

Virtual Garden Walk with Miguel – July 23, 2021  
Notes by Marilyn Goebel and Photos by Tresa Horney

NOT REVIEWED BY STAFF

Miguel started at VanDusen in 2008 and is one of the most senior staff members. Miguel's areas include the Canadian Heritage Garden, Vegetable Garden, Alma VanDusen Garden, Stone Garden and the Maze. We did not visit the Canadian Heritage Garden, as he says not much has been happening there. He noted that there has been little extra summer help this year, so it's been a challenge keeping up with the work, but he feels lucky to have a helper two days a week to weed the vegetables.

We started our visit in the **Vegetable Garden**. Miguel said that the project to build raised 'teaching' beds for urban gardeners has been put on hold. This year's theme is 'Eat the Rainbow.' The garden beds are divided and sorted by colour. It is the second time we have done this theme, but this year we have great signage from Sam showing the actual vegetable in all its glorious colour. We will continue this theme for 2022.

Several baskets contained recently harvested garlic that has been braided and is drying in the sun. Miguel will put aside a few of the best heads to sow this fall, and the rest will go to the restaurant. They have such good garlic crops now that they don't need to purchase starts. In the spring, the restaurant used some of the young garlic scapes in their menu.

Miguel said that some veggies are better planted from seed, such as carrots, radishes, beets, beans, and chard. Others start as transplants from the nursery: squash, onions, pepper, kale, and cabbage. Tomatoes and cucumbers are also started in the nursery, and there are two types. Determinates are bushy and don't need a trellis; indeterminates are leggier and need to be supported. Same with beans: bush beans grow on their own, but pole beans need a support.

Some of the vegetables can be continually harvested, like chard and purple kale. As the leaves of the latter are harvested from the bottom of the plant, the top produces new growth, and at the end of the season, the kale plants look like little standard trees.

This year's June heatwave was an issue for some of the vegetables. The lettuce bolted early and is already on its second planting, and the radishes went to seed quickly. The squash leaves are quite mildewed. But Miguel says that even with this early heat, he doesn't find that peppers thrive here. They need a hotter climate. One plant that does do well in our climate is quinoa (*Chenopodium quinoa* 'Red Head') which is quite tall and forming seed heads.

Miguel pointed out a perennial weed he calls portulaca. It has very thick stems and is somewhat indestructible. But it's edible, and the small leaves have a green, spicy taste.

This summer, Andrew F., subforeman, is handling the harvesting and distribution of the vegetables. He notes, "We harvest twice a week, usually on Wednesdays and Fridays. One-quarter of the total harvest goes to Shaughnessy Restaurant for use in their 'Taste of the Garden' series. The remaining three-quarters is sent to the Gathering Place Community Centre who offer a three-meal-per-day program from their cafeteria in the Downtown Eastside. The harvest schedule runs from mid-June until early September and we hope to harvest more than 3000 lbs of vegetables this season alone!"

In the fall, Miguel will add organic manure to the beds then plant a cover crop of winter rye, peas, and clover, which will be tilled in next spring. Every year they rotate the crops, so nothing is planted two years in a row in the same place.

Next, we moved to the **Alma VanDusen Garden** where the delphiniums (six different colours) have just finished blooming. He has left the horizontal trellis system in place for the second, less vigorous bloom in September but will lower it a bit. Last year he took the trellis out after the first bloom, but the second bloom flopped over, so he is

keeping the support in this year. These New Millennium delphiniums are not supposed to need staking, but with their hollow, light stems and heavy flower heads, he found they needed help staying upright. At first, he staked each plant, that was too much work, so he came up with the moveable trellis idea. He also is using a light trellis on the bed just to the east for the tall Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Roseum') and the even taller, yellow-flower cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum* – 'cup plant' because the adjoining leaves form a cup).

Every year they switch the annuals around the edges of this bed. Last year it was mainly coreopsis and zinnias, but this year marigolds, cosmos, cleome, and castor bean plants hold pride of place, along with cannas. Miguel frequently deadheads the cosmos to keep them flowering. Unexpectedly, the amaranths from a few years ago have re-seeded like crazy, and their dark purple colour nicely contrasts with the other annuals.

The back edge of this area has hundreds of tuberous begonias lighting up shady beds under the evergreen trees. These bedding-out begonias are expensive to buy, so the nursery takes cuttings from them in the fall and grows new ones for the following season. They do the same with the purple fountain grass and cannas.

As we walked up to the Sunflower Garden, Miguel pointed where he has subtly propped up the purple gayfeather (*Liatris spicata*). He said that the lantana standards planted every year in this area are pruned when they go back to the greenhouse in the fall, and the prunings are used to start new lantana groundcover plants.

The annual bed by the **Maze** will be planted next year with the All American Selections Cynthia talked about in her walk this spring. Miguel is letting the Maze grow taller and pruning the trees pyramidally. He's also watering more, and the Maze is doing better this year. He's pruned the berberis behind the viewing area twice this year and is making sure the planters are well-watered, even though there is a drip system. The dead limbs on the nearby monkey puzzle tree are normal.

The meadow above the maze now has a number of desert willow ( x *Chitalpa tashkentensis* 'Pink Dawn'), all in full bloom now. The small Arizona sycamore (*Platanus wrightii*) has leafed out better this year; it was planted in honour of former gardener Tomas' father and was grown from seed by Tomas.

Next, we visited the **Sunflower Garden** in all its splendor. There is a temporary fence to prevent people from trampling the plants, and it may be replaced by a golden willow fence. The California poppies in front are finished, but the Bonnie Henry cosmos mix is looking lovely. We took a stroll through the sunflowers, and it was surprisingly cool inside the bed. This year there are three sunflower cultivars: big 'Titan', Russian 'Peredovik Organic', and the variously-coloured 'Autumn Beauty'. Miguel also planted some 'Teddy Bear', but they didn't do well. This planting is so dense that Miguel recently saw an owl hiding in the foliage looking for squirrels.

The stream bed in front looks good after a lot of work on Miguel's part, but he still has to remove rocks placed by children who like to make dams and divert the flow of water. They even broke the sign asking not to move the rocks! This water is recirculated by a new pump near the bee pond to the south.

Our final stop was the **Stone Garden**, which is now part of his responsibility. After a massive weeding this spring, Miguel found he had to do it again recently, so the garden looks very zen right now. He tried to do some 'ripples' around one of the rock beds, like in a Japanese sand garden, but kids messed up his design. He has been using salt leftover from clearing the paths in the winter to keep the weeds down; this gives the stone areas a nice, whitish edge.

Despite the lack of help, these gardens all look great. Miguel's love for his areas definitely shows!