

Thursday Walk with Cynthia S. – October 6, 2016
Contributed by Marilyn G. and edited by Cynthia S.

Cynthia S., Curator of Collections, led the final walk of the 2016 guiding season. In addition to her curatorial work, Cynthia also oversees wayfinding, so we started our walk near the bright-green map/signpost at the west end of the Plaza. The original plan for the new Visitor Centre had included several of these signs, but with the reduced budget for the project, only two were made. Staff has come up with a more subdued and easier-to-read design for these signs and is looking for funding to move this project forward. Examples of the new design are already in place on the way to the Ed Centre and by the north Service Yard.

Our next stop was at the old wooden wayfinding sign next to the lath house. The map is almost illegible due to the aged fibreglass and does not have the new Visitor Centre on it, but the slats underneath, which point the way to various garden areas, are correct and easy to update, so the map will be cut off, and the slats will remain until the new signage is available. Cynthia said the three most common locations visitors ask about are 1) washroom locations, 2) exits, and 3) the Maze.

We then walked up to the middle of the Great Lawn, and Cynthia discussed another project to blend the green electrical boxes into the landscape. The boxes were installed for the Festival of Lights a few years ago, and the green colour is too bright. Staff was considering painting them a subtler colour but found that wrapping is more cost-effective. They may get the public involved by asking for garden-related photos that could be used on the wrap to integrate the boxes better into the landscape.

At the Korean Pavilion, Cynthia reviewed the history of this structure that was given to the City by the government of Korea after Expo 86. It was made of soft Korean pine using traditional joinery techniques and was only meant to last one year. According to Roy Forster, the structure was transported up Granville Street in the middle of the night in one piece on a flatbed truck, then placed in the Garden with a crane. About ten years ago a Buddhist monk was brought over from Korea to re-stain it, but two years ago pieces of the roof started falling off, and some of the roof end-pieces were starting to rot, so the Pavilion was fenced off. There are no structural plans for it, and no one can determine which pieces are structural. They hope to find an engineer in the next few months to assess its structural integrity and make recommendations for either fixing it or replacing it. Cynthia noted that there is a similar structure at the Sun Yat-Sen Garden, and staff there is replacing rotting parts with fiberglass reproductions, but that process is expensive. The Korean business community here has been supportive and may be willing to help fund the necessary changes to our structure.

We moved on to the Medicine Wheel where Cynthia noted that rejuvenation of the Canadian Heritage Garden is high on the list of the 10-year strategic plan she and Bruce have been working on. Rather than doing a massive makeover of this area, each of the collections will be worked on. For example, Cynthia pointed out that the Pacific Rainforest Garden is now overwhelmed by Western red cedars, so they plan to replace them with better understory plants. The Medicine Wheel's prairie grasses are hard to maintain, and some thought needs to go into upgrading that popular area.

The Canadian Medicinal Plant collection was originally done in conjunction with the UBC Pharmacy Alumni Association and the Vancouver Friendship Centre. The collection has recently been overhauled and includes more BC plants. Next step is new signage, which will be similar to the signage for the current vegetable display. It should be in place early next year. The signs will highlight important uses of the medicinal plants and will focus on those used by local groups. Heather Merillees' jam money is helping to fund this project, and UVic ethnobotanist Dr. Nancy Turner has been very helpful

Cynthia next pointed out that the 25 or so fruit trees in the Heritage Orchard are gone. The trees were at the end of their 20-year life span and were prone to disease, so they all had to be removed. To eliminate canker spores, this area will sit fallow for two years, then 10-15 new fruit trees will be planted that will be better adapted to the wet soil conditions in this area. A smaller number of trees will also allow better air circulation. The trees will be disease-resistant heritage cultivars traditionally grown in this area and may include some varieties that are grown on native crabapple (*Malus fusca*) stock. They will be mostly apple trees, but staff is considering some plum varieties and a pear variety used for making perry. An interpretation sign will soon be in place explaining what is happening.

The vegetable garden has gotten new funding! That means there will be a full-time temp gardener in the summer months. A new theme will be developed every two years, although some themes may be old ones with a twist. They will also add a small demonstration area to show local residents how they can raise more vegetables. This will include raised beds, drip irrigation, and the use of different mulches. The current vegetable garden is not mulched, and it is very labour-intensive to keep it weeded. Cynthia has received lots of positive feedback about this year's colourful signage, which was funded by the Vancouver Master Gardeners.

