
The Bard in the Garden

*“Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many—either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry —why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills.” – William Shakespeare’s *Othello**

As you leave the Visitor Centre and step out onto the **1 - Plaza**, it transitions you from the city and connects you to plants, botanical history and literature itself. To the left, just over the small bridge, you will find New Zealand flax, (*Phormium*), and to your right, in the Rain Garden pond in front of Livingstone Lake, you find various rushes, sedges and common cattail (*Typha latifolia*). Now look across the lake to the grassy hillock where quince grows and along the paved path bordering Livingstone Lake, a medlar (*Mespilus germanica*), the subject of a blatant pun (“meddlers”) in Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*.

At least 90 flowers, shrubs, trees and vegetables mentioned in the plays and sonnets of William Shakespeare can be found within VanDusen Botanical Garden’s 55 acres. *“To be or not to be,”* may be the question; just be quick about it. The flash of spring colour is here and gone like the glint off the blade of Hamlet’s sword. Come early in the year to find crocus, daffodils and narcissus.

Shakespeare’s plants range across our botanical landscape. He used the names of plants to make points, to establish moods, or to connect theatre patrons to the English, Danish and Italian landscapes. Our gardeners have always done this – connecting people with plants. This month, as the garden takes the first steps toward fall’s layers of transition, transformation and translation, Shakespeare’s trees (ash, balsam, bay, birch, fig, fir, hawthorn, pine and hemlock) can be fully appreciated. Later, as winter wanes, the geometry of bud-laden branches reveals itself to the winter visitor.

Turn right from the plaza and follow the gravel path toward the **2 - Eastern North American Collection**. Turn left then turn right almost immediately. To your right is VanDusen’s founding Curator and Director, Roy Forster’s rendering of a Carolinian forest. The rich, layered understory reads like the subtext to a Shakespearean play. In contrast to the evergreens of British Columbia’s temperate rainforests, this deciduous forest offers diffuse light through a canopy of hardwood trees, with American larch (*Larix laricina*), butternut (*Juglans cinerea*) and black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia* ‘*Tortuosa*’), underplanted with witch alder (*Fothergilla species*) and other plants of our Eastern deciduous forests.

Retrace your steps and return to the gravel path that leads to the **3 - R. Roy Forster Cypress Pond**. Our collection of bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) provides more cheer than Shakespeare’s *“Come away, come away, Death, and in sad cypress let me be laid. Fly away, fly away, breath, I am slain by a fair cruel maid.” – Twelfth Night*. The bald cypress trees let their hair down each fall when their needle-shaped leaves turn a brilliant coppery colour. These stately relatives of the redwood are native to the swamps of the Everglades and the US Gulf Coast but, like the words of the bard, these trees have universal appeal.

Today, VanDusen’s more than 50 distinct living collections encompass far more than just the Shakespearean plant references noted here. These living collections serve the ongoing horticultural display, education and plant conservation programs that underpin the role of a botanical garden. As you cross the zig-zag bridge, reflect (pun intended) on the water features, stonework and rolling terrain of the garden. These features were created by founding Garden Superintendent Bill Livingston before VanDusen’s very first plant, a lily-of-the-valley shrub (*Pieris japonica*), went into the ground in the 1970s. Lilies (*“O sweetest, fairest Lily,” – Cymbeline*) dot the garden landscape. Shakespeare referred to lilies as the *“mistresses of the field.”* Here in our collection, botanical questions find their answers in the plants themselves. In nature, you will always find *“books in the running brooks, sermons in stone and goodness in everything.” – As You Like It*.

Proceed up the path through the bamboo, turn left on the paved path, leaving the giant sequoias to your right. Proceed to the **4 - Southern Hemisphere** collection. Shakespeare had few references to the Americas or England’s far-flung colonies until he wrote *The Tempest*. Virtually everything you find in this collection was introduced to Europe (and Canada) following Shakespeare’s tenure as playwright for the Globe Theatre.

Keep on the main path that leads to the stone wall and steps ahead. Turn right at this junction and proceed across the zigzag bridge past the prehistoric giant rhubarb (*Gunnera manicata*) on your right. Gunnera was not referenced by the bard, but the acerbic rhubarb (which is not related to Gunnera) was: *“What rhubarb, senna or what purgative drug would scour these English hence? Hear'st thou of them?” – MacBeth.*

