

Gardener Walk - April 5, 2018  
Guy P, Director, & Cynthia S, Curator of Collections  
Notes by Marilyn G

Guy led off our walk by addressing the issue of gardener staffing. Bruce M left in January to be the acting Superintendent of Sunset Nursery and the Bloedel Conservatory, and Casey W has been promoted to Subforeman at Sunset, so there are some big shoes to be filled. Because Bruce is acting, Guy can't replace him now, but he can use Bruce's salary to get some more temps for the time being. Bruce took the nursery operations with him, which is a plus for us because VanDusen will have its own area there for specialty plant propagation. Sunset is now heated by excess heat from the neighbouring ice rink, which has decreased the propagation utility costs by 75%, and the use of their large cube van to transport plants should also cut down on our carbon footprint. David G, who temped here last summer in the Perennial Garden, has been hired as an apprentice in the Heather Garden and will be in line for the gardener position. Another good candidate is being considered for a second opening. Lisa Wong has been hired permanently as a labourer to assist Shaun L with operating the heavy equipment and a variety of other roles. Currently she is maintaining the public areas around the garden entrance. Guy noted that there is actually a shortage of gardeners in the labour pool, so it has been a challenge filling openings, but he feels VanDusen is holding its own staffing-wise. With the temps, there should soon be 16 people on the gardening staff. Cynthia has taken on Bruce's plant ordering function, so she has a lot on her plate.

Guy noted that the 2017 Festival of Lights broke all records for attendance, with 9,000-10,000 visitors the Saturday night before Christmas. He was also able to get extra help taking down the lights this year, which allowed our gardeners to get back to their normal work. The FOL revenues exceeded targets and all go into the Park Dept. budget. While we don't get a 'cut,' these revenues help maintain our \$1.3 million budget from Parks (entrance revenue does not cover our costs).

Cynthia addressed the fire ant issue. Basically we are continuing to use the method developed a few years ago by former Gardener Dean M, Lisa W, the Invasive Species Council of Metro Vancouver staff and Sophie D, the Park Board's Integrated Pest Management Coordinator. The method uses permethrin, a natural pesticide (the same chemical used in head lice shampoo, but weaker), applied manually to infested areas with a specific technique. This method has become the gold standard for fire-ant cleanup, and Cynthia will be doing a workshop for the City of Burnaby. They are also working closely with fire-ant guru Dr. Rob Higgins at Thompson Rivers University, who is experimenting with using smoke to flush ants out of their nest, thereby determining the extent of the nest and where its exits are. Fire ants do not 'sting'; rather they bite, injecting

venom. There is no specific policy about handling visitors who get stung. The reaction is typically less severe than a wasp or bee sting, and severe reactions are extremely rare. One piece of Bruce's work is still up in the air: who will take on monitoring incoming plants for fire ants.

Cynthia announced that this year's vegetable garden theme will focus on vegetables that are easy to grow in our area. They will have larger plantings of each vegetable, which will increase the food production. The crops will be given to a local soup kitchen to be turned into nutritious meals. Camil Dumont of Inner City Farms will be back Thursdays and Fridays to work in this area and talk with visitors and will also write a weekly blog on his activities. The interpretation will be less elaborate, so that will free up staff time to work on interpretation in other areas.

We moved to Bed 35, the grass and Rosaceae bed, which will be renovated shortly. The roses to the west are overgrown, and some woody material will be removed (not the medlar!). Some of the less spectacular grasses to the east will come out, to be replaced by swaths of perennials in the style of Dutch designer Piet Oudolf. The transition between the two sides of this bed will be smoother. Guy noted that the perennial garden renovation has been put on hold to allow staff to work on this area and finish the BC Habitat Garden near the Ed Centre, where we headed next.

Originally this area around the willow beds had been planted with BC native trees donated by MacMillan-Bloedel to provide screening. It has been cleared out, especially where the willows were, to allow for nice views into the pond area and will encourage more bird traffic. Some of the willows were integrated into other parts of the garden, including the Sino-Himalayan Garden, and cuttings or layers were taken of other willows. The idea of the new collection is to showcase native plants from BC ecosystems that are especially beneficial to wildlife, by providing food and habitat. The new plantings will include smaller native deciduous trees and perennials (including some nice new cultivars) and will be kept low to preserve the peek-a-boo views and to create colour across the seasons. More beds will be added across the paths and will include blueberries. Plant labels here will include information about how each plant supports wildlife within the habitat.

Guy ended our visit by saying how impressed he was that so many guides showed up for this rainy walk, demonstrating our passion for the garden. He noted that only two parks have volunteers (Stanley Park Ecology Society and us), and he is available to talk to us any time.