Our next stop was terra incognita for most of us - the eastern Service Yard. Here Cynthia talked about our European fire ant strategy. Last year we had a full-time technician, Lisa Wong, who worked on controlling the ants, setting up ongoing monitoring, and doing outreach. We did not have the funds to hire her again this year full-time, but we were able to get her back one day a week as a summer gardener. We have backslid a bit this year in our prevention strategy, but Lisa was able to prioritize her work this summer based on her earlier experience, so she accomplished a lot. Individual gardeners provide the first line of defense. The Garden is a recognized leader in this work and has also been working with myrmecologist Dr. Rob Higgins at Thompson Rivers University, BC's foremost expert on European fire ants, who has used our strategy as a basis for his treatment method, which is described at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ef6BtC9OuhU>.

The Service Yard and the Alma VanDusen Meadow are ground zero for the ants, which have infested these areas for ten years (and also the neighbouring condos). They are impossible to totally eradicate here and will nest in almost anything, including rusty pipes. There are inaccessible nests under the Festival of Light containers at the north end of the Yard, and at some point we hope to replace the containers with a warehouse. The Yard should be paved, but the cost is prohibitive. The compost at the north end of the Yard is contaminated with fire ants, and it will be spread on the Meadow (which is already infested with fire ants) and rototilled in, which will start breaking up the nests. A new compost pile will be built at the uninfested south end of the Yard, and new bays are being built so that different materials stored there can be kept separate.

Around the Maze, the pampas grass was completely infested, so it was removed and replaced by seasonal plantings. An inside edge of the Maze was infested, but constant treatment and monitoring seems to have gotten rid of the ants here. As a side note, Cynthia mentioned that the monkey puzzle tree in the centre of the Maze is not well. When the roots of this species hit the water table, they tend to get verticillium wilt and die. The soil compaction from all the foot traffic doesn't help either. One option is to replace the tree with an elevated gazing ball, which fits in with the mystical origins of the maze.

The Meditation Garden, which had been closed to the public, was reopened last year after successful treatment and remains ant-free. The moss is being re-established.

Cynthia talked about the history of the Alma VanDusen Meadow, which was originally a wildflower meadow. It had to be reseeded every year, with varying results. Invasive plants took over, and weeds were difficult to manage. About 10 years ago, two oval meadow perennial beds were created. Then two years ago, the Meadow was closed off, as every square metre was infested with fire ants. Recently Miguel and Sean have done an amazing job cleaning out this

area. Since ants do not like water, the team is building a buffer zone along the stream (which was kept running last summer during the drought). Vegetation has been removed from the stream to keep ants from using it as a springboard into other parts of the Garden. The large rocks along the edges of the stream are nest-friendly, but the team has dug out the soil to a depth of two feet, put in heavy-duty landscape fabric, then filled the trenches with ant-unfriendly gravel and river rock. The river rock will also deter visitors from spreading out picnic blankets. The perennial borders along the stream have been removed. The remaining Meadow has been rototilled, and a crop of winter rye will be planted. This will be rototilled in the spring, and a sunflower garden will be planted for the summer, then rototilled next fall. This semi-annual rototilling to discourage nesting will continue indefinitely. A six-foot-wide gravel buffer between the Meadow and the trees at the far end is also envisioned, but this will not be visible to visitors. This work was partly inspired by Taylor Park in Burnaby, which has developed some landscaping strategies to keep the ants in check. Cynthia mentioned that the Garden is aware of a local case of anaphylaxis caused by fire ants, but she said this is a very rare reaction, and bee stings are a bigger danger. The Garden does not keep epi pens on hand, as this is a very complicated issue.

Moving on from fire ants, Cynthia said that another big item on the 10-year strategy list is to create a kids' zone in the area above the Maze. It will include interactive and sensory components to help children learn about nature through play. The Maze, bees, and the veggie garden are natural draws to this area. The plan is to build a pavilion with washrooms to generate revenue from birthday parties and room rental. Another idea is to build an elevated "tree house" viewing structure on the edge of the Stone Garden so that visitors can see view corridors that are now overgrown. Since this spot is the second-highest point in the city (after QE Park), it is an ideal location.

The Stone Garden was originally built to have a lightweight garden on top of the reservoir, but it is very weedy. Staff is currently thinking about converting part of this garden into a Japanese-style gravel garden where visitors can rake their own shapes. They will trial this in a few pockets of the Stone Garden.

Cynthia said that using the reservoir for storm water that can be used to water the Garden is still a possibility, but it will need costly pump houses and irrigation conduits. There is also concern that the reservoir is not seismically sound. In the case of drought in the future, the Garden will try to get an exemption from the watering restrictions to reduce substantial plant loss.

In answer to a question about the black mulberry tree recently removed near the Rhododendron Walk, Cynthia said that the replacement tree is available, but they are trying to decide the best place for it. When the old tree was removed, it opened up a nice view into the Garden that they do not want to lose. Wherever it goes, it will be close to a path so we can still point it out to visitors.

Cynthia ended by saying our input is valuable, and she would enjoy hearing from us. Her e-mail is cynthia.sayre@vancouver.ca