

Dominion Brook Park Rehabilitation – The First Ten Years

This summer marks the tenth season that the Friends of Dominion Brook Park volunteers have been working to rehabilitate this unique community park, and the results of their labours have made a spectacular improvement in its appearance.

It was 1912 when the Federal Department of Agriculture created the 120 acre Dominion Experimental Farm to provide support to Vancouver Island farmers. At the time, 12 acres were set aside for a public display garden. Creative landscaping and exotic plantings from around the world, tended over the decades by farm staff, soon created a world class horticultural showplace.

However in the early 1980's severe budget cuts and changing priorities forced the station (now the Centre for Plant Health) to cease maintenance, and the park was essentially abandoned to grow wild. It soon became a weed choked and overgrown derelict. No government funds were available for restoration.

In 1999 an ad hoc group of local citizens gathered to consider the creation of a non-profit society of volunteers and supporters – the Friends of Dominion Brook Park – to organize the Park's rehabilitation. With the enthusiastic support of the North Saanich municipality and the federal Station staff, things began to rapidly take shape. Formerly nameless, the Park achieved its official name; a constitution and bylaws were drawn up; a long term property lease was arranged, and status as a charitable society was achieved. A stewardship agreement was drawn up clarifying responsibilities for issues such as danger trees, structures, lawn mowing, drainage, debris removal, etc. between the municipality (management authority), the federal government (owners of the land) and the Friends Society (fieldwork, planning, fund raising, etc). It thus became by far the largest and most complex park in the District of North Saanich, requiring expertise, money, and lots of hard work. A regular newsletter was initiated.

Finally, on April 18th 2001, the first small volunteer work party took to the field. They had no tools or other equipment, and had to bring their own gloves, secateurs, rakes, and other gardening tools from home. They were initially awed by the formidable task that faced them of clearing overgrown ivy and blackberry vines, unpruned plantings, and invasive noxious weeds of all kinds. Where to start? Clearing and removal of tons of plant debris was the first order of the day, and this would be the primary job for the next few years. That first summer mountains of extraneous plant debris had to be man-hauled on tarpaulins across the park to be stockpiled for removal by the municipality. Since most of the volunteers were seniors this tough work took its toll.

Over the next few years the work situation improved steadily. In year two a volunteer provided his lawn tractor for debris



BeforeAfter

hauling; tools were acquired; a sturdy wagon for debris hauling was donated by the station; amazing cut granite walls and stairs were revealed as ivy was removed; the first of several work parties of young inmates from William Head Penitentiary were assigned to clearing of dense overgrowth in the ravine; and the numbers of Society membership increased steadily.

Other achievements in the early years included obtaining our own ancient tractor for hauling debris and mulch; a topographic survey of the park as the basis for detailed development planning, an information kiosk at the main entrance for maps and notices was designed and built by a volunteer; and the park was adopted to provide fieldwork experience for students in the Camosun College Horticultural Technician program.

Other work included tall tree pruning by professional arborists (much of this work donated); initial clearing and cleanup of the sunken garden; a watercourse hydrology and erosion control assessment for the ravine creek (Dominion Brook) was completed; the unattractive chain link fence at the entrance terrace was replaced with a rustic split rail cedar fence; and a hard surface pathway from the entrance down into the main park was built.

Fieldwork included a program of weeding, edging, and mulching of the north boundary gardens and island beds (this was done twice – in total over 80 yards of mulch has been distributed); a cleanup of the main pond including removal of several unsightly willow and alder trees; tables and benches in the picnic area were repaired and sanded; the picnic shelter hut was refurbished and repainted; a policy for park memorial benches and trees was established; several large danger trees were removed; and low shrubs were planted on the escarpment below the entrance terrace for erosion control.

During this time considerable effort was dedicated to identifying and cataloguing hundreds of the remaining imported plantings, some with the assistance of the Master Gardeners Association; long term overall park design concepts were drawn up for future rehabilitation planning; and a major reconstruction of the sunken garden including cleaning and repairing of its small pond and outflow creek stonework, plus creative replanting of the garden. Other notable improvements include the long awaited installation of two high pressure water lines for irrigation (the lush green plants are really displaying their gratitude); major drainage repair in the upper fields; and the first significant new planting program in several parts of the Park since rehabilitation began with the addition of 85 shrubs and trees.

The first stage of a three part major redevelopment for the Ravine and its significant Rhododendron collection was completed in 2010. We are going forward with Phase 2, a multi-year commitment to restore the Ravine to its former glory.

