

FRIENDS OF DOMINION BROOK PARK

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W.T. Macoun, Unsung Canadian Hero

William Tyrrell Macoun was Dominion Horticulturist and the architect of the Dominion Experimental Farm, Saanichton Station in 1912.



He drew up very detailed plans for the entire 120 acre site which included an Arboretum on the west side of East Saanich Road where some of the earliest plantings still survive and the Park which contains identifiable specimens from the first shipments of 1913 and 1914.

W.T. Macoun (1869-1933) is an unsung hero of our horticultural past who had a significant impact on our gardens, orchards and public landscapes. As Dominion Horticulturist at the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa from 1910 to his death in 1933, he was a prime mover on the Canadian horticultural scene. Armed with a strong sense of horticultural mission, Macoun was a prolific writer, a disciplined plant breeder and a tireless promoter of a number of horticultural movements and philosophies.

Horticulture at this time was often characterized as the handmaiden of agriculture, which itself was defined as the main pillar of Canada's wealth. Much was at stake in advancing agriculture and horticulture in the late nineteenth century: settling the West, making the country fruitful and prosperous, building the nation.

Macoun was no stranger to nation building through agriculture and horticulture. He was the son of a famous nation builder, John Macoun, who immigrated to Canada from Ireland in 1850. A self-taught botanist, John rose from the position of village schoolteacher to become Dominion Botanist of the Geological Survey of Canada. His opinions helped confirm the route of the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway through the prairie grasslands. William often accompanied his father on collecting trips until he joined the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa in 1888 two years after its inception.

What else do we know about Macoun? He had two daughters and a wife who died young. He loved poetry and collected reams of it and on occasion could be heard declaiming poetry as he walked through the various experimental stations. He was tall, strong and active and a great field naturalist. He was not college trained but as one of his contemporaries noted, "His was the training of an able parent and the university of nature, coupled with a keen and observant mind, a retentive memory and an undaunted power of determination"

Annual General Meeting, April 22, 2009

The 8th Annual General Meeting of the Friends of Dominion Brook Park Society will be held on Wednesday, April 22 at 7:30 pm at the Pavilion, Centre for Plant Health, 8801 East Saanich Road.

Join us in comparing the accomplishments of 2008 with a photo essay of the early days at the Park; and learn of the extensive plans for returning the Park to its previous grandeur.

Refreshments provided after a brief meeting.

Macoun began his career at the age of 19 at the Central Experimental Farm as the first Director's assistant mostly doing manual labour. His first serious assignment was to pursue apple breeding. Five years after beginning at CEF, he was re-appointed as assistant to the director with additional duties as foreman of forestry. Two years later, he was placed in charge of the Arboretum and Botanic Garden. After that he steadily rose through the CEF hierarchy and in 1898 he was appointed Horticulturist to the CEF in Ottawa and Curator of the Arboretum and Botanic Garden. In 1910, at the age of forty-one, Macoun was made Dominion Horticulturist responsible for supervising the horticultural work of the entire Experimental Farms System which eventually numbered 27 stations across Canada.



The official residence with W.T. and his daughter, Pat.

Breeding and introducing cold climate plants, trees, fruits and vegetables was one of the top priorities for the Experimental Farm System. Macoun oversaw most of the hybridizing work for fruit, vegetables, trees, shrubs and ornamental plants. Under Macoun's direction, horticultural techniques such as shipping, storage, cultivation and fertilizing were addressed by the CEF's Horticultural Division. Macoun personally focused on apple breeding and improvement although he also made major advances in potato breeding. He himself originated the Melba, Joyce, Hume, Lobo and Linda apples. There is an apple named after Macoun but it would be considered a heritage variety.



Isabella Preston

After the First World War, Macoun wanted to expand the range of ornamentals suited to our various climate zones. Searching for someone to undertake the experimental work, he did an exceptional thing for his time. In 1920 he hired a woman, Isabella Preston, for this position. Her long and illustrious career encompassed breeding roses, Siberian iris, crabapples trees and lilies. Testing and breeding new varieties of ornamental plants for home gardens became one of the Horticultural Division's main activities. Macoun believed that the beautifying of home surroundings does much to make a contented and happy people.

Macoun was also involved in one of the most important horticultural programs of his day – plant registration. The Canadian Horticultural Council felt plant registration promoted quality horticulture in Canada as well as ensuring a fair monetary reward for the hybridists' work and protection for consumers.

