

Please follow the black and white number and arrow signs for this tour.

While walking through VanDusen Garden in February and March, winter is very evident. There are spots of unexpected colour among the bare tree and shrub branches created by the lingering strings of lights from the recent Festival of Lights. The Garden is shedding its fancy dress and glitter and becoming itself again. Amidst the peacefulness are glimmers of what is to come. This tour will invite you to look for those joyful, hopeful signs of spring, one of the most wonderful seasons in the Garden.

To begin, stroll across the Plaza towards Livingstone Lake, turn right down the ramp, keep straight and turn left at the first path branching off from the main walkway. You are entering the Eastern North America Collection and are greeted by magnolias. To the left is a **1 - southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora* 'Victoria')**. Among the tropical-looking, glossy leaves you will see some striking reddish-brown fruits, which split open to release many bright red seeds. Come spring, creamy white, lemony-scented flowers will appear. Although originating in the southeastern United States, this evergreen magnolia survives even our harsher winters. As you walk to the crossroad and turn left, look for deciduous magnolias with their fuzzy, pussy willow-like buds on bare branches. Generally, North American magnolias flower while in leaf, whereas Asian magnolias tend to bloom before leafing-out. *Magnolia* is an ancient genus, with fossil evidence of their beetle-pollinated flowers dating back nearly 100 million years.

After turning left, follow the path edging Heron Lake, home to bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), which are deciduous conifers waiting to burst out with soft, lime-green feathery leaves. You can see a stand growing in and around the pond border behind the Floating Bridge. At the either side of your path are drifts of **2 – *Helleborus***, with leathery green leaves and mostly nodding pink and burgundy-hued flowers that bloom in January, even when covered in snow. There are many *Helleborus* species and hybrids. Their flowering season is over by April, so if purchasing some, do so in February and March so that you can enjoy the flowers. They are quite adaptable but need good drainage. They are also deer resistant due to the alkaloid toxins they contain. These same toxins made them useful as a poison or a purgative but don't experiment!

From a small rise with an inviting bench on your right you can view the bridge and bald cypress and admire the reflections of departing winter and arriving spring in the water. Now return to the main path, turn right and follow the arrows into the Mediterranean Garden. This is more of a summer-flowering collection, but the bay laurel by the bridge is already covered in tiny flower buds. As you walk straight ahead, you will see mounds of lavender on your right that will be a delight to see and smell later in the year. As you turn left at the crossroads, look for the **3 - mayten tree (*Maytenus boaria*)**. This tree is often overlooked because it is evergreen and has insignificant blooms in May, but it is a graceful addition to this garden bed dedicated to summer and fall bulbs, giving it multi-seasonal interest. It is native to South America and has some valuable uses. The oil extracted from its seeds is used in varnish and its hard wood is made into such things as tool handles. Best of all, European bees make delicious honey from its flowers, of which there are male and female on the same tree, clustered at the base of leaves near the stem. If you return to the Garden in May, you might see them!

Now take the path to the right leading past plants native to Australia and New Zealand, like the **4 - Tasmanian snow gum (*Eucalyptus coccifera*)**, whose creamy-white flowers appear in the summer. These trees were planted fairly recently and were chosen in part for their high tolerance of frost, drought and exposed conditions. Their year-round attractive foliage has a scent similar to peppermint. In a past harsh winter, the *Eucalyptus* that used to grow here suffered badly from the freezing snow and ice and had to be removed. You may be surprised to know that this part of the Garden is among the second highest in Vancouver, Queen Elizabeth Park being the highest. Hence this exposed area can be susceptible to winter cold, winds and summer heat.

To your right near the water is a mound of straw concealing dormant **5 - giant rhubarb or dinosaur food (*Gunnera manicata*)**, native to southern Brazil and Columbia. The genus *Gunnera* dates back to the Mesozoic era, 150 million years ago, and is named for Johan Ernst Gunnerus, a Norwegian bishop and naturalist. Although covered for the winter, since it dislikes winter wet and cold, in early spring it will arise like an alien to produce enormous, leathery, rhubarb-looking leaves with nasty spikes on the underside and along its stems. It will create a 10-14 foot wide clump, making it one of the largest known herbaceous

perennials on earth. Hidden among the foliage tiny, red-green flowers will appear on tall cone-like structures at the base. Interestingly, it is used in Brazilian traditional medicine to treat sexually transmitted diseases.

