

Thursday Gardener Walk with Bruce Mc - October 1, 2015

By Marilyn G

--These notes have not been reviewed by Garden staff--

Bruce filled in for Tomas who was in Scotland studying alpine gardens. For those who have not yet met Bruce, he is the Garden's plant propagator and runs the nursery, but he also has a broader portfolio of responsibilities: acting superintendent, curatorial team member, projects and planning, interpretation, Festival of Lights creative lead, and garden design (Black Garden, Heirloom Vegetables, etc.). He's been at VanDusen for over 20 years.

We started our walk at the mound on Oak Street where staff were directed to increase the drive-by appeal of the bed by adding colour. The challenge was to do this with native plants to reflect the Cascadia theme of this area. By broadening the definition of 'native' plants to those found all along the Pacific coast, an eye-catching display was developed, including clarkia, gaillardia, anaphalis and California poppies. Next year these plants may cover the entire mound and nearby curb beds. More flowering material may be added to the border along the building wall to pep it up.

Bruce also added lupins and camassias at the top of the mound where the Garry oaks are finally starting to grow. He is now worried that these oaks may block the view of the building. The evergreen trees at the north side of the driveway have already been limbed to make the building more visible, but it's not enough, so these trees may be replaced by something less obtrusive.

Bruce noted that plastic sheeting has been placed over the rammed earth wall to dry it out. The wall will be cleaned and sealed some time this fall. Hopefully this will prevent further water seepage.

We walked to the corner of 37th and Oak where a big maple was removed recently. While the late-August windstorm did not initially bring down any trees in the Garden, it probably weakened some trees that were struggling, and the September rains hastened their demise. This maple had three large cracks that revealed a rotted interior, so it needed to come out. The arbutus next to it now looks bad. One or more of the robinias along 37th are leaning and will be removed. A tree expert is surveying the big trees in the Garden and will make recommendations. While it is sad to lose a big specimen, this often provides opportunities to increase light and allow other plants to grow.

In the bed with the Garden sign, one lilac was removed and relocated in early July to increase visibility of the signage, and a second will be moved this fall. The plan is to plant more annuals and some shrubs around the base of the sign.

In Bed 3, the ivy will be removed by staff (there are too many needles left by people sleeping rough for volunteers to work here), and more of the rockwork will be exposed. Additional Cascadia plants will be included to increase eye appeal from the street.

The low-rimmed concrete foundation from the Swedish fountain in the centre of this area will remain. The fountain panels are currently installed in the Ash Collection area but will be moved to the old stone trough bed next to the glass house to act as a fence.

We then moved to the Plaza where Bruce noted that there have been leaks in the green roof of the Visitor Centre. The black filter cloth lining the roof may be rotting, and there are a lot of small entry points used by squirrels and rats. The roof is not irrigated, although for an unknown reason, there is one green patch. Bruce needs to plant more material around the oculus, but this requires being harnessed. He has to use a delicate touch because he can only plant three to four inches deep. As a side note, Bruce added that squirrels are also a big problem with Christmas lights, as they think the large bulbs are a delicacy and end up destroying the entire strand.

As we moved through the Bentall Garden, Bruce says they plan to pep up the perennial beds, which are looking tired.

We stopped in front of the Stanley Smith Garden, and Bruce talked about the complexity of updating this area. The \$20,000 grant from the Stanley Smith Foundation is available, but any major changes will cost a lot more, so he and Cynthia Sayre are working on proposals for obtaining more private funding. There are several possibilities for the Alpine Garden. One is to move it to another area because of the rampant weeds and horsetail in the current location. A possible new site is behind the glasshouse, but the weeping beech there is a big problem. Another possibility is moving it to the Stone Garden in the Sino-Himalayan Garden. Or it could just stay in its current location with a reduced footprint. They need some expert guidance to move ahead; the original idea to use City landscape architects for advice did not work out. For a short-term fix, the Alpine Garden was heavily weeded this summer, drought-impacted plants were taken out, and some shrubs will be removed to open up the walkway and highlight the rockwork.

The nearby golden catalpa planted the day the Garden opened is in bad shape. It dropped a large lower branch recently, the leaves have either mildew or blight, and it doesn't look good. Also, the bean production this summer is very heavy, a sign that the tree may be on its last legs.

Near the glasshouse, Bruce showed us the new stone trough area to the left and said that the other troughs from the old area are in the nursery and are being used as a source of supplemental plant material. New plant containers line the old trough area on the west side of the glasshouse to prevent people from tripping over the ledge. He did all of the planting in one day! The planters are from Atlas Pots and are made out of fibercrete (glass fiber reinforced concrete). He gets some of the succulents from WIG (Western Independent Greenhouses in Burnaby) and propagates the rest.

We walked up the slight slope to the tropical beds. Next year they will look more tropical, using plants Bruce has in the greenhouse, especially gingers and taros. Fewer bedding plants will be included. The colour scheme will be bolder and warmer, with lots of purples, oranges, and hot pinks. There will be fewer bananas on the west side of the path.

The blue border by the Formal Rose Garden will be renovated for the first time in 20 years. The blue theme may go away, and plants will be selected to enhance the rose collection and improve the structure of this bed. Bruce pointed out that, despite its location across from the weedy alpine area, there has never been a major weed problem in this bed.

We ended up our visit at the Herb Garden. In an effort to spice up the area this summer, sweet peas were planted, but they did not do well in the drought, and the trellis structures looked tacky. Over the next two years they will try to marry the Herb Garden to the Fragrance Garden, taking out some plants and making a more informal look. The Fragrance Garden was blah this year, so it will include a bigger variety of unusual plants next year.

In addition to all these changes, Bruce and Cynthia are working on a project plan to upgrade other tired spots in the Garden. Some projects center on enhancing the plant collection, but others involve changes to infrastructure (e.g. replacing the gazebo). Improving interpretation is also a priority. They are not finished with the plan, but the list of projects already in it is over 15 pages long. With this plan, they can target fund-raising for specific projects.

One other big issue is trying to identify plants that grow well in our climate, especially ones that are drought-tolerant. In the past we have planted some exotic species that did not do well, so we need to pay better attention to plant choices.

Staff is also reviewing water resources to see what can be done to improve irrigation in the future. The reservoir upgrade project had been about 70% roughed in when the project was put on hold several years ago. A pump infrastructure is needed to move forward, and that is very expensive.

The reservoir will need to be re-inspected, although Bruce says that there is water in it. Heron Lake would also need to be deepened to hold more water. Another alternative may be to drill wells.

Installation of the Christmas lights is starting earlier this year, on November 1, because the show is opening December 1 to coincide with the shows at Stanley Park and Bloedel Conservatory. This year's show will have a bigger footprint (15 acres compared to the traditional seven) in order to prevent traffic jams that happen on busy evenings. On a good night, 5,000 to 7,500 people visit the show. Last year's total number of visitors was 108,000. Bruce has ordered lots of new lights, which are being tested now. There will be two 'augmented reality' displays, which are being installed by an outside contractor, where visitors will interact with digital objects. Bruce spends nearly half of his work time on the project right now and says that the planning for the show starts in early spring.

We were happy that Bruce could spare the time for us to bring us up to speed on all the exciting projects in the works for the Garden.