

April Showers Bring May Flowers
May 2012 Self-Guided Tour

Contributed by Kumi S & Arlene C,
VanDusen Garden Volunteer Guides

Begin by exiting the main doors of VanDusen's new Visitor Centre which was officially opened on October 23, 2011. Take a moment to admire the spectacular view, then turn left and walk across the wooden bridge towards the Phyllis Bentall Garden. The groupings of various sized planters contain a collection of **1 - carnivorous plants**. These include yellow pitcher plant (*Sarracenia flava*) and common pitcher plant (*Sarracenia purpurea*), the provincial flower of Newfoundland and Labrador, which use passive traps to capture insects, their prey. Carefully peer down into one of the pitchers, formed from modified leaves. Can you see any insects trapped inside? Look closely in the planters to find a venus flytrap (*Dionaea muscipula*), which uses an active trap, a modified leaf that snaps shut to capture its prey inside.

Now wander past the Fragrance Garden to the Herb Garden. Stop here to gently rub the leaves of some of the plants in these beds, and enjoy their aroma. Today herbs are primarily used to season our food, but they are also used medicinally and, in the past, some were even believed to ward off evil spirits. Do you grow any of these herbs in your garden? Continue along the path until you reach the **2 - golden catalpa (*Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea')**. In the tradition begun by Queen Victoria, who always marked a special occasion by planting a tree, this beautiful golden catalpa was planted to celebrate the official opening of the Garden on August 30, 1975.

Turn left and walk just past the Alpine Troughs, a collection of alpine plants from around the world. Look to your left at the **hardy Japanese fibre banana trees (*Musa basjoo*)**. These "trees" are actually very tall herbaceous perennials with long leaf stalks forming the stem. Unlike the seedless bananas you buy from the grocery store, this species produces non-edible fruit with lots of seeds and very little pulp. To protect them from cold winter weather, they are wrapped from the end of October until mid April. Now follow the directional arrow and wander along the winding path. Can you find the three topiaries -- a caterpillar, an ogopogo and a pony? A topiary is a form of living sculpture. Which one is your favourite?

Cross to the other side of the paved path, past the Minotaur sculpture, and enter the bark mulched Loderi rhododendron trail. This trail features a collection of rhododendron hybrids developed by Sir Edmund Loder at the famous Leonardslee Garden in England. The **3- *Rhododendron* 'Loderi King George'**, described by many as the best of the Loderi Group, has large pink-white blooms and is slightly scented. Ahead on your right is **4 - *Rhododendron* 'Loderi White Diamond'**. On a warm day, the scent from these rhododendrons is more pronounced. What do they smell like to you?

At the end of the trail, turn left onto the main paved path. A few feet ahead, climb the two stone steps on your right and enter another bark mulched path. Here you will find the colourful and fragrant **5- deciduous azaleas (including *Rhododendron molle* and numerous cultivars)**. Deciduous azaleas are more tolerant of sun than many of the evergreen rhododendrons. Incidentally, azaleas are in the same botanical group, the genus *Rhododendron*, as rhododendrons, but azaleas usually have five pollen-bearing stamens, while rhododendrons have ten or more. As you enjoy this colourful trail, check the stamens, and see if you can tell which are azaleas and which are rhododendrons -- some can fool you!

At the end of the trail, turn left onto the paved path. You will soon see on your left a **6 - Chinese dogwood (*Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis*)**, a beautiful disease-resistant tree. More rhododendrons abound on this pathway, along with an abundance of groundcovers, hostas and ferns. **7- Ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)** is one of the most popular ferns for gardens. Its common name is derived from its fronds which resemble ostrich plumes. The young, tightly-coiled fronds are the fiddlehead greens that are served in fine restaurants.

Continue up the path towards the educational sign that tells the story of "The Aristocrats of Gardens". Next to the sign, notice the beautiful **8 - orangebark stewartia (*Stewartia monadelpha*)**. A member of the tea family and native to Japan and Korea, its bark just has to be touched! A few steps ahead on your right is a **9 - golden full moon maple (*Acer shirasawanum* 'Aureum')**. This graceful tree with its beautiful, yellow-green, palm-shaped foliage is much loved in Japan. Proceed along the path and enjoy more rhododendrons. On your left, next to another educational sign, admire the peeling, papery, cinnamon-brown bark of the **10 - paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*)**. Unlike typical maple trees, its leaves are trifoliate (divided into three distinct leaflets) and coarsely toothed. Native to China, this tree is difficult to propagate.