Now make your way to and across the bridge and follow the rise up to the Grotto entrance marked by enormous black basalt conglomerate rocks. Walk through to the Heather Garden designed by Roy Forster, our first Garden Curator, after he was inspired by the moors on a visit to Wales. Heathers (*Calluna* spp.) have scale-like leaves and are preferred by sheep, while heaths (*Erica* spp.) have needle-like ones. Both are very adapted to growing in the acidic soil found in the Pacific Northwest. You may still see **6 – winter heath (*Erica carnea* ‘Beoley Pink’)** brightening up the winter garden. Generally, you will have to wait until summer to see heathers (*Calluna* spp.) blooming. And did you know that the word ‘heathen’ can also mean someone living on the heath?

Follow the arrow-marked path to the Crofter’s Cottage, and cross the stone bridge. On your left is **7 - Harry Lauder’s walking stick (*Corylus avellana* ‘Contorta’)**, a type of hazel named after a Scottish comedian who used a crooked cane made from this shrub. The botanical name *Corylus* comes from the Greek word ‘korys’, meaning helmet, and refers to the shape of a hazelnut husk. The female flowers and male catkins appear in late winter and early spring, before the shrub leafs out. The artistically twisted branches provide winter interest until then and make a statement in floral arrangements.

Across from the contorted hazel, there is a bank of **8 - lily-of-the-valley shrub (*Pieris japonica*)**. The small, dainty blooms of this shrub resemble lily-of-the-valley flowers and appear in late winter and early spring. This plant is popular among gardeners, with many white and pink-flowered cultivars available. *Pieris* is part of the Heath Family (Ericaceae), and much like the related *Rhododendron*, prefers acidic soils. The name *Pieris* refers to a Muse from Greek mythology.

At the cross-roads, walk straight ahead and look for the small **9 - star magnolia (*Magnolia stellata*)** in the planting bed on your left. It is an endangered species native to Japan and grows wild along streams and bogs near Ise Bay on Honshu, Japan’s largest island. Its dozen or more petal-like tepals form star-shaped, snowy-white or pink, slightly fragrant flowers in February to April before leaves appear. Even though it can grow in light shade, this tree blooms best if it has a minimum of four hours sunlight per day. The roots grow fairly close to the soil surface, so they don’t tolerate a lot of disturbance. Pruning should only be done lightly, if at all, and only in mid-summer or early fall so the tree has a chance to harden up before the winter. Here the tree is at the entrance to the Perennial Garden, so take some time checking out what is making an appearance in both the formal (in front of the yew hedge) and informal (individual beds opposite) sides of the Perennial Garden. Then keep walking straight ahead along the main path cutting through this Garden and keep walking past the wooden Lathhouse to the very end of the path which borders a fence.

If you wish to check out the **10 - Rhododendron Walk** to enjoy the early blooming rhododendrons, turn right. If you want to head back to the entrance, turn left and enjoy the delights of this pathway which will take you to the Backyard Bird Garden if you keep straight ahead, or past **11 – a display of spring bulbs** if you turn left at the next crossroads. You may still see the hardy banana plants at the back of the bulb bed wrapped up for the winter, or their stalks might have been already revealed. It is always fascinating to watch these plants turn into lush summer specimens. If the summer weather is mild and humid, these banana plants may even flower and produce tiny fruits!

As you head back to the entrance and pass the Herb and Fragrance Gardens on your right and the Phyllis Bentall Garden with its reflecting pool, you will come to a green Jade Water Fountain just before the wooden bridge. Arching over this functional sculpture is a **12 - silk tassel bush (*Garrya elliptica* ‘James Roof’)**. The species is native to the American West Coast and was named for Nicholas Garry, a secretary of the Hudson’s Bay Company, who organized expeditions to North America for plant hunters in the C19. It tends to be overlooked nowadays as a landscape plant, even though it is a hardy, salt-tolerant, handsome evergreen with long, striking drooping catkins. A little pruning can deal with any winter damage and size control.

And so we come to the end of this tour of only a small portion of the Garden. There is so much to see and explore in these 55 acres, especially when you are waiting for spring. You might have to look a little more closely at the plants before they show off their spring attire, but that makes the experience all the more worthwhile. And the vistas of the Garden are even more evident before everything is once again leafy and green. Winter may seem long, but how wonderful to know that dormant plants are getting ready to delight us again and remind us of nature’s resilience.