

## The Wild Plant Gardens at the Royal British Columbia Museum

British Columbia is home to many wonderful and interesting plants. The Native Plant Gardens surrounding the Royal British Columbia Museum and Provincial Archives contain a collection of living specimens that beautify the grounds and provide a setting for interpretive programs in plant identification, use and ecology. The specimens also supply material for botanical research. This outdoor display adds a living dimension to the natural history exhibits in the Museum's galleries.

The Native Plant Garden was established when the Museum moved into its present location in 1968. Museum botanists collected plants from around the province for the gardens.

British Columbia has great contrasts in climate and vegetation. In our gardens, many of the plants are grown in beds from three vegetation zones in British Columbia:

**Coast Forest Zone:** Dense coniferous forest stretches along the Pacific Coast, Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Islands. The climate is wet and mild. The forest contains Western Red-cedar (*Thuja plicata*), Western Hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). Below the trees grow Salal (*Gaultheria shallon*), Sword-fern (*Polystichum munitum*), Evergreen Huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*) and Maiden-hair Fern (*Adiantum pedatum*).

**Dry Interior Zone:** South central British Columbia lies in the rain-shadow of the mountains. The climate is very dry and hot in the summer, and cold in the winter. The vegetation varies from dry Douglas-fir and Ponderosa Pine forests, to grasslands of Bluebunch Wheatgrass (*Agropyron spicatum*) and Idaho Fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*), to semi-desert shrublands with Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), Rabbit Brush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*) and Prickly Pear Cactus (*Opuntia fragilis*).

**Alpine Zone:** At high elevations in the mountains, the climate is too cold and the growing season too short for forest to grow. Here the vegetation consists of low-growing heathers (*Phyllodoce* and *Cassiope*), Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*) and colourful meadow herbs such as Spreading Phlox (*Phlox diffusa*) and Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*).

Plants from specialized habitats grow in several garden beds:

**Camas Bed:** Two kinds of camas, the Common Camas (*Camassia quamash*) and the Great Camas (*Camassia leichtlinii*) grow in the full sun in deep humus soil.

**Sand Dune Bed:** Here are plants of dry shifting sand dunes and the upper seashore. Dune Wild Ryegrass (*Elymus mollis*), Beach Pea (*Lathyrus japonicus*) and Beach Sage (*Artemisia suksdorfii*) spread over the surface and bind the sand.

**Wetland Bed:** Peatbogs, marshes and springs are soggy throughout much of the year. Labrador Tea (*Ledum groenlandicum*), Bog Laurel (*Kalmia polifolia*) and Bog Orchid (*Habenaria dilatata*) thrive in such habitats.

**Use By People**

Aboriginal people of British Columbia used plants for many purposes. Camas bulbs were a staple food of the Salish peoples of southern Vancouver Island. Natives and European pioneers throughout British Columbia steeped the young leaves of Labrador Tea for an aromatic tea. Along the coast, Western Red-cedar furnished easy-to-split planks to build rot-resistant houses. Skilled Aboriginal weavers created baskets, mats and clothing from Red-cedar bark.

Today we use native plants in gardens and landscaping. For example, Tall Oregon Grape (*Berberis aquifolium*) graces many plantings around public buildings. Brightly coloured, Red-flowering Currant (*Ribes sanguineum*) is a favourite shrub in west coast gardens.

**A Living Collection**

Like the artifacts in the Museum, the plants you see in the Gardens belong to the Museum's collection. The place from which each plant came, the plant's name, its location in the Gardens and its reference number are recorded on cards and in computer data files.

The Museum maintains the beds and plants on a regular basis, cultivating the soil, watering, mulching and pruning. Once a week we check for diseases or pests and treat the affected plants to keep them in top shape. We maintain records of the treatments and of the yearly growth cycles of many plants.

Richard Hebda, Botany

R.T. Ogilvie, Botany

For Additional Reading:

Kruckeberg, A.R. 1982. Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest. Douglas and McIntyre, Victoria.

Province of British Columbia  
Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services

