

Thursday Walk with James W, March 5, 2015  
Contributed by Marilyn G

Forty guides braved the sunshine to hear Garden Superintendent James W. lead our first walk of the year. James noted that 2015 is our 40th anniversary year, and all his work this year will be in that direction. His is a challenging job helping to realize the Garden's vision. He loves the variety of tasks he faces every day, from picking up dead ducks to helping movie star Jennifer Beals find her way to the maze for a film shoot (someone has to do it).

As we faced Livingstone Lake from the Plaza, he said one of his biggest challenges is finding the manpower to keep the ponds and streams in the Garden looking good. The liner in the lake was last replaced 20 years ago, so every year the weed problem is worse.

The recent Festival of Lights broke all records. The festival started in a much smaller form in the early 1980s after one was held in Stanley Park. Our VanDusen Festival started as an indoor show then gradually moved outdoors. One guide remembers going to a Christmas decorations show the year the Garden opened, so the Festival is almost as old as the Garden itself.

Staffing continues to be another challenge. Jim T. has moved to another job, and his work is being done until the end of June by apprentice Justin S. (who also teaches classes on permaculture at VanDusen). The paperwork to find a permanent replacement for Jim has been submitted. Gerry G. is retiring this month, and Casey W. started working in the Sino-Himalayan Garden a couple of weeks ago. [Note: Gerry will come out of retirement for our April 2 walk.] James is still working out a replacement strategy for Casey's old area. The general gardener post formerly held by Peter N. is still open after a year. James quipped that the essential skill set for a VanDusen gardener is a strong back and an inquiring mind.

James' first stop on our tour was near the glass house, which will be getting a new poly roof and a nicer wood barricade to protect the fragile windows. More work is needed, but that will require a donor to fund it. The bonsai shack will be torn down, and some of the alpine troughs will be moved to that area (the concrete troughs will go to the greenhouse to supply plant material if needed). There is not enough manpower to maintain all the troughs, and volunteer Ian P. does not have the time. The Japanese lantern, which was a gift from the City of Yokohama, will move to the foot of the new Japanese bed on the upper Rhodo Walk. The path through the graveled space to the west of the glasshouse needs to be realigned, and there may be a sculptor working there this summer, similar to what took place at Zimsculpt. Behind the glass house, the overhanging beech will be cut back, and some alpine plants will go onto the slope. The 'tropical' bed there will have more bananas but otherwise look the same.

The Alpine Garden renovation has stalled due to lack of resources, and nothing will happen this year except maintenance. However, Swedish horticulturist Peter Korn's work is being studied for future improvements in that area. The library will be getting a copy of Korn's book, and former gardener/nor UBC Horticulture Program Chief Instructor Egan Davis will be working with Korn for a while this summer. James also said that late winter and early spring are the only good times to work on big projects; in the fall and early winter, gardeners are working on lights, and after Mother's Day, the number of visitors to the Garden makes big projects difficult.

James pointed out the bright green electrical boxes around the garden that were installed during the electrical system upgrade last year. In order to mute their colour, some sort of floral 'wrap' will be applied, and gardeners are putting in plants that will eventually hide them.

We will have another new cart this year!

On the sculpture front, James hopes to bring the Swedish Fountain out of storage for the 40th anniversary and to set it up temporarily in the middle of the Garden in such a way as to deter

metal thieves who tried to steal it in its old location at 37th and Oak. The Archibald Menzies bust, formerly in the old volunteer lounge, will move to a plinth in the Rose Garden as soon as it is finished. As far as James knows, there are no plans to move the Minotaur, but the Bill Reid canoe will be going to a new home at SFU this summer.

As we walked up to the Rhodo Walk, James mentioned that some oaks were removed, and Bruce has selected magnolias for that area. Dealing with trees is always a resource issue but has to be done. Trees get damaged, grow too fast, or were intentionally overplanted in the early days of the Garden, so a steady program of tree removal is important to the overall enhancement of the Garden. Five trees are being removed from the Winter Walk to improve the collections there. Trees will also come out along the 37th Avenue edge of the Garden to allow more light. More cherries will go on the Cherry Garden hill to replace the one planted by David Lam at the bottom of the slope that is not doing well. Some trees have been moved using a large four-blade tree spade that keeps the root ball intact.

James has been asked to create a stronger Garden presence at the Oak St. entrance to attract people driving by. More colour will be added to the mound (no annuals, however), and the Garry oaks will stay for now.

While European fire ants have been eradicated in the Meditation Garden, they have infested the top service yard and portions of the upper Alma VanDusen Meadow, which will probably stay closed this summer. A temp gardener from last year, Lisa, has been hired to focus solely on this issue. Dean's successful eradication strategy for the Meditation Garden was to place some pavers in sunny spots to attract the ants, then spray them with Ant Out. He also used a blow torch in other areas.

A new path will be cut into the Canadian Heritage Garden just up the road from the Meditation Garden. The original idea for the Heritage Garden was to keep it separate, but in reality that meant few people visited it. Staff is also looking at improving the visitor experience in the Heritage Garden. Miguel's vegetable beds will not change much from last year, but the signage will be better.

Casey has cleaned up the entrance to the Sino-Himalayan Garden at the end of the Great Lawn. Some trees in this area will be removed, and more palms will be planted along the path. This garden needs to be diversified, and James, Bruce, Cynthia, and Casey will be going through it bed by bed to come up with a new plan. Leaks are being fixed in the Waterfall, and it should be up and running by Easter.

The Education Centre has found a new life as a home for some volunteer groups and as Santa's Workshop. The next Festival of Lights will be greatly expanded, so James needs all the space he can get for assembling new displays and storage.

Squirrels looking for bulbs have dug the holes in the Perennial Garden. They caused a lot of damage this winter by chewing some of the Festival lights off their strings. James also hopes to have a dedicated mower for the Great Lawn after several years without one. The grass there was cut a couple of weeks ago, which is much earlier than normal.