

Editorial

On being ready!

Spring offers every garden a chance for renewal and redirection. Research botanical gardens, such as ours at UBC are no exception, and the return of graduate students and arrival of new researchers often brings challenges both to accommodate the new and to continue support of on-going work. Spring brings annual budget allocations at UBC, as well as news (good and bad) about research grant applications. With new faculty members and a group of energetic and talented technicians, graduate students and post-doctoral researchers, the redirection of the UBC Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research is starting to bring rewards. The imminent construction of the Beaty Biodiversity Research Centre is indeed timely for the Botanical Garden as three of our research staff (Professors Cronk, Graham and Adams) have established links to the Centre.

Our contributions to university teaching have been steady for some time. Landscape architecture students continue to benefit from Douglas Justice's offering of a course on *Trees and Shrubs in Landscape*, and each spring signals the arrival of five students who will gain hands-on experience in botanical garden work. Every university botanical garden has a mission to teach and that mission does not end at one or two courses to serve the needs of others. Sadly, UBC's undergraduate degree in horticulture seems to be languishing, in spite of attempts at curriculum renewal in the agroecology programme of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (renamed Faculty of Land and Food Systems, effective July 1st 2005). It is also unfortunate that past initiatives to develop a full-scale apprenticeship programme for horticulturists remain

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largely unfulfilled. The regional colleges in British Columbia have developed many excellent courses and qualifications, but the notion of a provincial or, dare we think, a national accredited programme seems lost in turf wars (pun intended). Clearly, there is a need for more and better-trained plantspeople, but few major gardens (Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh and Longwood Garden are two exceptions) have acted consistently to meet the need.

Our public education programmes continue to thrive, but the retirement of Judy Newton presents us with major challenges to continue to grow this part of our educational mission. A university garden without strong public education is surely missing its mandate.

Botanical gardeners worldwide use springtime to tidy up, repair, and do all the seasonal chores that prepare us for the arrival of summer visitors. We all yearn for more visitors than last year, especially if they pay admission, but visitor benefits are often unclear. We tend to fall back on the natural glory that we display and too often fall victim to smugness that the public will come for their own good, or worse that if they don't visit then that is their problem. We must be constantly aware that the visitor needs to feel real benefit, whether from a chance to learn about plants, an opportunity for the children to run in a green place, or just being in a place of peace. There are a few things that are easy to achieve and will ensure that our welcome mat stretches through all parts of the garden and beyond.

1. The visitor must know we exist and how to find us. Small, attractive publicity cards with clear car and public transit directions should be available at the airport, train and bus station, tourist bureau and in every hotel lobby in town. Just as important are the local direction signs that say for example 'Entrance →100 meters'. We must consider that many visitors will come by public transport and make sure that our bus stop is close to the entrance and does not require a long and poorly directed walk.

2. The entrance must be a magnet and an exciting place that welcomes visitors, young and old. The admission fee becomes

relatively unimportant if visitors find easy and accessible things to do and see, and if the washrooms and the refreshment kiosks provide comfort and convenience. The garden map should not require advanced knowledge of geography or horticultural jargon. A stop at the 'shop' or reading various pamphlets at the entrance kiosk may provide extra details, but visitors will not enjoy their visit nor will they return if we patronize them from the outset.

3. What is there to see? Points of interest and attractive plants should be labeled with concise, interesting signs, most important these should be readable. Audiences still laugh when I show a picture of a 'sign' at a famous university garden, that provides scientific name, common name, family, country of origin, more than 50 explanatory words, all packed into 15 x 6 cm and placed 3 cm from the ground. There is an encouraging trend to provide detailed signs for everything, but there is a risk of creating a garden of signs. Much more thought is needed to present information that meets the needs of casual visitor, interested gardener and botanical expert: not an easy task. The signs and labels also must be checked regularly to ensure that they are visible, that newly relevant signs are installed and redundant ones removed.

The 'Kids Stop' trail signs, developed by Judy Newton at UBC and aimed at 4-8 year olds has proved a great success. Children's gardens have added a long-overdue dimension including actively worked vegetable and flower patches, areas with botanical toys and play equipment, quiet spots where children can sit and watch both plants and animals, and places where children can simply burn energy.

4. Botanical Gardens are not just scientifically labeled plant collections. Many gardens provide guided tours and on-site programmes that include opportunities to see the other life forms that share our space. The opportunities to use a garden as a gallery or display space for permanent or temporary exhibitions of art lead to increased visitor numbers as well as using the natural settings of our space to serve other sectors of the community. Exhibitions by local artists, statues of distinguished botanists (Linnaeus at Chicago), native

crafts (Denver), old transport displays (Basel), a model railway display 'Locomotion in the Garden' (Atlanta), and a host of different sun dials all provide points of interest for visitors.

5. The souvenir brochure provides a long-term reminder of a garden. The balance must be between an attractive and 'punchy' document and the reality that souvenir book production is a financially risky business. The development of high quality (no-one wants a cheap-looking souvenir that cost them \$10 or more) colour, laser printing will be the way of the future. Increasingly the internet web site is becoming a novel, attractive and evolving means of having a dynamic souvenir. If it is well designed, the web site key elements, including details of access, programmes, contact information and of course the plants that are currently on full display can help people decide to visit us, but also to see the garden at other seasons.

Research gardens still seem to struggle recognizing that the web site can and should meet the needs of all segments of the community that we claim to serve. We frequently forget that many botanists found their defining experience during a childhood visit to a botanical garden. The new generation of children expects interesting and exciting web sites. We must not miss our opportunities.