

Provincial Treasures - John Davidson and the Riverview Lands

A Century of Growth in Jeopardy

John Davidson, British Columbia's first Provincial Botanist, is a seminal figure in the field of botany and natural history in this area. While the focus of his interest was botany, he took an interest in everything from taxonomy to mountaineering, to preserving the Capilano watershed to establishing Arbor Day in Vancouver schools and setting up an international seed exchange. He developed not one but two botanical gardens for the province and saw them both torn apart.

He was born in 1878 in Aberdeen, Scotland, the son of a cabinet maker too poor to educate his son past the age of 14. John had, however, picked up woodworking skills from his father and got a job as boy attendant and model maker at the Museum of Marischal College, University of Aberdeen. He began carving models of plants and flowers that could be assembled and disassembled by botany students and this fired his life-long passion for botany.

He attended botany classes and within a year became Botany assistant. By the age of 29 he had been appointed Curator of the Botanical Museum at the University of Aberdeen, performing the duties of a North American Assistant Professor and directing the laboratory work of students studying for B.Sc. finals. He was also in demand as a teacher and lecturer - partly because of his rich sense of humour, partly because he illustrated his lectures with the new technology of photographs and lantern slides. People called him "Botany John", a name that followed him throughout his life.

Upset that his lack of a university degree prevented him from being appointed Assistant Professor, he moved with his wife and children to Vancouver in 1911, armed with glowing references from the faculty at the University of Aberdeen. Within days Dr. Henry Esson Young, Provincial Secretary, had appointed him Provincial Botanist with the understanding that

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he would become a professor of Botany at the new provincial university, whenever it should come into being.

Coming from Scotland with its illustrious tradition of botanists and plantsmen, he was the beneficiary of a very rich background of botanical knowledge and expertise. While few botanical surprises can have remained for him, here he was, botanist in charge of finding and naming correctly the plants in this vast new area. On top of that he had the opportunity to develop a botanical garden from scratch. Some people might have been overwhelmed but John Davidson, the quintessential autodidact, got busy creating a botanical garden to accommodate plants from coastal marshes, Okanagan desert, Rocky Mountain alpine meadows and everything in between. That garden was part of the complex then called “Essondale”; the “mental” hospital, experimental farm and botanical garden named after Henry Esson Young. Today what’s left of it is called Riverview.

John Davidson was a man blessed with a high energy level, independence, initiative and, best of all, a vast curiosity and a wide ranging vision. He knew he had a unique opportunity to influence the future of British Columbia not just botanically but ecologically, although this was not a term in general use at the time. The value of trees was clearly apparent to him - not only individual species or specimens but trees generally. He was as passionate about maintaining the forest in the Capilano watershed as he was about planting street trees in Vancouver. Eighty years ago he was preaching the gospel of forests affecting climate and indiscriminate logging causing erosion and flooding. He saw the city of Vancouver expanding rapidly and some plants, notably the *Cornus nuttallii* (dogwood) and *Rhamnus purshiana* (cascara), being decimated and possibly facing extinction. It was John Davidson who put the brakes on the ignorant “slaughter” (his words) of trees.

Within a very few years of his arrival he had a good grasp of the BC flora, partly through the plants sent to him by teachers and surveyors from around the province and partly from his own explorations. When Point Grey was selected for the site of the new provincial university, about 25,000 plants of some 90 species from his original botanical garden at Essondale were moved on horse drawn wagons to the new site. His trees, however, were already too large to move; they were left in elegant clusters of similar and contrasting species. And he continued what he had done so successfully in Aberdeen - he taught. He taught botanical students and school children, he lectured to

dozens of clubs and associations. He established the Vancouver Natural History Society and taught generations of men and women with an interest in natural history. At his behest Vancouver's Arbor Day was established.

As he taught he shared his vision. Having, as he once said, "the benefit of a good, old-fashioned Scotch (sic) religious training" he compared British Columbia to the Promised Land of the Bible, "a land of wonderful fertility, flowing with milk and honey". His vision was that we might maintain this, that the short-sighted greed of grabbing and selling off resources might cease if people learned and understood more about the value of maintaining those resources. His vision was that with learning might come respect for the land and the plants that grow on it.

