

A History of the University of British Columbia Botanical Garden 1916 - 2002

Early History

The UBC Botanical Garden was founded in 1916. Its creator and first director was John Davidson (1878-1970) from Aberdeen, Scotland, who began his botanical career when he was apprenticed to the University of Aberdeen's modelmaker in 1893. He was a self-taught botanist and became the curator of the Botany Museum at the University of Aberdeen. He left that position when he moved to Vancouver in 1911 and was appointed to the post of Provincial Botanist.

His two main tasks were to make a complete survey of the BC flora, and to establish a botanical garden and herbarium of native plants. He enlisted the help of almost 200 correspondents, ranchers, prospectors, surveyors and teachers in addition to making many collecting trips himself. He soon acquired a collection of native plants, and was given 0.8 hectares (2 acres) at the Colony Farm at Essondale in 1912 to establish a temporary botanical garden. By 1914 there were more than 700 species of native plants in this garden, which was managed by one gardener, Mr. L. van der Born.

The Provincial Botanical Office was abolished in 1916, victim of World War I austerity, and the herbarium and botanical garden were transferred to UBC. The University site on Point Grey was almost entirely covered in brush and the University was housed in temporary buildings about 12 km (7.5 miles) away. John Davidson, who soon became widely known as 'Botany John', was not discouraged, and arranged for the laborious clearing and preparation of 34 hectares (85 acres) of land on Point Grey. Teams of men and horses felled and burned trees, drained and graded the land, and hauled away stumps and boulders. Most of the cleared land was designated as an experimental farm, but 2 hectares (5 acres) to the west end of the site were set aside for the botanical garden. A cabin in the nearby woods provided a temporary home for Mr. van der Born and his family. The move from

Essondale to Point Grey began in the fall of 1916 and was completed in 1917. Over 25 000 plants (about 900 species) were transported by truck over the 40 km (25 miles) from Essondale.

Davidson, whose appointment as Provincial Botanist required him to teach at the new university, joined the UBC faculty in 1916 as an instructor in Botany. He drew up an ambitious plan for the garden, which had education as its main function. He designed a series of systematic beds in which all the herbaceous species of the province were to be arranged, family by family. Deciduous and evergreen native trees and shrubs were to be planted on each side of the beds. In 1920, a visiting professor from the University of Chicago praised the gardens as being second only in Canada to the Botanical Garden at Ottawa, and called their setting “matchless”.

The University moved to buildings on Point Grey in 1925 and the Botanical Garden began to fulfil its functions as a teaching and research resource. An alpine garden, which Davidson referred to as the “rock slide garden” was constructed using stone left from the building of the Main Library. The rock slide garden was a 1.8 m (6 feet) high bank, which stretched for 120 m (400 feet) along what is now West Mall. It contained an impressive collection of alpine and dryland native plants placed in pockets between the boulders, and was watered in a rather novel way. A row of drain tiles was buried about 15-30 cm (6-12") deep in the soil at the top of the bank and filled with water by hose about once a week. The water then gradually seeped down among the plants without causing any soil erosion. There is now no trace of this rockery, which was in the area now occupied by the Ponderosa Cafeteria and Ponderosa Offices, although a small piece survived until 1969.

The rapid growth of the University through the 1920s was abruptly curtailed in 1929 with the start of the Great Depression. However, the garden survived even though there were only two full-time employees, Miss M. Gruchie (originally hired in 1912 as the “office staff”) and Mr. Ernest Schwanje who had replaced Mr. van der Born as gardener. A student was hired part-time during the summer to cut the grass. John Davidson apparently spent a lot of time going to Victoria, “cap in hand”, to plead for money to keep the garden in operation - a process that was repeated in a slightly different form some 50 years later!

By 1938, the garden consisted of the systematic beds, native arboretum,

nursery, medicinal beds, rock garden, salicetum (willow collection), various display areas and an aquatic garden. To the east of the aquatic garden was the Japanese Memorial Garden, which adjoined the Botanical Garden but was not part of it. This garden, completed in 1935, was designed by a UBC landscape architect (Dr. John Neill) and developed by a team of Japanese gardeners.

Although the Botanical Garden was affected by World War II, it survived these years relatively unchanged.