Macoun took his duty to society seriously. His memberships read like a Who's Who of Ottawa and of the major North American horticultural, fruit growers and civic improvement associations of the day. He lent his support to the vacant-lot garden movement. A man ahead of his time.

Macoun wrote for general audiences as well as professional horticulturists, scientists and academics. He wrote on every conceivable horticultural topic in all the important magazines of his day. He was a tireless lecturer. Not surprisingly, this most gregarious of men was called an "indefatigable platform man". His lectures were praised as major vehicles for widely spreading the knowledge of horticulture to groups across Canada and North America. His writing, speaking, supervising and hands-on work had the immediate result of a veritable shower of honours and medals throughout his life from Europe, Canada and the United States.



W.T. Macoun Memorial Garden, ca. 1940

Macoun was an important voice and certainly one of the most influential enablers in our horticultural history. We are privileged to share a small portion of his life's work in Dominion Brook Park.

(excerpted from *Creating the Garden of Canada: W.T. Macoun and the Gospel of Horticulture*, by Edwinna von Baeyer)

The Dominion Experimental Farm Featured at Sidney Museum

A new photo exhibit of almost 100 years of the Dominion Experimental Farm and Park is now on permanent display at the Sidney Museum, downstairs in the old Post Office building on Beacon Avenue.

Be sure to sign the Visitor's Book saying you came to see the display !



Pine Trees Removed From Upper Pond Reservoir

The reservoir, shown here in 1951, was created as part of a fire prevention plan before there were waterlines into the area. There were detailed drawings for plantings to surround the pond, some of which still exist among the brambles and overgrown shrubs - including a selection of old roses.



Photo courtesy Sidney Museum and Archive

This past winter, after consultation with the Centre for Plant Health Facilities Manager and arborists from BC Hydro and the District of North Saanich, it was determined that the lodgepole pines located between the Upper Pond and East Saanich Road posed a threat to hydro lines and to the integrity of the west side of the reservoir. For this reason it was agreed that the pines be reduced to the height of the hydro primary lines. During heavy winds one of the pine's root mass was observed to cause bulging of the reservoir wall. This pine was removed.

As a first step in the overall comprehensive plan for ravine and pond restoration, the Friends, the District and the Centre will have to undertake repairs to stop the leakage which occurs during the winter months. The spillage impacts the proposed stairs and pathways into the ravine. With the additional help of volunteer expertise in the community, we hope to complete the first step this summer.



Recent Events

Volunteer Recognition Tea at the North Saanich Municipal Hall, February 21.
Board members in attendance: Joan Gibb, Springfield Harrison, Sheila Irving, Ed Johnson and Edna Ralston.

Upcoming Work Parties April 1

The regular Wednesday morning work party will begin its 2009 season on April 1. We will meet at the picnic shelter at 9am to enjoy a coffee and muffin supplied by the District while we discuss the program for the next season. Come prepared to work. Bring able-bodied friends who would like to join our merry band of stalwarts.

Special Spring Cleanup on Saturday April 18

This special spring two hour work party to augment the regular volunteer fieldwork program has become a semi-annual event. It provides an opportunity for society members, other community groups and individuals to contribute their time and effort towards this magnificent community asset.

All and any volunteers will be welcome. Jobs to suit every level of activity. Bring your favourite rake. We meet at the Park entrance on East Saanich Road at 9:30 am. Refreshments provided by the District of North Saanich. In case of inclement weather (it snowed last year) we'll regroup on April 25. **For further information on all events contact Joan Gibb at 656-4185 or gibbjb@shaw.ca.**

This is a great way to get to know the intimate details of the park and enjoy the comradery among the volunteers.



Featured Plant

Chionodoxa Luciliae (Glory of the Snow)

The annual early spring carpet of spectacular tiny blue flowers beneath the deciduous trees in the meadow above the picnic shelter are worth a special visit to the Park. They appear in mid-March and last about three weeks. They are related to Scilla and are a small bulbous perennial from the open mountainsides and forests of Crete, W. Turkey and Cyprus.

They self-seed freely, tolerate summer drought, and are one of the earliest flowers of spring. The current naming preference among taxonomists is *Chionodoxa forbesii*.



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For more information on Dominion Brook Park, please visit http://www.pennywhistle.ca/Dominion_Brook_Park.htm
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