Since then our formal knowledge of plants and botany has increased exponentially. Our wisdom, however, does not seem to have increased. Naturalists and botanists still teach the same message, but the financial bottom line still trumps the responsible use of our lands and plants, immediate provincial revenue still beats out future benefits and greed still sings louder than conservation. At the same time our technology removes us from the immediacies of life as our predecessors knew them. Very few people could tell you the phase of today's moon or which tree will grow best to make a windbreak for a house, or to bind a slope. Our ancestors knew multiple attributes for every tree - what you might build from the wood, what medicine and food it supplied, what wildlife it attracted or repelled. Most people today couldn't name more than a dozen trees and don't understand their attributes or value other than "wood chips," or "lumber".

More than ever now we need to follow John Davidson's vision of educating British Columbians about the value of our native plants and trees as well as the large number of plants imported for our gardens and landscapes. And waiting to support this are the trees he left behind at Essondale. His first botanical garden, undisturbed for nine decades and the oldest continuously operating arboretum in Canada, stands in mature glory around what is now called Riverview Hospital. It is a perfect botanical classroom, waiting to be used. The trees have grown to their mature size and form, only minimally bothered by the invasions of man. Root compaction and interference by roads and drains is minimal.

But a decade ago none of this was known and the past seemed forgotten. However, a small group of people who each loved the Riverview trees for

their beauty decided to share them with the public. David Tarrant, from UBC Botanical Garden, guided one tree tour and Bill Browne, retired Arborist for the City of Vancouver led another. We had no idea how many people might attend but a couple of hundred tree lovers showed up. We had to borrow a bullhorn from the RCMP.

Soon we realized that these trees were more than just landscaping for Riverview Hospital. They were a provincial treasure of interest and value to botanists and arborists nationally and internationally. We also realized that it would be a disaster if they were destroyed. Already, in the 1980s, some 57 hectares (143 acres) of the site had been sold to developers. As this seemed likely to recur we formed the Riverview Horticultural Centre Society (RHCS) dedicated to preserve and protect the land and trees of the Riverview Hospital site (the Lands) as a community-oriented, financially viable centre for horticultural, educational and therapeutic activities. At present the Lands consist of 99 hectares (244 acres) of parkland, meadow and woodland, with streams, paths and gardens. It is a wildlife habitat and part of the diminishing corridor of green spaces between Burrard Inlet and the Fraser River. Once home to 5000 patients and now housing fewer than 700 it has several large empty buildings of heritage and architectural interest. The mature trees reflect almost a century of gentle nurturing and preservation. Dedicated head gardeners knew the treasure they were fostering and served it well, each doing their part to create and maintain this treasure for the future.

Over 1800 significant trees at Riverview have been identified and tagged. According to the International Society of Arborists' standards, ten years ago the value of these trees as individual specimens was over \$50 million. But as a collection they are worth far more. They were planted, using Kew Gardens in England as a model, in complementary groupings. Many are now over a century old and over a metre in diameter. This is a Canadian Heligan.

John McGannon, President of the Society of Municipal Arborists wrote:

"Examples of trees such as on this ground are priceless in terms of their aesthetic, educational and scientific value. This site will be world renowned if it becomes a preserve or education center."

The Riverview Lands could be world renowned. Already, without professional promotion or publicity, they are attracting attention across North America and in Asia. They are a place of intrinsic aesthetic value, a place of

healing, part of our heritage and a resource for study and learning. If we must consider the bottom line, as an arboretum or botanical garden they could bring in a fine income annually in perpetuity. How do we set a price on a priceless asset? To value the Lands by the acre for housing development would be like valuing the Mona Lisa for the canvas, frame and paint used in it. But as John Davidson himself said, “We need men who can see and act straight, whose eyes are not fixed on TODAY, but who are looking forward to the FUTURE welfare of the Province.”

The trees alone have given British Columbia a first class arboretum with trees of unique and pristine growth. They also form a gene pool that is the envy of arborists elsewhere on the continent. Some varieties are a challenge to taxonomists and a number of trees have not yet been conclusively identified. Common themes of newer botanical gardens and arboreta are natural areas for native flora and wildlife. Riverview Lands has these elements, with an old orchard, a long strip of native trees known as the “backyard” and streams. While powerful and persuasive arguments can be made for saving the Lands for their ecological, botanical and heritage values, equally strong arguments can be made for maintaining the vision of John Davidson by understanding and valuing their healing power. His vision could not have been realized without the labour of patients who lived at the hospital. They cleared the land, blasted stumps, built rock walls by hand, levelled the terraces and helped erect the buildings. They lived, worked and died at Essondale and many are buried in its cemetery. But they have left us this national treasure; an oasis for plants, wildlife and people.

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