

Sept/Oct 2024 - Edibles in the Garden

contributed by Diane Lake, VanDusen Garden Guide

"The single greatest lesson the garden teaches is that our relationship to the planet need not be zero-sum, and that as long as the sun still shines and people still can plan and plant, think and do, we can, if we bother to try, find ways to provide for ourselves without diminishing the world."

— Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*

On this self guided tour through VanDusen Botanical Garden, we take a look at some of the plants in our collection that produce edible seeds, berries and fruits. Many of these fascinating plants have been used for food and medicine throughout history in different parts of the world by humans, birds, and other animals.

Begin the tour from the Plaza and walk towards the wooden bridge to your left as you face Livingstone Lake. Stay right and continue along the upper edge of the lake planted with grasses where you will see **1 – a Bollwiller pear (*× Sorbopyrus auricularis*)**. This tree is an intergeneric hybrid, or a cross between two species in different genera. The parent species are common whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) and European pear (*Pyrus communis*). Bollwiller pears were introduced in Europe in the 17th century but were not planted in North America until the 1950s. They produce yellow-orange, rounded fruits that resemble apples more than pears. A Bollwiller pear tree can take up to ten years to produce fruit, so are rarely grown commercially.

Continue on the path and look on your left for **2 – wineberry (*Rubus phoenicolasius*)**, native to China, Japan and Korea. Wineberry is in the same genus as red raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*), and the two species share some characteristics: both have silvery-white underleaves, and a cone-shaped core, or receptacle, that remains on the stem when the ripe berry is picked. Both have thorns. Unlike raspberry, the canes, petioles and sepals of wineberry are covered in fine red hairs, giving the entire plant a reddish hue. Wineberries have similar health benefits as raspberries and are a good source of vitamin C, antioxidants, minerals, and fiber. In addition to fresh eating, wineberries make great preserves, pies, and other desserts.

Next up is **3 - the medlar (*Mespilus germanica*) located down the slope**. These trees are native to southwest Asia and southeast Europe. The apricot-sized fruit resembles a rose hip. They have been eaten in Europe since Greek and Roman times. Before consuming or cooking, medlar fruit must be allowed to blet, or soften. Freshly picked medlar fruit are placed, flowering end face down, not touching each other, on a clean, dry surface, and left until they turn a deep brown and are

soft, almost squashy, to the touch. The flesh has a custard-like texture and a taste described as “apple butter with notes of cinnamon and vanilla.”

Growing just above and behind the medlar is **4 - a large quince tree (*Cydonia oblonga*)**. It is a deciduous tree that bears hard, aromatic, bright golden-yellow fruit, similar in appearance to a pear, with a tart, astringent flavour. They are eaten raw or processed, again after bletting, into marmalade, jam, or a paste known as “quince cheese”. In Europe, quince is used to make a fruit brandy called “rakija” in the Balkans and “eau-de-vie” in France.

Next up is **5 - a Sargent's crabapple (*Malus sargentii*)**, a member of the rose family (Rosaceae) native to China, Korea and Japan. This small tree or large shrub has abundant, fragrant white flowers in spring, and tiny, round, red, sweet fruit in the fall that birds love. At the end of the bark mulch path turn left into the Black and Gold Garden and look for

6 - the black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa* ‘Autumn Flame’) on your right. Black chokeberry can be used as an edible fruit crop, although the fruit is too astringent to eat raw. The high-antioxidant fruit is used in baking and to make jams, jellies, syrup, tea, juice and wine. The fruit can persist into winter and serves as a food source for birds and other wildlife.

Retrace your steps back towards the Lake, go down the slope and over the Zig-Zag Bridge into the Mediterranean Garden. Follow the arrows to **7 – two strawberry trees (*Arbutus unedo*)**, native to western Europe and the Mediterranean Basin, but grown here on the west coast as a garden plant that can often withstand cold down to -10 °C. The fruit ripens bright red and contrasts beautifully with the dark green foliage. As an edible, its fruit replicates the flavour of apricots and guavas and is used in preserves, syrups and fruit wines. The strawberry tree has major ecological significance as a food plant for bumblebees and also provides health benefits for pollinators. A recent scientific study shows that the nectar contains chemical compounds that can combat a common and harmful bumblebee gut parasite.

