

Virtual Walk in the Garden with Cynthia – May 12, 2021

Recorded by Marilyn Goebel, photographed by Tresa Horney, reviewed by Cynthia

Curator of Collections Cynthia S. kindly took time out of her schedule to talk about projects in the Garden. She pointed out that the *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Victoria' at the entrance to the Eastern North America Garden has been severely pruned to remove dead wood. Earlier this spring many of the leaves died back. This may have been a delayed reaction to saltwater run-off from Festival of Lights walkway clearing over the years and perhaps to some dry summers. The evergreen magnolia across from it is in fine shape, so hopefully Victoria will recover.

Our first stop was at the **North American Cultivar 'Nativar' Collection** south of the Plaza. It replaced the Garry Oak Meadow which was not thriving (many of the original plants did not survive) and what did survive did not provide a lot of interest in this high-profile area of the Garden. Now the bed features a new collection of **"nativars" (cultivars of North American native plants)**, with drifts of grasses and perennials in the style of Dutch landscape designer Piet Oudolf, while retaining the white/pink/blue colour scheme of Garry oak meadows with their camas and spring wildflowers. Cynthia noted that the Carolina allspice shrub (*Calycanthus raulstonii* 'Hartlage Wine'), along the inner mulched path, is worth checking out in May with its lightly fragrant, rich wine-coloured blooms. Most North American native grasses are too large for this bed so the Nativar collection features drifts of the shorter Mexican feather grass (*Nassella tenuissima*) – native from Texas, south to Chile and Argentina - and this spring, some tufted hairgrass (*Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau'), a species native to Canada and the USA, will be added to diversify the grasses. BC native plants remain a part of this collection including, camas, trilliums, erythroniums, Nootka rose, the bird-friendly ocean spray and of course the distinctive Garry oak trees. The autumn sages (*Salvia greggii* cultivars) are not hardy here and needed replacing ever year so they are being replaced with two varieties of pink penstemons. The dwarf, spreading *Ceanothus* 'Blue Sapphire' right in front did not survive the winter and will be replaced with *Ceanothus gloriosus* 'Point Reyes', another dwarf spreading variety. There are some new streamside plants on order too, including the red-listed Henderson's checkermallow (*Sidalcea hendersonii*) which occurs from Alaska to Oregon. As a practical solution, at the edge of the bed adjoining the plaza pavers, the native creeping sedums were replaced with creeping thyme, which tolerates foot traffic much better and defines the edge of the bed, though it is not native to North America.

Our next stop was the **Astilbe Collection** planted a few years ago just west of the Ornamental Grasses bed. In the future, the plan is to add more oak leaf hydrangeas, hostas, heucheras (including gold-leaved *Heuchera* 'Applertini' with dark red flowers) and other perennials which will provide some diversity to the collection and expand the bloom season. Originally *Hakonechloa* had been planted next to the path, but the geese ate most of it, so it is being replaced by lime-green *Carex oshimensis* 'Everillo', which the birds leave alone.

Just around the corner is the **Black and Gold Garden**. Over the years, as perennials died here, they were replaced by annuals, but now the perennials are making a come-back, with the addition of more *Actaea*, *Penstemon* 'Onyx and Pearls', black aquilegias, *Heuchera* 'Tokyo', and *Ajuga reptans* 'Black Scallop'. The large laburnums planted in the 1970s were in poor health and were removed last year so now there is more light and space. They will be replaced by a silk tree with dark foliage (*Albizia julibrissin* 'Summer Chocolate'). New shrubs will include *Weigela* 'Date Night Tuxedo', with white flowers and dark foliage, and fringe flower (*Loropetalum chinense* var. *rubrum* 'Fire Dance') with deep burgundy foliage and magenta blooms.

