern Asia and, in China with the tree peony and lotus, is among the most important ornamental plants. Directly opposite, its limbs twisting high above the path, is **8 – black locust (*Robinia pseudocacia*)**. Observe the dark brown, deeply furrowed, scaly, thick bark.



Continue to follow the path sloping downward past the almost fluorescent purple berries of the Beautyberry (*Callicarpa bodinieri*). Ahead, on your left with a very uniform, multi-stemmed form, laden with brick-colored berries, is **9 – Japanese mountain ash (*Sorbus commixta*)**. At the next intersection, turn right down the path onto the Great Lawn, to view the incredible **10 – Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*)**. The group stands like silent sentries. The deeply grooved bark of their branchless trunks reaches to the heavens.



Now, glance over your right shoulder, across the grass to the dramatic skyline effect of the three large black locust, *Robinia pseudocacia*. Their open branching effect creates a stark, almost sinister appearance.

Wend your way down the path, stopping at the monarch **11 – Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*)**. Reach out and touch the very beautiful, dense, fire-resistant bark that encloses the tree like armor. Look beyond in the distance to your left and see the grove of Himalayan white birch (*Betula utilis* var. *jacquemonti*). Shown here at their best, white trunks and limbs standing boldly against an evergreen backdrop. Proceed to the next crossroads, and as you turn left, you will see the largest ash tree on

the VanDusen site, **12 – European ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*)**. This impressive tree pre-dates the garden by many years.

Ahead on your right is **13 – Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avallana* 'Contorta')**. This strange form was found in an English hedgerow, c. 1863. All plants in cultivation from this source have amazingly gnarled and twisted stems. This shrub is already bearing tiny male catkins hanging perpendicular and inconspicuous purple female flowers. Many observers prefer this shrub's winter state to its summer foliage with puckered leaves.



Retrace your steps back to the intersection and continue ahead to the perennial garden. On your left, is the **14 – star magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*)**. This lacey framework of branches and furry buds provides a filigree playground for our feathered winter friends.



Pass under the twisted pendulous branches of the weeping copper beech, *Fagus sylvatica* 'Purpurea Pendula' to see on your right **15 – golden beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Zlatia')**. A noble European native, the golden beech possesses magnificent form and a smooth bluish-gray, elephant-like bark.

Let your eyes roam the vast expanse of the Great Lawn, itself the "bones" of a day when this garden was once a golf course, and the Great Lawn a fairway. The winter garden is one of form and structure, of "bare bones and skeletons".

To return to the Garden entrance, follow the directional arrows on the Map board opposite the beech grove.