

Thursday Gardener Walk with Bruce M - September 1, 2016
Notes taken by Marilyn G and edited by Bruce M

Bruce M 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.

Bruce took us on a tour of his latest project, the Bird Garden, initiated by former director Howard Normann as part of the City of Vancouver's bird initiative (see below for the official VanDusen document about this project). Bruce noted that VanDusen has always attracted a lot of visitors interested in birds, so this project is a good fit. Our hummingbird feeders and a few birdbaths have already helped bring in a variety of birds, but we need to increase our effort. The development of a Bird Garden is in two phases; phase one is to be ready by May 2017 to coincide with Vancouver Bird Week. Phase two will be finished for the International Ornithological Congress to be held in Vancouver in August 2018. Garden staff is working on getting extra support and outside expertise for this important project.

Phase one is the transformation of the current Children's Garden into a Bird Demonstration Garden. Bruce noted that the Children's Garden has never really worked. It is not very exciting and definitely not interactive, and the location next to the restaurant is not one where children can let off steam. The plan is to eventually have a Kids' Zone near the Maze.

The transformation of the Children's Garden has already started. The recent removal of the cedar hedge along the parking lot has increased the light in this area, and the pyracantha hedge will also be lowered. We will soon lose the topiary worm and Opopogo, although the latter will eventually be relocated to the Kid's Zone. The picnic table will stay, but the paths will be reconfigured to increase bed space (but they will not be accessible by carts). The tricolour willow will be heavily pruned to provide more bed space underneath. Staff is working on a list of grasses, perennials and annuals that provide seeds and nectar. Birdhouses will be included in the garden but no bird feeders, which attract rats. There will be an open area for birds to scratch around in. The little gazebo in the centre is on its last legs but may be transformed into a 'blind' where visitors can watch birds without being seen. Interpretation will be very important in this area. A transitional zone will be developed between the Bird Garden and the tropical beds, which will stay. Bruce noted that a lot of the seasonal tropical plants attract birds.

We left the Children's Garden, and as we walked by the Formal Rose Garden, Bruce pointed out the Zimbabwean stone sculptures displayed there. We paused by the Heather Garden, and he mentioned that three 'dwarf' conifers that were no

longer dwarf were removed recently, which has opened up the area. He is sourcing new varieties of heather and should be adding them soon. His aim is to keep all the heathers down to a foot or less, so the beautiful rock structure of this area can be seen. Bruce added that they plan to refresh many areas of the Garden over the next five years, to reclaim the landscape and its views and to bring plant material back into scale with its surroundings.

We arrived at the intersection by the Western red cedar on the way to the Education Centre where Bruce talked about phase two of the VanDusen Bird Strategy, which is an initiative to take visitors to the Garden's bird hotspots. A self-guided tour will be created, in conjunction with new interpretation and educational material, highlighting habitat and plants that support diverse bird life in the urban environment. The Ed Centre's naturalized landscape is one of these bird hotspots, and the goal is to further augment bird habitat with native plants, attracting even more local and migratory birds to this area.

The Garden has acquired the Spirit Tree, a natural wood sculpture displayed in the BC pavilion during the Beijing Olympics. The hope is to install it at the entrance to the newly renovated area.

As we moved closer to the Ed Centre, we saw that a lot of deadwood and invasives have been removed. Bruce said that in one area the blackberries had nearly destroyed an old ocean spray (*Holodiscus discolor*), so he initially planned to remove it. But while he was studying the shrub in situ, a group of canaries landed in it, so he felt it was a sign that it should stay. The paths in this area will be reconfigured and will be made of wood chips. Several trees have been taken out along the north path to bring in more light. The "Last of the Giants" sculpture was moved to a little knoll above the path.

The totem poles were attacked by carpenter ants earlier this summer. While the Garden usually only uses organic pest controls, the ants needed something stronger to prevent them from destroying the poles.

The Ed Centre is being used by volunteer groups, but it leaks and the green roof is covered in blackberries. Its future is uncertain.

Bruce noted that birds need open water to land (which is why the Canada geese have left the Wedding bed area - the lake has too many water lilies). The pond behind the totem poles will be cleared to create some open water, but there is no money for dredging. The other pond just to the north needs work along the edges so that visitors can distinguish where the land ends and the water begins. This is where the tree frogs congregate, but since they are the same colour as the grass, they are difficult to see unless they are hopping. (Luckily, as we rejoined the path, one tree frog obligingly hopped across it so that we could check it out.) The baby owl that lived in this area was found dead a couple of weeks ago, probably attacked by a hawk.

We ended our walk by the Willow Bed, which has become a barrier in this part of the Garden. The native willows will stay, but the non-natives (including the blueberries) will be moved to other parts of the Garden, and some new paths will be created to get visitors into the new Bird area.

A question was asked about the washrooms in the Ed Centre, which need to be upgraded. Bruce said that the long-term plan is to have two additional washroom pavilions in the Garden (to take place of the portables), one of which will be in the Kids' Zone as a part of a small facility that could be utilized for education or party rentals.

On a final note, Bruce said that staffing is always an issue, especially with new projects. We will be getting a new temporary gardener next week, but Dean McIntosh's temporary posting expires Nov. 1, and it is not clear he will return.

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.

From the official VanDusen bird strategy document:

In 2015 the City of Vancouver unveiled its Vancouver Bird Strategy. Pledging “by 2020, Vancouver will be a world leader in supporting a year-round rich and diverse assemblage of native birds, accessible to Vancouver residents in every neighbourhood and park in the city, and attracting visitors from all corners of the globe.”

The impacts of urbanization have resulted in a decline in bird species in our region. In keeping with Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan's goal of accessibility to nature for all, there is a need to bring nature into the urban environment. VanDusen Botanical Garden has always been a sanctuary within the urban landscape, providing birds and other wildlife with food, shelter and habitat for survival, while allowing visitors an opportunity to experience and interact with nature.

One of VanDusen's goals is to better connect people with birds. Through ongoing habitat enhancement within our collections, creating a new demonstration Bird Garden, and providing diverse educational opportunities, our intent is to engage and inform the public. Collaborating with local bird experts, the Beatty Biodiversity Museum and other organisations will help us achieve these goals. Throughout our fifty-five acres, visitors will enjoy a bird-centric experience through interpretation, a self-guided tour and other components of our comprehensive Bird Strategy.

The Bird Garden will demonstrate what can be done to support local bird populations at home. Whether it is a backyard or a balcony, people can incorporate bird-friendly design principles into urban spaces through plant selection, habitat enhancement, nesting boxes and feeders.

Interpretation is a critical component of this demonstration garden. Family-friendly messaging will target all age groups and complement new and existing educational programming. Visitors will learn about the complex role birds play in local ecosystems, supporting biodiversity and the interaction between birds, plants, insects and other organisms.