The Post-War Years

John Davidson retired in 1948 after 32 years at UBC. The University was not quite sure what to do with the Botanical Garden, which entered a period of decline and was integrated with the rest of the campus plantings in 1950. In 1951, the entire campus was designated as the Botanical Garden, with the Head of the Botany Department (Dr. T.M.C. (Tommy) Taylor) receiving the additional title of Director of the Botanical Garden. In 1956, the Botanical Garden came under the control of the Department of Buildings and Grounds, which now had responsibility for the development and maintenance of the entire campus. From 1949 until 1963, Dr. John Neill of the Department of Plant Science was Associate Director of the Botanical Garden and Supervisor of Campus Development, and he and Tommy Taylor were responsible for maintenance and development in the original garden area.

No history of the Botanical Garden or indeed of the UBC campus would be complete without emphasising John Neill's enormous contribution to landscape architecture, the development of the Nitobe Japanese Garden and indeed to the overall UBC landscape.

In 1963, the Botanical Garden was merged with the Grounds Division of the Department of Buildings and Grounds. The position of Botanical Gardens Curator (established in 1951) was changed to Supervisor of Operations, and the titles of Director and Assistant Director were allowed to lapse.

The surviving parts of the original gardens in 1963 were the Native Arboretum (begun in 1916), the rock garden and the seed exchange program. The seed exchange has been in continuous operation since 1928 under the control of staff members in the Department of Botany, the Department of Buildings and Grounds and currently the Botanical Garden (see Hine, 2002.

Davidsonia 13: 27). One of the employees of the seed exchange seems to have taken his job very seriously. He insisted on being called ‘Author Seed Collector’ and his real name is unknown. He was rumored to be a communist and his sudden disappearance one day in the early 1950s from the small cabin where he lived alone was attributed to his supposed leftist leanings. In the abandoned cabin were the remains of a meal, an unmade bed, and several 20 litre (5 gallon) cans of rare and valuable seeds that he had apparently acquired through the seed exchange. The garden behind the cabin was well stocked with choice exotics.

A very important development was the construction of the Nitobe Memorial Garden, which was opened in 1960. The Japanese Memorial Garden had been constructed in 1935 and contained a lantern dedicated to the memory of Dr. Inazo Nitobe, which had been damaged during World War II. Dr. Nitobe had been devoted to the cause of peace before he died in Vancouver in 1933, and his friends in BC and at the University funded the creation of a memorial garden in recognition of his work. However, as UBC President Norman MacKenzie said at the time, “ignorant and stupid hooligans” had defaced the lantern and garden during the war, throwing the plaque honoring Dr. Nitobe into the bush area behind the garden. In 1959 it was agreed that a permanent memorial to Dr. Nitobe and to peace should be erected on the UBC campus and Prof. Karmosuke Mori, a distinguished Japanese gardener and landscaper, was selected to design the garden. Prof. Mori arrived in BC in early 1959 and remained with the university until the official opening of the Nitobe Memorial Garden in June 1960. The Nitobe lantern was repaired and installed in an appropriate area of the garden.

In 1966, the Botanical Garden became a separate non-academic service department under the jurisdiction of the university President. Land (24 hectares, 60 acres) near the Thunderbird Stadium was set aside to form the garden nucleus. The “new” Botanical Garden also included the Nitobe Memorial Garden, the Rose Garden and the Faculty Club-Graduate Centre complex. Additional areas were subsequently added (and removed), until the garden finally reached its present size of about 44 hectares (110 acres).

The first director of the new Botanical Garden, Dr. Roy L. Taylor, took up his position on December 1, 1968. The University was somewhat unprepared for his arrival because his first office consisted of two empty rooms in the Horticulture greenhouse on West Mall. In July 1969 the Botanical Gar-

den office moved into a renovated hut on West Mall, one of the original “tar-paper” shacks moved to campus in 1945-1946 to provide classrooms for returning servicemen. The renovations did result in a somewhat luxurious “tar-paper” hut, but its construction left the staff with less than two minutes to evacuate the building in the event of fire! Two or three years later, the office expanded into half of the hut next door, and moved into Norman MacKenzie House, the former President’s Residence, on NW Marine Drive in 1975. In 1983 the office moved again, into the old Home Economics building between Norman MacKenzie House and the Museum of Anthropology. The original hut was demolished in early 1987.

Roy Taylor’s research group made valuable contributions in systematics and floristics. Chris Marchant, who joined the garden staff in 1970, worked on ferns and also began studies designed to use plants to stabilize the cliffs on the north and west edges of the university campus. Geraldine Allen, Steve Buttrick, Gerald Straley and Nancy Turner completed graduate theses in ethnobotany and systematics. Roy was very active in the Flora of North America program and Gerald Straley served as a regional editor for that continuing project. Taylor and Macbryde’s *Vascular Plants of British Columbia - A Descriptive Resource Inventory*, published in 1977 was a major compilation of the BC flora and contributed significantly to the eventual production of the 4 volume flora, *The Vascular Plants of British Columbia*, and its 7 volume illustrated version. In 1985, Roy, Gerald and George Douglas, co-authored *The Rare Vascular Plants of British Columbia*, in the National Museums of Canada Syllogeus series. Gerald’s *Trees of Vancouver* continues to be in great demand.