Next to the **Backyard Bird Garden (BBG)**, work is underway to install the **summer tropical display** in the two large beds along each side of the main path. The smaller interior bed that has been part of the tropical display in the past will now be part of the BBG. It will include more bird-friendly plants and reduce labour needed to maintain the tropical beds. New bird-friendly plants will include a serviceberry (*Amelanchier* cultivar), a weigela with wine-coloured flowers to attract hummingbirds, and more perennials to fill in gaps left by the recent installation of irrigation. The bird feeders were temporarily removed because of a salmonella outbreak among birds in the Pacific Northwest, and they have not yet been given the all-clear to bring them back.

The black mulberry (*Morus nigra*) was too large for the bird garden so it was moved to Bed 73 near the Great Lawn. It has a 15-metre (50 feet) spread and can grow to 12 metres (40 feet). The new location is close to where the old black mulberry was located (by the red sculpture), but it is now set further back from the path where its berries will fall out of the way of cart traffic. The fruit is tastier than that of white mulberry (*Morus alba*) but the latter is the preferred habitat of silkworms and is used in their cultivation. There is a white mulberry growing opposite the Fern Dell.

We walked up the Rhodo Walk and cut over to the **Great Lawn** by the Hydrangea Collection. Two robinias in Bed 140 in the centre were removed to open this area up for a **new Hydrangea Collection**, to be planted this spring, and were discovered to be rotten. This Bed and the one to the west, Bed 141, originally sheltered a lily collection that has been shaded out. They are going to add lots of interesting new hydrangeas. The tree peonies will stay, but the current mixed perennial beds will be removed. Some of the lilacs in Bed 140 will stay, but in the future, they will be adding newer, smaller lilac cultivars, suitable for small spaces and urban gardeners. Bed 73 across the way will also have some new plantings to break up the current mass of shrubs. Cynthia feels that the Garden should feature more plants that can be used by urban gardeners in patios and small spaces, along with more edible and medicinal plants, to connect with the next generations of gardeners.

As we headed up past the **Japanese Collection**, we nibbled a leaf of the true wasabi, *Wasabia japonica*, growing along the path. Slugs did serious damage to this plant when it was younger, but now the plant is holding its own. Just down the path is the flowering *Enkianthus campanulatus* 'Showy Lantern', which is a magnet for bees.

The **Korean Pavilion** is still in pieces after the spring windstorm, but City engineers have removed parts of it, and they may go to a museum or be preserved elsewhere. The Korean Consulate says it is the only piece of traditional Korean architecture in the area. The pavilion was built in Korea for the 1986 World's Fair, using Korean pine, which is quite soft. It was built to only last a year, so it is a miracle it lasted this long. There is some talk of putting up another structure on this spot, but nothing has been decided.

Next stop was the new **Canadian Heritage Orchard**. The north end of the orchard replaces a bed of western Canadian shrubs which are better represented in the BC Habitat Garden. The original orchard, which featured Canadian apple and pear cultivars, was removed a few years ago because the trees were diseased and in poor shape. The ground remained fallow for a few years before the 16 new dwarf apple trees from a Bowen Island heritage apple orchard were planted last fall. The newly renovated orchard represents an authentic heritage apple orchard from the early 1900s, featuring varieties brought to southern BC by early settlers from their home countries. New signage will tell the story of each apple. The rotten fence on the edge of the orchard has been replaced and is now only along the edge opposite the Medicine Wheel. The Canadian raspberries, bred in BC, that were on the fence opposite the vegetable garden were moved to the new extended fence at the top of the orchard.

The south end of the old orchard is now grass but will be home to a new **Canadian Heritage Rose Garden** in the next few years. These roses are now being grown at Sunset Nursery. There will be a wheel-chair accessible path through this area as well.

The **beehive area** was redone this spring, and the rotten fence was replaced. They removed the soil and bark mulch in this area to get rid of fire ants and weeds, put in landscape cloth, then added new soil, a gravel bed around the hives, and grass that can be easily maintained. Main Street Honey manages the hives and says that four is an ideal number. Last year's hives didn't produce much honey, and the bees died over the winter, so new hives were added in April.

