

A changing role for botanical gardens

ROYAL BOTANICAL GARDENS' natural areas, educational programs and display gardens were important influences on the development of my own interest in nature and conservation. As I was growing up on Rock Chapel Road, the Rock Chapel Sanctuary was essentially the neighbourhood "playground"; my family, friends and I took full advantage of the year-round opportunities that the Gardens offered. We were regular "groupies" at the maple sugar demonstrations each spring, participated in fall programs at the Arboretum, and in particular, looked forward to skating on Cootes Paradise each winter. The sanctuaries and programs enhanced our passion for the nature surrounding us and kept us excited about exploring our area.

Our connection to the Gardens didn't stop with the nature sanctuaries. Whenever we had visitors from out of town, we inevitably included a visit to the Rock Garden to "show off" the incredible horticultural displays. I remember spending hours marvelling at the vividly coloured, and the seemingly endless varieties of tulips. A visit to the Lilac Dell was another spring ritual that still comes to mind whenever and wherever I smell lilacs. The wonders of nature and science were dominating themes linking the display gardens and the nature sanctuaries.

An international movement

In the international community of botanical gardens, these links are not always immediately evident. While botanical gardens were originally created to host vast collections of plants, to study them and to allow opportunities for the public to discover them, most botanical gardens were not worried about the protection of the habitats where these plants originated. Today this situation is changing. For example, Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney, Australia, reminds their visitors that "plants = life."

With the ability to harness energy from the sun and produce oxygen, plants are the basis of life on earth. Plants are such an integral part of our life that we often take them for granted. Humans depend on plants for all facets of life: food to nourish us, material to construct our shelters, fuel to heat our homes,

medicines to heal our ills, clothes to keep us warm, paper to record our history and discoveries, and colours and smells to invigorate our souls. Botanical gardens showcase and celebrate these values, and can serve as places to teach us about the importance of biodiversity and the need to care for natural habitats.

The non-profit group Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) was formed in 1987, in response to the growing global awareness of the fact that human activity is destroying natural habitats at an alarmingly accelerated pace and threatening the source of the diversity on which we depend. The mission of BGCI is to build and maintain a world network of botanical gardens for plant conservation. It provides technical guidance, data and support for plant conservation and education at botanical gardens, and has more than 500 member institutions in 112 countries, all working together to implement a worldwide Botanic Gardens Conservation Strategy for plant conservation.



Endangered Garry oak ecosystem interpreted at VanDusen Botanical Gardens, Vancouver.

Recently, BGCI expanded its program, thanks to Investing in Nature, a five-year partnership funded by HSBC Holdings plc. Through Investing in Nature, BGCI's global goals are to protect 20,000 plants from extinction, educate 400,000 people through their Web site, and target 2.5 million people in more than 10 countries with new public education programs. As a result of this partnership, BGCI has created a variety of projects in 16 different countries, including China, India, Indonesia, United States, and Canada.

SCIENCE AND CONSERVATION

LAUREL McIVOR

The Canadian partnership

A Partnership for Plants in Canada, funded as part of Investing in Nature, is a co-operative effort with Canadian botanical gardens and arboreta to promote greater public awareness of the importance of plants, the threats they face, and the actions needed to protect them. In January 2003 I was hired to co-ordinate these efforts.

Our goals

- Research and develop educational resources.
- Develop network/communication forums for educators.
- Contribute content to national and international botanical organizations, and Web sites.
- Assist botanical gardens and arboreta contributions to endangered species recovery plans.
- Identify and investigate a variety of additional funding sources and opportunities.

Institutions participating in *Investing in Nature – A Partnership for Plants in Canada* as of November 2003

- Assiniboine Park Conservatory, Winnipeg, MB
- Devonian Botanical Garden, Edmonton, AB
- Memorial University Botanical Garden, St. John's, NF
- Milner Gardens and Woodland, Qualicum Beach, BC
- Montreal Botanical Garden, QC
- Morgan Arboretum, McGill University, QC
- Muttart Conservatory, Edmonton, AB
- New Brunswick Botanical Garden, St. Jacques, NB
- Niagara Botanical Garden and School of Horticulture, Niagara Falls, ON
- Reford Garden, Mont-Joli, QC
- Royal Botanical Gardens, Hamilton, ON
- Sherwood Fox Arboretum, London, ON
- Tofino Botanical Gardens, Tofino, BC
- Toronto Zoo, Toronto, ON
- UBC Botanical Garden, Vancouver, BC
- University of Guelph Arboretum, Guelph, ON
- VanDusen Botanical Display Garden, Vancouver, BC



Composting exhibit at New Brunswick Botanical Garden focuses on homeowner conservation.

Although I was very familiar with the extensive conservation and education programs offered at Royal Botanical Gardens, it is important to understand what is happening from a national perspective. Since April 2003, I have consulted with professional botanists, educators, administrators, and volunteers at various Canadian botanical gardens and arboreta. We are examining plant conservation and education programs and discussing what information, educational resources, training, and networking are needed to enhance plant conservation and biodiversity education. While each institution is different, many common needs have been identified. I am beginning to implement a number of the valuable suggestions for expanding plant conservation and biodiversity education.

I am pleased with the enthusiastic support for this project and the genuine interest in becoming more involved in conservation efforts. Canadian botanical gardens and arboreta host about 3.5 million visitors a year, and deliver educational programs to about 500,000 people. I am convinced that collectively, botanical gardens and arboreta in Canada and worldwide can make significant contributions to the conservation of international biodiversity. ✨

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Learn more on-line

www.bgci.org.uk

www.rbg.ca/cbcn

www.investinginnature.org

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