The Botanical Garden reached its largest size in the 1970s when it included the grounds associated with Cecil Green Park, Graham House, the Museum of Anthropology and Norman MacKenzie House. The staff had increased to approximately 45 during these years of rapid expansion, many of them being paid from grants provided for the development of the various areas.

The Friends of the Garden program (the FOGs) began in the spring of 1976, when a group of 10 people took part in a training program. An additional group joined in the fall of 1976. Since that time, the FOGs have increased to approximately 160 active volunteers who play an integral part in the Garden’s activities. They are responsible for many programs, including guided tours, the annual Indoor Plant Sale, Perennial Plant Sale and Apple

Fest, as well as operating the Hortline and the Shop-in-the-Garden.

The first phase of financial cutbacks to the University in 1982 resulted in significant losses to Botanical Garden staff positions, as this operating budget reduction coincided with removal of development grants, which had also paid several staff. Staff pointed out the unfortunate timing of these events and the record shows that most were concerned to complete projects under development rather than in keeping their own positions. The director actively pursued other fund-raising strategies - shades of John Davidson in the 1930s! Unfortunately, cuts went ahead and the staff was reduced from about 45 to 17. The garden's journal, *Davidsonia*, which was edited by Roy Taylor and Sylvia (no relation) Taylor and first published in 1970, was also a victim of the cutbacks. Happily, publication restarted in 2002. Roy Taylor began the Davidson Club as an annual donor program designed to build permanent endowment accounts with interest income to be used to fund the programs and operation of the Botanical Garden.

The recommendations of the President's Committee to review the Botanical Garden in late 1984, followed by further cutbacks in 1985, led to the transfer of the upper campus gardens (the Rose Garden, Faculty Club, Graduate Centre complex, Cecil Green Park, Graham House and the Museum of Anthropology) to control of the Physical Plant Department. Physical Plant had already taken over the care of the grounds at Norman MacKenzie House in 1983 when the house once again became the President's residence. The Nitobe Memorial Garden remained under the control of the Botanical Garden, hence provision could be made for maintenance of the essential intellectual, cultural and horticultural aspects of Japanese gardening.

The Botanical Garden moves to the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences in 1985

After Roy Taylor left in 1985 to become the Director of the Chicago Botanical Garden, Bruce Macdonald was appointed to succeed him. Most of the nine professional garden staff at the time of the move to the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences were already contributing to the Faculty's teaching programs in Plant Science and Landscape Architecture. They were supported by nine other garden staff members. There were several very successful public education programs, including a public horticultural information service, and a popular television show "The Western Gardener" (later "Canadian

Gardener”) hosted by David Tarrant. Bruce Macdonald’s *Practical Woody Plant Propagation for Nursery Growers* (1986) became an internationally recognized reference and teaching text. Both Judy Newton (Education Coordinator) and David Tarrant have published acclaimed books and are regular magazine contributors.

Plant Introduction Programs

The UBC Plant Introduction Scheme of the Botanical Garden (PISBG) released its first introduction, *Genista pilosa* ‘Vancouver Gold’, in 1985 after more than 5 years of development work. The program, which is operated in cooperation with the BC Landscape and Nursery Association (BCLNA, formerly the BC Nursery Trades Association) and the BC Society of Landscape Architects, was initially supported by grants from the Science Council of BC and the Devonian Group of Charitable Foundations. It involves the evaluation and selection of plants from the garden’s collections, followed by propagation of short-listed specimens and distribution to test stations for long-term performance assessment under different climatic conditions. Each introduction is then released to the industry and stock plants offered for sale to participating nurseries. General release and marketing follow, with the garden receiving a royalty on sales. After 19 introductions and 15 recommendations, the PISBG has had a major impact on the public and residential landscapes of North America and beyond.

