

Thursday Walk with Tomas – April 7, 2016
Contributed by Marilyn G.

These notes have not been reviewed by staff.

Tomas started working permanently at VanDusen in 2009, and last May he became the gardener responsible for the Bentall Garden, the Alpine Garden, the Black Garden, the Children's Garden, and both rose gardens. He likes the variety found in his area, from the formal Bentall Garden to the informal Heritage Rose Garden.

We started our walk at the Bentall Garden where Tomas had worked as an apprentice when it was renovated in 2005. He finds there are fewer plants now than there were originally, and he wants to reintroduce more perennials to this area. He likes *Scrophularia auriculata* 'Variegata' in Bed 37 across from the pool because its white flowers attract bees and other insects in the summer. In the large grass bed between the pool and the lake, Tomas mulched heavily to keep the weeds down. He planted drifts of *Camassia leichtinii* and *C. quamash*, which are just about to bloom, and will be adding more perennials that can stand up to the grasses, such as flaxes, scabiosas, and clematis, to make the bed more interesting.

We walked down the path to what Tomas calls the Black and Gold Garden, which he thinks is the showiest area of VanDusen. As we passed the Glastonbury Thorn, *Crataegus monogyna* 'Biflora', he noted that it bloomed at Christmas and then again at Easter. Last fall Tomas planted 1400 tulip bulbs in the Black Garden, but squirrels and rats ate a majority of the bulbs, so the display is disappointing. Staff trapped squirrels and took them to other areas of the city, but the rats were too smart for the traps, so Tomas probably will not plant bulbs again in this area. Last summer, he put in a lot of annuals but found the soil too heavy, so in the fall he forked in sand and compost. The sand heats up in the sun, which helps with root development. He also thinned the overhanging laburnums and pines to increase the light. The large laburnum is leaning, however, and may need to come down.

We then turned up the path through the shrub roses. Morning glory is a problem in this area, but when Tomas pruned the roses here in the winter, he was able to remove a lot of it. In overgrown areas, like this one, he focuses on the big jobs first and then pays attention to the details later.

We walked back to the Stanley Smith Alpine Garden. Tomas said many visitors like this area, despite the weeds and dwindling number of plants. Rather than do a major renovation, as has been discussed, he will work to enhance the current structure of this garden. Last summer Tomas interned at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) in their rock garden, which dates back to the 19th century, and he got a lot of ideas. However, Vancouver is a zone colder than Edinburgh, and our alpine garden is quite exposed compared to theirs, so growing conditions here are different. He was able to bring back some alpine plants that are now in the nursery. Before he left last summer, he and Ian P. created the small crevice garden just east of the glasshouse, using many plants donated by UBC.

We then walked through the stone arbour to the Heritage Rose Garden. On the right is the China rose collection. Tomas is going to remove the undergrowth and replace it with less invasive perennials that will show off the roses.

The Heritage Rose Garden was developed several years ago when the roses that were in the current grass beds were moved to this new area and underplanted with "cottage" plants that eventually overwhelmed the roses. The beds are also too large for visitors to appreciate the roses up close, so Tomas is installing paths through each bed. Originally he wanted to use granite pavers to echo the stonework found in the Formal Rose Garden, but they were too expensive and difficult to keep level, so he is using wood chips instead. The cottage plants are being removed, and he is planting lower-growing, pastel-coloured perennials that do not distract attention from the roses. Tomas showed us a campanula that is invasive in this area. While he is taking out the old

perennials, he is trying to remove the campanula as well, but the tubers growing laterally from the roots need to be completely removed to prevent the weed from returning. As a side note, Tomas also said that he often eavesdrops on our tours to learn more about roses.

Tomas pruned the large beech in the Children's Garden heavily last winter to increase the sun in this area, but the garden will always be a challenge because of the shade created by this tree. He wants to highlight the rockery on the west side to tie in with the Stanley Smith Garden across the path. He wants to do a lot of unusual self-seeding plants here and hopes to use *Gentiana lutea* now being grown in the nursery. The tulip display here is magnificent, with minimal critter damage. He's not sure why the squirrels and rats left this area alone. Tomas noted that the bulbs will be removed after blooming, then given away by the City to other gardeners. A Polish visitor told Tomas that in his country, they dig the bulbs up after blooming, then tease away the bulblets and replant them, but we do not have time to do that.

Another project for the Children's Garden is to create a bird-friendly garden with interpretation about the relationship between birds and plants. More bird-friendly plants will be mixed in, as well as some interesting birdhouses. This project is getting off the ground now and should be finished by the time Vancouver celebrates "Bird Week" in mid-May. The "tropical borders" on both sides of the path will be planted by Dean this year. The structure of the border will be similar to last year's, but the colours will be different.

Someone asked if the large catalpa planted in 1975 was dying. Tomas noted that it leafs out late, so it is too early to tell, but he is concerned that old pruning cuts have not healed well. The tree was very stressed by last summer's drought. He also pointed out the scraggly *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Lycopodioides' at the southwest corner of the glasshouse. Because of the rain that runs in torrents off the glasshouse roof and the compacted soil from the former trough garden, this tree is struggling.

We moved to the border in front of the Formal Rose Garden where Tomas wants to continue the original blue theme. This area is wet because it is at the bottom of a slope. He divided the *Carex tumilicola* but wants to limit the grasses in this area because he thinks they look too coarse. Last year he planted lots of lobelias, plumbagos, and chicories and will continue to add blue perennials. Over by the arbour, he removed the shrubby Meidiland roses at the corner to free up more space for sun-loving perennials. [After the walk was over, he said that the Formal Rose Garden is in good shape, but this fall he is going to put down a thick layer of leaves topped with compost, then dig this in in the spring to provide better nutrients for our modern roses.]

Throughout his areas, Tomas has added some rustic plant supports, mostly made from *Acer rubrum* whips tied together by strings of *Akebia quinata*. When he was at RBGE last summer, he was impressed by the intricacy of the structures made from whips in their copse garden [during the talk he mistakenly called this a knot garden but corrected this later]. As a side note, he said that the RBGE gardeners were very impressed that VanDusen does not use herbicides.

We moved to the Herb Garden where Tomas wants to plant taller herbs, with a focus on culinary varieties. There was some discussion about the restaurant using them, but nothing is planned at the present. He removed the large rosemary in the front bed and heavily pruned the one in the centre to free up space. Last year he planted sweet peas here, but it was too hot for them to flourish. In the Fragrance Garden, he will focus on more unusual perennials and plant fewer annuals.

Tomas is very excited about all his new challenges and really enjoys learning about plants. His enthusiasm was contagious.

[Note: For future walks, we will make sure the gardeners use the mike.]