

Thursday Visit to Sunset Nursery, March 7, 2019
Contributed by Marilyn G. and reviewed by Casey W.

Thirty guides braved the sleet and cold to tour Parks' Sunset Nursery facility with Gardener Casey. We were greeted by Alfie, the Nursery rat controller, an 18-year-old cat who is the most senior "staff" member. Casey has been working here for a year and says it is a big change from working in a garden or park. He was previously at VanDusen for 13 years. Bruce McD is the nursery manager, also a VanDusen alum. There are 7-8 staff currently, including 3 gardeners, an "operator" who is the onsite maintenance person, and an apprentice. Peter Norton, a former labourer at VanDusen, is also here. During busy times in late spring, there may be more than 10 people working to get plants out.

Sunset was established in 1929 and provides most of the plants for the park system, including VanDusen and Bloedel. The nursery grows nearly all the perennials and summer annuals for Vancouver's parks and overwinters most of VanDusen's tender plants. Many plants are started from seed (usually the most cost-efficient way to propagate), but they also use plugs and cuttings. Gardeners from all over the system make plant requests early in the season, and everything is managed by an elaborate spreadsheet that tracks the requests and plans out how they will be fulfilled.

There are six glasshouses and five polyhouses. The single-pane glasshouses are old and need to be open and shut manually, but the polyhouses have recently been redone. These can be vented by either opening the doors at each end or rolling up the sides in very warm weather. There are overhead lights in two of the greenhouses for plants that need more light to germinate. For other plants, the gardeners watch the weather forecast and try to time their seeding when a period of sunlight is forecast. The heat in some glasshouses comes from boiler pipes running along the floor. Other greenhouses use waste heat from the ice rink next door. "Four-legged" pest control is handled by Alfie, and insects are managed by "bio boxes" which release beneficial bugs to counter bad bugs, like aphids. We also saw some sticky yellow "3x5" cards that catch pests as they fly around.

Casey showed us the punching machine that inserts seedlings into flats. There is also seeding machine and a machine which fills flats with soil mix, mostly a fine soilless mix, made of peat and woodchips. Sometimes perlite is added for potting cuttings because it allows for more air and faster setting of roots. No compost is used. A lot of this work used to be farmed out to private companies, but the machines are more efficient. While the initial equipment investment is high, savings in labour and contracting the work out quickly pay for the machines.

We started out in the coolest glasshouse that has new overhead misters. On a sunny day the seeded flats can dry out in 30 minutes, so they need extra humidity. The next greenhouse is currently focusing on annual seedlings like English daisies, pansies, and violas. Staff will start hardening them off next week then take them outside. In early April, the gardeners will start picking them up.

The adjacent polyhouse overwinters plants for VanDusen, especially from the Fragrance Garden. We all admired a tall Wollemi Pine with lots of cones. It was donated by someone in the West End of Vancouver who had been keeping it on a balcony. For the time being, Casey is keeping it at the nursery, as he hopes to take seed from it. He noted that these pines have not done well at VanDusen because the Australian bed is too exposed. In the wild, this plant grows on the steep canyon side and is well protected. He thinks the Fern Dell or *Meconopsis Dell* would be better locations for the pine in the future. The polyhouse also shelters *Echium candicans* from the front of the VanDusen Visitor Centre. Other specimens of this species along English Bay stay outside all winter because they are more sheltered there than at VanDusen. Once these plants go back to VanDusen, other crops will come in.

The next greenhouse handles tropical plants, mostly for Bloedel but some for VanDusen, like bananas. Another greenhouse is dedicated to perennials. The nursery is having a lot of success growing lavender and salvia from seed; some of these plants will be purchased by the city's street department for growing in median strips, as they are very drought-tolerant. Some of the perennials stay in this house for a year and are periodically replanted before they are released.

The Propagation house has mats that provide bottom heat and a "mistamatic" system that senses a drop in humidity and automatically mists. Casey had turned it off during our visit, but we could see the misters trying to work anyway. Casey showed us coleus starts that were done eight days earlier using rooting hormone. The starts already had lots of roots and will be repotted by hand. There was also a collection of taro plants from which they take "pups."

Another warm greenhouse had taros in 1-gallon pots and summer annuals a month away from going outside. Many of these will go into hanging baskets that will be distributed to various parks. Casey said they used to provide baskets for VanDusen, but they always were stolen. Someone asked whether these hanging baskets were used along major streets, e.g. South Granville, but he said those are provided by individual business districts and purchased from private nurseries.

The tropical house contained plants for Bloedel. Of particular interest was "Uncle Fester," Bloedel's corpse flower that bloomed last summer. The bulb is resting quietly in a pot with heating cables, but there should be a giant leaf emerging this summer, which will nourish the bulb. It probably won't bloom again for at least five years.

One last polyhouse, which we did not visit, contains native plants. Once the danger of frost is over, those plants will go outside to toughen up.

Many thanks to Casey for a fascinating visit and to the Nursery for all its hard work.