Dr. David C. Lam: Garden Benefactor

In 1988, the Honourable Dr. David See-Chai Lam, a long time devotee of gardening, was appointed British Columbia’s twenty-fifth Lieutenant-Governor. He collected seed catalogues as a boy and dreamed about the garden he would have some day. His interest in the UBC Botanical Garden began in the late 1970s, when he and his family began attending home gardening workshops offered, first in the West Mall huts, and later at Norman MacKenzie House. In 1983, he and his wife, Dorothy, joined Collections Curator Gerald Straley on a horticultural tour of California. Before his appointment as Lieutenant-Governor, Dr. Lam made a very generous gift of \$1 million for construction of the garden’s research, education and visitors’ centre and adjacent landscaping. In 1992, the Asian Garden was named in his honor to celebrate his support and enthusiasm for the Botanical Garden.

In his speech at the dedication of the David C. Lam Asian Garden on September 11, 1992, the Lieutenant-Governor observed that:

“There are finished and unfinished symphonies in the world. There are finished and unfinished cathedrals in the world. But no garden is ever finished. All gardens are unfinished products.... Please remember that a garden is never finished....To me, the David Lam Asian Garden is like a symphony. A multiculturalism of the best of east and west. It is a place to remind us to relax and to appreciate nature. A place of harmony with oneself; harmony with nature; and harmony with others.”.....

Garden Areas

The main garden consists of 26 hectares (about 65 acres) at the western edge of the campus. The nursery is 2 km to the southeast and the Nitobe Memorial Garden is at the north end of campus.

The David C. Lam Asian Garden

The 12 hectare David C. Lam Asian Garden, set amid coastal forest was formally opened in 1981 and renamed in 1992. It contains the University's *Rhododendron* species collection, as well as an outstanding collections of woody and herbaceous plant material of Asian origin.

The Nitobe Memorial Garden

The Nitobe Memorial Garden on NW Marine Drive opened in June 1960 and was renovated in 1993. It is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Inazo Nitobe, distinguished educator and international civil servant, who did much to interpret Japan to the West and the West to Japan. The garden designer, Professor K. Mori of the University of Chiba, provided the campus with one of the finest authentic examples of Japanese landscape architecture in North America. Plants, many of which were supplied by the Japanese Canadian Citizens Association of British Columbia, are of both Japanese and North American origin.

Dr. John Neill wrote that much credit must go to Professor Mori for interpreting our wishes to have an authentic garden of academic significance, capable of instilling the exclamation: “Ah! I am in Japan”, uttered by a distinguished visitor from Japan. The principal stone arrangements, collected carefully from Britannia Beach, were Professor Mori's finest achievement in

the Garden. Lanterns from Japan provide symbolic guides to the stroller over the arched bridge, across the “zig-zag” bridge through the iris garden and around to the Tea Garden.

The Tea House was a gift (as were many artifacts) of the Canada-Japan Society of Tokyo, and was prefabricated in Japan and reassembled on the site. It is used only for the Tea Ceremony, but is open for viewing during the visiting season.

Professor Mori was delighted to work in the west coast forest environment and to use our plant materials and our rocks. Many of the guidelines and taboos laid down in the 12th Century “The Book of the Garden” were followed in the design of the Nitobe Garden.

The E.H. Lohbrunner Alpine Garden

In April 1978 the 1 hectare (2.5 acre) E.H. Lohbrunner Alpine Garden was dedicated to honour Mr. Lohbrunner’s lifetime contribution to alpine plant horticulture in British Columbia. The collections include both true alpinines and horticulturally significant plants of diminutive stature that suit a rock garden setting. Plants are grouped into continental areas: Australasia, Europe, North America, South America, Africa, Asia and Asia Minor.

The BC Native Garden

The 4 hectare (10 acre) BC Native Garden, which was started in 1971 and dedicated to John Davidson in 1978, was originally intended to accommodate a substantial and regionally representative collection of the BC flora as well as showcase BC native plants. The introductions of *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* ‘Vancouver Jade’, *Potentilla fruticosa* ‘Yellow Gem’, *Vaccinium ovatum* ‘Thunderbird’ and *Penstemon fruticosus* ‘Purple Haze’ as well as the development of other Botanical Garden selections will increase the profile of native plants.

The Arbour Garden

The wooden arbour between the Food Garden and the Contemporary Garden displays a variety of climbing plants. While vines are also planted in other garden areas and can be seen hanging over walls, scrambling over shrubs or climbing into the tallest trees, the human scale of the arbour allows the visitor a more intimate view of these fascinating plants.

