VanDusen BOTANICAL GARDEN | Bloedel CONSERVATORY | Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association

**Self-Guided Tour June, 2026**
**WEST COAST MEDICINAL AND FOOD SOURCE PLANTS**
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The climate zone known as temperate marine is the name of the climate we enjoy here on the south coast of British Columbia. This zone is characterized by year-round mild temperatures with few days below freezing and few that would be considered hot in most parts of the world. There is also plentiful precipitation, mainly in winter. All of this makes for a diverse variety of plant life much of which is not found in other parts of North America. This self-guided tour will introduce you to some of these plants and provide information on their traditional medicinal and food use by the Coast Salish aboriginal people of the region.

To begin the tour, walk to your left. Before crossing the wooden bridge on your right is a small hill with a prominent **1- Garry oak (*Quercus garryana*)** In the centre of the display area. The Garry oak is found mainly on the Gulf Islands and especially around Victoria. The acorns are edible after roasting or boiling to remove bitter tannins. The Garry oak grows best in coastal meadow lands. In fact, what is now the city of Victoria is located on what was an expansive Garry oak meadowland. Garry oak meadows are the perfect habitat for **2- camas (*Camassia quamash)***. Camas is a member of the lily family. Coast Salish people have long cultivated camas by clearing areas of stones, weeding and removing brush through controlled burns. The bulb is traditionally slow-roasted or steamed for a long time before eating. Once cooked, the bulbs are sweet, sometimes compared to baked pears. Blue camas should not be confused with white camas (or death camas) which grows in the same habitat, has an almost identical bulb but is highly toxic and potentially fatal.

Come off the Garry oak hill and go to the left onto the bridge. Off to the right side of the bridge is **3 - salmonberry (*Rubus spectabilis).*** There may be a few of these berries visible. The salmonberry is the first wild fruit of the season in coastal BC, usually appearing in June. They are an important traditional food for aboriginal people. The sprouts of the bushes are peeled and eaten raw, and the red and yellow berries are used in preparing salmon. The berries must be eaten or used soon after picking as they quickly turn mushy.

Now look to the other side of the bridge and over the railing where you will see **4 - skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus)***. Coast Salish people traditionally use this as food source during times of low food supply, such as early spring. The leaves contain calcium oxalate crystals that irritate mucus membranes. These can be eliminated by changing the cooking water several times while boiling, allowing the leaves to be eaten safely. Skunk cabbage has a large yellow flower which is a first sign of spring. The flower gives off a skunk-like smell to attract pollinating flies and beetles. Bears coming out of hibernation will munch on the leaves to get their bowels moving again.

The next group of plants on this tour is in the Canadian Heritage Garden, which is close to the maze. To reach this garden from the skunk cabbage, keep left when you come to a crossing of paths by the green jade fountain, go past the reflecting pool by Shaughnessy restaurant to your left and follow the arrows into the Backyard Bird Garden, to the right of the restaurant. From there, follow the path on the left straight onto the Rhododendron Walk. In June some of the rhododendrons should still be in

bloom. At the end of the walk the path divides. Keep to the far left. You will see a sign marking the Canadian Heritage Garden. As you continue along the gravel path you will come to **5 - vine maple (A*cer circinatum*).** This is one of the maples indigenous to the west coast temperate rain forest. It grows as part of the understory beneath the tall coniferous trees such as western redcedar and Douglas-fir. In fall it can turn a vibrant red, but around Vancouver it is usually yellow. It has a strong but flexible wood and the Coast Salish find it useful for making tools.

Continue along the path, going past the grove of sugar maples (not indigenous to the west coast) on the right. Follow the directional signs until you reach **6 - arbutus or Pacific madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*).** This plant is easily identified by its evergreen leaves and orange outer bark, which peels away to reveal lime green bark beneath. It grows on dry sunny bluffs along the west coast, often with Garry oak. Southern Vancouver Island and the inner south coast of BC are as far north as arbutus will grow.

Follow the directional signs to come to the paved walkway. Here you will find a fine specimen of **7 - western redcedar (*Thuja plicata)*** on the right side of the path. On the other side of the path is a young **8 - Nootka cypress (*Xanthocyparis nootkatensis),*** sometimes called yellow-cedar or Alaska cedar. These two trees are in the Cypress Family (Cupressaceae). Notice that the bark of the redcedar grows in long fibrous strips. Indigenous people traditionally harvest strips of bark for weaving into baskets and clothing such as hats and capes. The wood of the redcedar is rot-resistant and makes an excellent building material for house construction and for ocean-going canoes. Nootka cypress branches droop and appear limp which distinguishes them from redcedar branches which grow slightly upward. Nootka cypress wood, when freshly cut, is soft and easily carved, so is used in mask and tool making.

Proceed down the sloping path towards the large red Adirondack chairs. Before reaching them, on your left you will see a wooden arch with Chinese characters on the beam on the top. These characters translate to “Meditation Garden”. Go through the arch and enter a grove of **9 - Douglas-fir *(Pseudotsuga menziesii)*.** These very large specimens were planted over one hundred years ago during the construction of the golf course that preceded VanDusen’s development as botanical garden. The Douglas-fir and the western redcedar were much sought after for timber in the 19th and 20th centuries. Unfortunately, their popularity and value caused significant deforestation and the destruction of most of the original rainforest habitat that they grew in.

Exit the Meditation Garden and go left toward the big red chairs. At the intersection go left. This part of the garden is called the Sino-Himalayan Garden, and it contains many specimen plants that are native to east Asia. These include rhododendrons and camellias. Continue down the sloping path until you see a very large western redcedar on the right at a four-way crossroad. This is called the “candelabra” tree because of its shape. Early in the life of this tree the “leader” or main growing tip of the tree was likely damaged, causing the tree to branch outwards rather than straight up. From the intersection of the paths at the “candelabra”, look to the left and you will see **10 - Oregon grape *(Mahonia nervosa).*** This is a common understory plant in the west coast rain forest. Later in the summer it produces edible, purple berries. The plant has many traditional medicinal uses, including treatment for gall bladder, liver, and eye problems. They can also be used to make jellies and wine. No information on the “notes” of the wine.

Close to the Oregon grape is **11 - salal (*Gaultheria shallon*)**. You will see this down the path to the right of the Oregon grape. This is another very common understory plant in the west coast rain forest. The berries are edible, often dried and mixed with other foods. The leaves are traditionally used as medicine, flavouring in soups, lining for cooking pits, and chewed to suppress hunger. The Salal bush has become a popular accent in floral arrangements to the point where it is now endangered in parts of Oregon and Washington.

A little further along is **12 - false Solomon's seal** (***Smilacina racemosa),*** another understory plant that has edible, but not very tasty, berries later in summer. There are various traditional medicinal applications of this plant, including as a tea for rheumatism, backache, and kidney problems. False Solomon's seal is widely used as an ornamental garden plant, especially in shady gardens.

The garden where false Solomon's seal is planted is part of the BC Habitat Garden. The wide variety of plants you see here is indicative of the enormous diversity of plants that grow throughout the province, many more than in other parts of the country. This is due to the range of climate zones in BC from alpine to desert to the west coast temperate forest you are in now.

Thank you for your interest in the herbaceous bounty of BC. Enjoy the rest of your visit to VanDusen and come again soon!