

The Magical Month of May!
2009

I love May for every day
There's something new that's come to stay.
Another bud, another bird,
Another blade the sun has stirred!

Abracadabra! Nature waves her wand, and POOF! something new appears— fresh, green buds, lovely blooms, baby birds..... It's **magical!**

This self-guided tour will take about an hour and covers a part of the garden that is spectacular at this time of year. As always, exact blooming times are in the hands of Mother Nature. As you walk along, be sure to look way up at the trees and bushes, and way down by your feet, so as not to miss any of the miracles unfolding around you. If you've brought your camera, have it out ready to capture some colourful pictures!

To start your tour, go down the stairs on the left of the pavilion deck. Turn right at the directional arrow and proceed towards the herb garden. Gently rub some of the leaves of the plants in these beds and notice their aroma. These days herbs are used primarily to season our food, but in the past they were used to cure sickness and ward off evil spirits. Continue along the paved path. You'll soon see some stone troughs that are filled with tiny alpine plants. They grow above the tree line in their natural environment. They require good drainage and full sun.

When you reach the golden catalpa (*Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea'), a tree planted when the garden officially opened in August 1975, turn left and walk towards the espaliered fruit trees. Cross to the opposite side of the path, walk across the grass, and enter the bark mulched Loderi rhododendron trail. This trail features a collection of wonderful rhododendron hybrids developed by Sir Edmund Loder at the famous Leonardslee Garden in England. The **-1- Rhododendron 'Loderi King George'**, described by many as the best of the Loderi Group of Rhododendrons has large pink-white blooms and is slightly scented. Ahead on the right is **-2- Rhododendron 'Loderi White Diamond'**. If today is warm, the scent from the rhododendrons will be more pronounced. What do they smell like to you? You've probably noticed a number of oak trees along this trail. They make very good companions for the rhododendrons because they provide dappled shade and have root systems that are not aggressive.

At the end of the trail, turn left towards the broader paved path. Just ahead on your right, go up the two stone steps to begin on another bark mulched path. Along this path, you will find the colourful and fragrant **-3- deciduous azaleas (including Rhododendron molle and numerous cultivars)**. Rhododendron molle is native to China and Japan and deciduous azaleas are more tolerant of the sun than many of the evergreen rhododendrons. Of course their roots must not be allowed to dry out! Incidentally, all azaleas are in the same botanical group as rhododendrons but azaleas have 5 stamens and rhododendrons have 10 or more. As you enjoy this colourful trail, by checking the stamens, see if you can tell which are azaleas and which are rhododendrons—some can fool you!

When you reach the end of the bark mulched trail, turn left and continue up the paved path. On your left you will see a **-4- Chinese dogwood (Cornus kousa**

var. chinensis), a beautiful disease-resistant tree. More rhododendrons abound on this pathway along with an abundance of groundcovers, a variety of hostas and barrenwort (*Epimedium*). Do you notice the gorgeous sea of green? -5- **redwood sorrel (*Oxalis oregana*)** is a clover-like ground cover which flourishes in shaded areas. When direct sunlight strikes its leaves, they fold downward. When shade returns, the leaves reopen. -6 - **ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)** is the most common fern available for planting in gardens. It gets its common name from its resemblance to ostrich plumes. The young, tightly-coiled fronds of the ostrich fern are the fiddlehead greens that are served in fine restaurants. Fiddleheads taste similar to asparagus or green beans.

As you continue up the path you will see a sign board on your left entitled “The Aristocrats of Gardens”. It is well worth reading if you would like to find out more about the amazing rhododendron. Beside this sign board, you will notice a beautiful -7- **orangebark stewartia (*Stewartia monadelphica*)**. A member of the tea family, and native to Japan and Korea, its bark just has to be touched! Just a few steps ahead on your right is a golden full moon maple (*Acer shirasawanum* ‘Aureum’). This graceful tree is much loved in Japan, and has beautiful yellow-green foliage. Enjoy more beautiful rhododendrons as you proceed along this pathway. On your right admire the thin, papery, cinnamon brown bark of the -8- **paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*)**. This wonderful tree is native to China. It is difficult to propagate and is considered endangered.

The -9- **Rhododendron yakushimanum** is native to Japan. Look on the underside of the large leaves to see the indumentum, the fuzzy covering which provides protection against loss of moisture during dry periods, and also against extremes in temperature. As you continue along the path, check the underside of other rhododendron leaves to see if they have this adaptation.

