

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 Vancouver Park Board's 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 superintendent of the nursery, also a VanDusen alum. There are 8 staff currently, including 2 gardeners, an "operator" who is the onsite maintenance person, and an apprentice. Peter Norton, a former labourer at VanDusen, is also here on modified duties. 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 all the summer annuals and many of the perennials for the 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 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 six 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 report and try to time their seeding and taking cuttings 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 and help monitor pest numbers.



Casey showed us the punching machine (left photo) that inserts seedlings into flats. There is also seeding machine (right photo) and a machine which fills flats with soil mix, mostly a fine soilless mix, made of peat, perlite and woodchips. Extra perlite is added for taking cuttings because it allows for more air, drainage and faster setting of roots. No compost is used. A lot of this work used to be farmed out to private companies, but the new machines are more efficient, allowing for most of the work to be done in house. 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, which 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 and Southern Hemisphere gardens. 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 growing 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 side of a steep canyon 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* and *E. piniana* 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 standards and larger tropical plants, some for Bloedel, VanDusen, and various other parks for summer displays. These include *Musa* (bananas), *Lantana* and *Brugsmansia*. Another greenhouse is dedicated to perennials at this time of year. As evening temperatures become milder, these plants can go outside to get acclimatized for planting in gardens. The nursery is having a lot of success growing lavender from seed and salvia from cuttings; some of these plants will be purchased by the city's street hort department for growing in median strips, as they are very drought-tolerant; others will be sent off to various parks as needed. Some of the smaller perennials stay in this house for a year to grow on and will be ready for fall planting.

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 re-potted 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 provide baskets for VanDusen, but they always were stolen from the corner of Oak and 37th so he is not sure if Van Dusen will continue to put them out there. 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 and other semi hardy perennials. 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.

Photos by John S.