The **11 - *Rhododendron yakushimanum*** is native to Yakushima Island in Japan. Look at the underside of the large leaves to see the indumentum, the fuzzy covering which provides protection against moisture loss during dry periods, and also against extremes in temperature. Check the underside of other rhododendron leaves to see if they have this adaptation.

At the entrance to the Canadian Heritage Garden is a **12 - Himalayan spruce (*Picea smithiana*)**, planted before the Canadian Heritage Garden opened in 1989, when the area was still part of the Sino-Himalayan Garden. Its long, hanging branches allow it to shed snow easily and it has the longest needles of any spruce, up to five cm in length.

Enter the Canadian Heritage Garden. This pastoral area contains plants native to Canada and many cultivars of fruit trees and plants developed to tolerate the range of climates found across this vast country. Just past the split rail fence is a grove of **13 - sugar maple trees (*Acer saccharum*)**, whose leaf is featured on the Canadian flag. Not well suited to our climate, they remain quite small here, but in their native Quebec they can reach 40 m in height. Sugar maple trees are the source of delicious maple syrup and maple sugar.

Continue along the path and turn left at the stone step, onto the bark mulched trail. On your left is a collection of Canadian rhododendron hybrids and cultivars such as **Rhododendron ('Scandinavia' × 'La Bars White')**. Further along the path, you will come to **14 - Eddie's White Wonder dogwood (*Cornus 'Eddie's White Wonder'*)** a hybrid of Pacific dogwood (*Cornus nuttallii*) and eastern flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), and the most famous tree ever developed in Canada. In 1986 this tree was chosen as Vancouver's Centennial Tree and it has won numerous awards, including a First Class Certificate from the Royal Horticultural Society. This particular 'Eddie's White Wonder' is the oldest living specimen and it was moved to VanDusen from Eddie's retail nursery in 1994. It is a propagation of the sole survivor of the 1948 Fraser River flood that destroyed all but one of Henry M. Eddie's original seedlings. Keep following the stone wall. On your right you'll soon see a large circular configuration of stones in a grassy meadow. This is a representation of an ancient medicine wheel used by First Nations people for calendar, spiritual and astronomical purposes.

Wander through the small orchard inside the split rail fence and take a moment to check out the beehives. The bees who call these hives home busy themselves collecting pollen from around the garden. Leave the orchard by the fence opening marked by the rural mailbox. The **15- Vegetable Garden** you see in front of you was planted with winter rye, a green manure which provides nutrients to the soil when dug under in spring. As much as possible, organic means are used at VanDusen to enrich the soil. If you visit in summer you will see a variety of heritage vegetables growing in these beds. The harvested vegetables are donated to the local food bank.

Now, turn right and head toward the paved path. Enjoy the plantings on either side as you walk along. When you reach **16 – pignut (*Bergenias purpurascens*)**, stop and have some fun! Would you like to hear a pig squeak? Gently rub one of the thick, leathery leaves between your fingers. Can you hear a grunting noise? This plant is commonly known as pignut because of the noise made when the leaves are rubbed. This herbaceous, evergreen perennial is known for being incredibly hardy and reliable.

Continue on to the foot of the path where you will find two **17- princess trees (*Paulownia tomentosa*)**. Notice the distinctive eyelike formations on the trunk and look up to see the large, showy, tubular, purple flowers that appear in May before any foliage emerges. These trees are native to China. It is said 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 her wedding chest.

Now walk straight ahead to the **18- Korean Pavilion**, and be sure to go right inside. This structure was a gift to the garden from the Korean people at the close of Expo '86 which was held in Vancouver. Growing around it are some Korean native plants. Go down the stone steps and veer to the right down the grassy slope. This area boasts many azaleas and rhododendrons. Looking to your left, you will see a large expanse of lawn, one of the last reminders that VanDusen was once a golf course. Continue down the lawn, walking past the hydrangeas and the large Leyland cypress to your right. When you reach the paved path in front of the Lathhouse, turn right and walk along until you reach the **19 - dove tree (*Davidia involucreata*)** on the corner. Look up and you will see why this tree is also called the handkerchief or ghost tree. In May, large white bracts hang from the branches hiding small greenish-white clusters of flowers. It is a lovely sight!

Follow the directional arrow, and continue on down the main path. You are now back on the Rhododendron Walk. End your tour in spectacular fashion by strolling the length of the Laburnum Walk, a highlight of VanDusen this month. A rule of thumb is that these trees are at their peak around the last week of May. The pendulous, yellow blooms of **20 - hybrid goldenchain trees (*Laburnum × watereri 'Vossii'*)** give off a wisteria-like scent and are beautifully set off by the purple alliums planted beneath.

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