Now keep on the path past the bench to the lawn and turn right at the arrow and turn right again onto a gravel path also marked by an arrow. Follow it to **8 - an Italian stone pine (*Pinus pinea*)** leaning towards the water. Native to the Mediterranean, it has been cultivated for its edible seeds, or pine nuts, for more than 6,000 years. The cones are harvested and placed in burlap sacks for 20 days, then smashed. The nuts are then separated by hand, a labour-intensive activity that explains why these nuts are so expensive. They are very nutritious, containing essential fatty acids, minerals and vitamins.

Turn right and walk to the main path ahead, turn left, then right following the arrows and return to the Visitor Centre. Cross the Plaza in front of the building to return to where the tour began at the Bollwiller pear tree. Instead of going right along the lakeside as you did before, go up to the left. Continue to go straight

ahead, past the pool, Fragrance and Herb Gardens and turn left at the crossroads near the Formal Rose Garden and follow the path leading to the start of the Rhododendron Walk. Stay on the Rhododendron Walk and go straight ahead until you come across expanses of green **9 – redwood sorrel (*Oxalis oregana*)** which often reminds people of shamrocks. The leaves of redwood sorrel are used in salads, as edible decoration or to make a refreshing sour drink. The green seed capsules can be eaten raw and have a taste similar to rhubarb. The plant is also used in traditional medicines as a diuretic and to treat fever and scurvy. A little further along the Rhododendron Walk is a grouping of **10 – ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)**. This is a deciduous fern, and in spring, new fronds emerge in tight coils called fiddleheads. The fiddleheads of some fern species are toxic, but ostrich fern fiddleheads are considered a delicacy. They are best when tightly closed and cooked much like you would asparagus.

The next sighting **11 - is wasabi (*Eutrema japonicum* 'Mazuma')** from the mustard family (Brassicaceae). This plant grows naturally along stream beds in mountain river valleys in Japan. It is cultivated for its rhizomes, which are ground into a paste as a pungent condiment for sushi and other foods. Wasabi is known for its unique, complex flavor with fragrant peppery heat, followed by a smooth, sweet finish. The heat is similar to horseradish or hot mustard, rather than chilli peppers, because it stimulates the nose more than the tongue. True wasabi paste is quite expensive, and the "wasabi" found in most sushi restaurants is generally made of horseradish dyed green with food colouring.

Continue along the path until you reach the giant red chairs and turn left. Walk to **12- the BC Heritage Apple Orchard**. This orchard contains heritage varieties from BC's oldest domestic apple orchards. Read the interpretive signs to learn more about the different apple varieties.

Just up from the orchard is **13 - the new Garden Lab**, an educational space where students can gain hands-on gardening experience. Read the interpretive signs to learn more and take a look at the different themed planters if there are no classes in session.

Finally, on our last stop, walk up past the maze and above the stone garden to **14 - a collection of plants from West, Central and South Asia** near the top of waterfall. One of the plants is green cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*), an herbaceous perennial plant in the ginger family (Zingiberaceae), native to southern India. Green cardamom is a versatile spice with a sharp, strong, punchy aroma, used to flavour curries, daal, puddings and teas. Another member of the ginger family, turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), has rhizomes that are eaten fresh or boiled, dried, and ground into a deep orange-yellow powder commonly used as a colouring and flavoring agent in many Asian cuisines, especially for curries, as well as for dye. Turmeric powder has a warm, bitter, black pepper-like flavor and earthy, mustard-like aroma.

The sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*) belongs to the mulberry family (Moraceae). Sacred fig has a religious significance in four major religions that originated on the Indian subcontinent: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism. It is also used in traditional medicine for about fifty types of disorders including asthma, diabetes, and various digestive issues.

This concludes the self-guided edible plant tour. Please continue to explore and enjoy other parts of the garden.