The Harold and Frances Holt Physick Garden

The Harold and Frances Holt Physick Garden, which was opened in 1981 and renovated and named in 1998, was designed following a sixteenth-century Dutch print of a monastery garden. It is surrounded by a traditional English Yew hedge, inside which twelve plots encircle a handsome bronze sundial decorated with an engraving of a native death camas (*Zigadenus venenosus*). The gnomon carries the physician's snake and the pharmacist's cup of hemlock. The main plantings, which were decided by a committee of Friends of the Garden in conjunction with landscape architects Messrs. Justice and Webb, and Dr. Alan Goodeve of the UBC Pharmacy Department, are herbaceous perennials with a few shrubs and trees. Many of the plants in this garden were grown from seed donated by the Chelsea Physick Garden in London, England, and thus maintain an important link with history.

The Food Garden

The Food Garden is a valuable, documented collection of fruits, berries and vegetables that grow well in the BC Lower Mainland. Plantings in raised beds allow easy access and unobstructed viewing. The Friends of the Garden help in the assessment of the harvest, as well as with the picking and distribution of garden produce to charities. Fruit trees lining both sides of the outer path were purchased with funds provided by the Garden Club of Vancouver. This collection displays varieties best suited to the local climate as well as pruning and training techniques. These include the centuries-old space saving methods of cordons (oblique, single, double, triple and multiple) and espaliers (fan, palmette, horizontal, candelabra and Belgian fence).

Nursery

In 1969, a 2 hectare (6 acre) site was set aside on the south campus to be developed as a nursery for the propagation of plants for future garden components. The nursery was also home to a large collection of *Rhododendron* species, which had been started in 1952 by Tommy Taylor and John Neill. This collection was expanded from various sources, including Royston Nursery of Vancouver Island; the Rhododendron Species Foundation of Eugene, Oregon; and various botanical gardens in the UK. In 1969, the Botanical Garden entered into cooperative programs with the Pacific Rhododendron Society of Tacoma, Washington and the Vancouver Chapter of the Ameri-

can Rhododendron Society to acquire some important additional species.

On September 27, 1971, Dr. Douglas Henderson, Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh opened the new Botanical Garden Nursery and planted a specimen of *Rhododendron taliense*. By 1972, another 300 species, subspecies and varieties had been added, many of which have been incorporated into the Asian Garden. While the first focus of the Nursery was the production of plants for the various garden areas, in 1979 its role was expanded to include research and education for in-house projects and other campus departments.

Other Gardens

The Perennial Borders display harmonious colours from late spring through into the fall. Plants that are prone to pests and plants that need staking have been excluded, as well as flowers with a very short blooming season.

The Winter Garden is designed to take advantage of the mild climate of the Lower Mainland. Its plantings include a number of the more common winter and early spring flowering species, such as heathers and hellebores, but also more unusual flowering subjects, for example *Lonicera* × *purpusii*, *Clematis cirrhosa* and *Garrya elliptica*. Plants with decorative berries, bark or interesting evergreen foliage are also displayed.

Information for visitors to the Botanical Garden is available on the garden website (<http://www.ubcbotanicalgarden.org>) and on the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences website (<http://www.agsci.ubc.ca>).

Extracted from R. Blair and C.R. Nichols *A History of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences at UBC* (<http://www.agsci.ubc.ca>). Article based on UBC archives and newsletter and pamphlet material published by Sylvia Taylor, Professor Emeritus John W. Neill and Josephine Bridge. Comments received from Douglas Justice, Judy Newton, Daniel Mosquin and Iain E.P. Taylor of the UBC Botanical Garden, and from Michael Anhorn and Julia Saunders of the UBC Faculty of Agricultural Sciences are gratefully acknowledged.



Photo of Davidson courtesy UBC Archives. Photo of T. Taylor courtesy UBC Department of Botany. Photos of R. Taylor and Macdonald: UBC Botanical Garden archives.

The directors of UBC Botanical Garden (clockwise from top left): John Davidson, Tommy Taylor, Bruce Macdonald, Roy L. Taylor.



UBC Botanical Garden staff, summer 2002. Back row, standing (l to r): Ron Rollo, Tom Wheeler, Elaine LeMarquand, Randy Grant, Iain Taylor, Douglas Justice, Peter Wharton, Brent Hine, Chad Chobatar, David Tarrant, Tom Barber, Daniel Mosquin, David Griesser, Hailey Pappin, Judy Newton, Junji Shinada. Middle row, kneeling or sitting (l to r): Stacey Ewert, Justin Moore, Catherine Larochelle, Sara Harrison, Andrew Riseman, Susan Zaric, Sarah Howie, Tony Maniezzo, Andrew Hill. Front row, sitting (l to r): Yasmin Chir, Edwin Crail. Missing: Siva Chenhareddy, Jean Scott.