Across the bridge, at the top of the rise, turn left and then right at the basalt rocks to pass through the stone **5 - Grotto**. Forming the roof of the grotto overhead is yew. When Macbeth's witches chanted *“double, double, toil and trouble,”* they threw *“a sprig of yew”* into their cauldron. On the other side of the Grotto lies **6 - The Heather Garden**. Heath (*Erica* species), its close relative heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) and mountain heather (*Cassiope species*), are found throughout northern latitudes from Europe to Haida Gwaii. Worldwide, there are over 300 species of these tough, low-growing shrubs. *“Now would I give 1000 furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground, broom, furze, anything.” – The Tempest*

Walk past the Scottish Shelter (take care not to mention the Scottish play), cross the small stone bridge, turn right onto the paved path and follow it all the way to the crossroads, turn left and walk up the slight rise to pause at the stand of **7 - Himalayan birch** (*Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*). The striking white Himalayan birches to your left mark the gateway to the Sino-Himalayan Garden. Follow garden signs to the Waterfall. Just after the waterfall you will come to the willow (*Salix alba* var. *vitellina*), which forms the living rail for the stone steps beside the waterfall. Shakespeare attributed the common name Dead man's fingers to this plant. Another tree, also known as **8 - Dead man's fingers** (*Decaisnea insignis*) grows beside the path just beyond the steps and has been so named, because its blue fruit resembles the fingers of a corpse. This is a favorite of children when the “fingers” are “ripe.”

From here you can choose to climb the steps to the top of the Waterfall, follow the path that skirts the Stone Garden all the way to a view of the maze on your left and keep left walking past the maze toward **9 - the Vegetable Garden**. The other option is to follow the unpaved path ahead of you until it bisects a paved path at the Fern Dell, turning right on the paved roadway to arrive at the Vegetable Garden. The choice is yours. Shakespeare mentioned many vegetables and fruits, some of which you will find here in VanDusen's Vegetable Garden... beans, blackberries, cabbages, chamomile, cherries, clover, corn, currant, onion, and strawberries which *“grows underneath the nettle, and wholesome berries thrive and ripen best neighboured by fruit of baser quality.” – Henry V.*

From here, proceed through the Canadian Heritage Orchard and past the Medicine Wheel along a heavily treed path to explore the **10 - Canadian Heritage Garden**, which features many plants unknown to Shakespeare's Elizabethan England. Follow the meandering paths and when you emerge from the Canadian Heritage Garden, where the country lane meets the main paved path, continue straight ahead along the **11 - Rhododendron Walk**. This collection of hybrid rhododendrons is a riot of colour in May when it is at peak bloom.

Proceed almost to the end of the Rhododendron Walk to the dove tree (*Davidia involucrata*) at the foot of the path, turn left, walk past the wooden arbour and turn right through the path bordered with **12 - Lavender (Lavendula)**. Next bear to your right along the Laburnum Walk past the Heritage Roses and Formal Rose Garden. Lavender and roses are both referenced by Shakespeare. Turn right at the path leading to the Glass House and keep on the path that is closest to the lawn. It will lead you beside the Herb Garden and Fragrance Garden. Alternatively, walk to the end of the path that runs past the Formal Rose Garden and turn left to explore the Black Garden, with many plants referenced by Shakespeare. Enjoy the late-blooming flowers as we conclude this tour of the Garden through Shakespeare's eyes.

Checklist of Plants Referenced in Shakespeare's works: apple, (crab, pippin), ash, aspen, balm, balsam, bay, bean, birch, blackberries, box, broom, burdock, cabbage, chamomile, carnation, carrot, cherry, chestnut, clove, clover, columbine, corn, cowslip, currant, cypress daffodil, daisy, dock, elder, elm, fennel, fern, fig, flag, lax, flower-de-luce (iris), urze, garlic, gillyvor (carnation), ginger, gooseberry, goss or gorse, grape, grass, harlock (burdock), hawthorn, hazel, heath (ling), hebanon (yew), hemlock, herb of grace (rue), holly, honeysuckle, hyssop, ivy, (hemlock), larkspurs, laurel, lavender, lettuce, lily, ling, locust, love-in-idleness (pansy), mace, mallows, marigold (calendula or pot marigold),,marjoram, medlar, mint, mistletoe, moss, mulberry, mushroom, mustard, myrtle, narcissus, nettle, nutmeg, oak, olive, onion, osier (willow), oxlip, palmtree, pansy, parsley, pea, pear, peony, pepper, pine, pink, plane tree, plantain, plum, poppy, potato, primrose, quince, radish, reed, rhubarb, rose, rosemary, rue, rush, rye, saffron (*Crocus sativus*), samphire, savory, sedge, speargrass, stover (grass), strawberry, sycamore, thistle, thorn, thyme, toadstool, turnip, vetch, vine, violet, walnut, wheat, willow, woodbine (honeysuckle), wormwood, yew.