We now leave the Rhododendron Walk and enter a pastoral area of VanDusen, the Canadian Heritage Garden. This area contains many plants that are native to Canada and many cultivars of fruit trees and plants that have been developed to tolerate the various climates found across this vast country. To your left, you will see a -10- **Pacific dogwood tree (*Cornus nuttallii*)**. It is the beautiful flower of this tree that is British Columbia’s provincial flower. This tree is protected by law from being dug up or cut down in BC. It is very susceptible to dogwood anthracnose, a disease which has killed many of them in the wild. Nearby, grows Ontario’s flower, the **white wakerobin (*Trillium grandiflorum*)** whose white flowers turn pink as they age. Further along, on your right is the **western red lily (*Lilium philadelphicum* var. *andinum*)** that is Saskatchewan’s provincial flower.

Continuing on, you see a grove of -11- **sugar maple trees (*Acer saccharum*)** on your right. They are quite small due in part to our mild and rainy west coast winters. However, they are common in Quebec where they can grow to be 40 m tall. These are the trees that produce delicious maple syrup and maple sugar.

As you stroll along the curved walkway, read the interesting signs to learn about the variety of flora that grow in the distinct regional landscapes across our vast country of Canada. Veer off to the left at the “Aspen Parkland” sign and follow the stone wall to see some Canadian rhododendron hybrids and cultivars such as **Rhododendron** (‘Scandinavia’ × ‘La Bars White’). Continue on and soon you will come to -12- **Eddie’s white wonder dogwood (*Cornus* ‘Eddie’s White Wonder’)** a hybrid between *Cornus nuttallii* and *Cornus florida*. In 1986 this tree was selected as Vancouver's centennial tree. This tree is the parent plant from

which all 'Eddie's White Wonder' have been propagated. Read the sign to find out about this amazing tree and its local origins. Keep following the stone wall and you will enter into the ethnobotany section where the signs tell about the indigenous plants that our First Nations people used for healing and spiritual purposes. Find out how the **red alder** (*Alnus rubra*), **cascara** (*Rhamnus purshianus*), **Nootka rose** (*Rosa nutkana*), **Garry oak** (*Quercus garryana*) and other plants soothed the ailments of everyday life.

Look to your right and you will notice a configuration of stones on the ground. This is a representation of an ancient medicine wheel that was used by First Nations people for calendar, spiritual and astronomical purposes. Come to VanDusen on Sun., June 21st, noon to 3 pm to join elders from the First Nations community in a spiritual ceremony to mark the arrival of summer.

At this point, take some time to wander through the small orchard inside the split rail fence. These fruit-bearing trees are cultivars that have been developed to withstand the various climatic conditions found across Canada. Also, take a minute to check out the beehives—the bees who call these home busy themselves collecting pollen from around the garden.

Leave the orchard by the fence opening marked by the rural mailbox. The circular garden in front of you was planted during the winter season with fall rye grass, a green manure which provides nutrients to the soil when it is dug under in spring. Fertilizers and pesticides are not used at VanDusen. A variety of heritage vegetables will grow here throughout the summer.

Now, turn to your right and head for the paved walkway. Enjoy the plantings on either side of you as you walk along. As you reach the foot of this pathway, you will find two **-13- princess trees** (*Paulownia tomentosa*). Notice the distinctive eye formations on the trunk and look up to see the large, showy tubular flowers that appear in May before any foliage emerges. This tree is native to China where the story goes that it was once the custom to plant a princess tree when a baby girl was born, and when she was eligible for marriage, the tree was cut down to make a chest for her as a wedding present.

Now walk straight ahead to the Korean Pavilion and be sure to go right inside and look up at the beautiful painted flowers. This structure was a gift to the garden from the Korean people at the close of Expo '86 which was held here in Vancouver. Growing around it are some Korean native plants.

Go down the steps and veer to the right down the grassy slope. This area also boasts many rhododendrons and azaleas. If you glance to your left, you will see a large expanse of lawn which is one of the last reminders that VanDusen was once a golf course. Looking northward, the Coast Mountains can be seen from this part of the garden. Continue down the lawn, staying to the right, and let your eyes savour the magical panorama. Keep going until you see the Lath House on your left.

Turn right and walk along the path to the **-14- dove tree** (*Davidia involucreta*) Look up and you will see why this tree is called many different names including the handkerchief tree and the ghost tree. In May, large white bracts hang from the branches hiding small greenish-white clusters of flowers. Across the path from the dove tree, look up again to see if you can find an old nest of a Cooper's hawk.

Follow the directional arrow, and continue on down the main path. You are now back on the Rhododendron Walk . Back at the troughs of alpine plants, end your tour in spectacular fashion by strolling the length of the Laburnum Walk, a highlight of VanDusen during this month. A rule of thumb is that this tree is at its peak around the 24th of May. This tree's common name is **-15- hybrid goldenchain tree (*Laburnum* × *watereri* 'Vossii')**. Its pendulous, yellow blooms which give off a wisteria like scent are beautifully set off by the alliums planted beneath.

This marks the end of the self-guided tour. Continue on your own to see more of the garden, or return to the entrance which you can see from this spot.