Cynthia remarked that the entire **Canadian Heritage Garden** needs overhauling, which is a huge job, so they are attacking it piece by piece. The new orchard is now in place, and the Heritage Rose Garden project is underway. Next on the list is the **Medicine Wheel** redesign. Cynthia will get guidance from the City's Reconciliation Planner to work with local First Nations on a culturally appropriate redesign. Around the Wheel they would like to expand the **Canadian Medicinal Collection** to create an **ethnobotany collection** that includes significant plants used for food, medicine, tools and cultural practices by indigenous peoples.

This year's **Vegetable Garden** is returning to a colour theme that we did in 2011. The updated theme is '**Eat a Rainbow**' and each bed will feature vegetables of a different colour with interpretation around the health benefits of the different plant pigments that give different fruits and vegetables their colour. The seeds are from West Coast Seeds and are all available locally.

As we headed north around the **Maze**, Cynthia pointed out that the annual bed to the west of the display originally featured pampas grass, but those plants were infested with fire ants and had to go. Having annuals allows staff to monitor and treat any recurring fire-ant nests and adds colour to this area. This year we will be featuring new annuals and vegetables selected by the non-profit **All-America Selections** organization which trials new selections for the home gardener. **VanDusen is now an official All-America Selections Display Garden** and works in tandem with West Coast Seeds, the official All-America Selections Test Garden for our region. Test Gardens like West Coast Seeds trial new plant introductions for the program and evaluate them, declaring which are deemed "All America Selections Winners". The role of VanDusen as an AAS display garden is to grow the plant and label them to raise awareness about these plants that are excellent growers in their region. AAS Winners plants growing at VanDusen will be identified with the AAS logo on their labels.

Next stop was the **Sunflower Garden** which will feature 10 different varieties, all from West Coast Seeds. The bed was treated earlier this year for fire ants and has a small looping path to keep people out of the beds while allowing them to get close to the sunflowers. They have added a front border of California poppies, which will be backed by the Dr. Bonnie Henry Pollinator Blend, a mix of cosmos. Then a living fence of golden willow (*Salix alba* var. *vitellina*) whips taken from the shrub at the top of the Waterfall will be installed in fall to deter people from walking into the beds to take selfies with the sunflowers. There will be more interpretation this year.

As we walked east by the **Stone Garden**, Cynthia pointed out the limitations of this area: the reservoir can't support a garden with soil, a lack of irrigation, and reflected heat from the stones. Miguel recently did a massive amount of work here, torching the weeds and raking the rocks into a simple pattern. They would like to add sections of pea gravel to the river rock, which could be raked into more complex designs, perhaps providing rakes for visitors to do this. The position of the large stones is very symbolic in this kind of Asian Garden; some of ours have fallen over, which changes the meaning of the stones to knowledgeable visitors.

Revamping **Bed 126B** just east of here is on the to-do list. They would like to focus on plants used in medicines from different parts of Asia. They will keep the *Zanthoxylum simulans* (Sichuan pepper tree) but remove some of the more common trees, like *Cotinus*, which do not fit the theme.

Across from this bed at the **top of the Waterfall**, Cynthia pointed out how the golden-willow fence is out of control and will be removed in the fall. It is overgrowing and blocking the tiny and unusual alpine rhododendron *Rhododendron intricatum* from Sichuan and N Yunnan, China, which grows at elevations of 11,000 -14,800 feet. They will install a handrail along the steep sections of the rock steps leading up the waterfall. They will be adding some low-growing shrubs to the small bed at the top of the waterfall.

As we walked back towards the Visitor Centre, Cynthia noted that a large Doug-fir in **Bed 85A** at the west end of the Great Lawn has been removed because of butt rot, a fungal disease which weakens the trees and makes them more vulnerable to toppling over. Most of the firs in the Fern Dell have it, but they are still in good shape and according to the City's arborists, will live for many more decades at least.

Despite COVID, it is very impressive what Garden staff have already accomplished and what is on their to-do list. Big kudos to Cynthia for spearheading much of this work.