After ten years, the willing and enthusiastic hard work of our marvellous volunteers, together with the support of the municipal parks and federal station staff, has brought about an astonishing resurrection of this former horticultural showplace. Recognition awards have been received from the Hallmark Society of Victoria, the Heritage Society of B.C., and the Provincial Capital Commission.

During this period the park has been newly discovered by many local citizens and has become a popular and well visited community amenity for relaxing, picnicking, dog walking, and social events. All new visitors are amazed by the size, creative landscaping, and sheer beauty of this old park. It truly is “the Jewel of the Peninsula”.

ON THE FLAVOUR TRAIL AGAIN

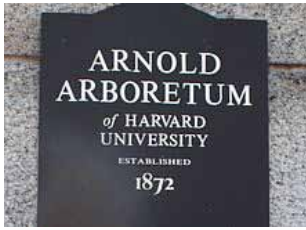
Dominion Brook Park is once again participating in the North Saanich Flavour Trail event. We will be hosting guided tours on August 21 at 10, 11 and 12 noon leaving from the Kiosk on East Saanich Road. Look for the signage.



The tour ends at the picnic tables with coffee/tea and cookies. Check out our Ravine Restoration display and chat with Board members about happenings at the Park.

The Centre for Plant Health is open to the public on August 21 for one hour tours at 9, 10, 11 and 12 across from the Park. Learn about the Centre then stroll through historic Dominion Brook Park and join us for refreshments courtesy of North Saanich.

ARNOLD ARBORETUM



One of the early suppliers to the Dominion Experimental Farm and Park in 1913 was the already famous Arnold Arboretum in Boston, Massachusetts.

It was founded in 1872 when the President and Fellows of Harvard College became trustees of a portion of the estate of James Arnold (1781-1868). Arnold, a New Bedford, Massachusetts, whaling merchant, specified that a portion of his estate was to be used for "...the promotion of Agricultural or Horticultural improvements" With the addition of land from the Bussey estate (another donation of land for agricultural purposes) the Arnold Arboretum was created. The historical mission of the Arnold Arboretum was to increase knowledge of woody plants through research and to disseminate this knowledge through education - and it continues today.

Charles Sprague Sargent (that Sargentii) was appointed Director and together with landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, he developed the road and pathway system and delineated the collection areas by family and genus. Olmsted was the architect of Central Park in New York City and for a local connection, he designed the Uplands area of Victoria in 1907 for the developers who purchased the land for \$275,000.



Arnold Arboretum



R. Strigillosum

The Dominion Experimental Farm in Ottawa ordered 148 different species from AA in 1913.

Among this selection were a great number of plants attributed to Ernest 'Chinese' Wilson, the most famous of plant hunters and to William Purdom, lesser known but still an important contributor to specimens now grown throughout the world.

Many of these plants no longer exist in the Park but we have been able to identify a few survivors. There were 73 Rhodos grown from seed collected by Wilson in Western China. Unfortunately, few remain but we do know the R. Strigillosum is one of the original shipment. It grows on the south side of the Pond edge and is the earliest to bloom in March with brilliant red trusses.

ELDER COLLEGE

Dominion Brook Park will be taking part in a new venture for the area entitled **Elder College** through the Panorama Recreation Centre. It offers general interest courses to adults 50 years or better at low cost. The volunteer instructors are enthusiastic supporters about their subjects ranging from art, language, travel, science and discussions.

There will be a tour and talk in the Park on September 30 at 10:30am. Contact the following for further information: www.panoramarecreation.ca or telephone 250.656.7271.



WESTIE WALK



One of the many activities that took place in the Park was the 2011 Victoria and Vancouver Island Westie Walk. A group of proud owners of Highland Westies got together for an outing with their cherished pets to raise awareness and support for Westie Rescue of Canada. This year had over 60 dogs and owners along with a piper to lead them to the picnic area for a spot of lunch. They have already planned for next year with a gathering on May 6, 2012. You may contact them at: www.westhighlandwhiteterrierclubofwesterncanada.com.

It's not our only 'pet extravaganza'. The Blessing of the Basset Hounds is also an annual event at the Park.

MULCH, MULCH AND MORE MULCH!

Have you ever seen 50 yards of mulch and know that it must be distributed over an 11 acre site?
Quite intimidating!



However, with assistance from the District and Centre for Plant Health with their machinery and an amazing team of 24 volunteers on the first day, the job was done in two, two hour sessions. The old adage, "many hands make light work" really does apply.

This was just the first of two applications to help diminish the constant supply of weeds and allow us to concentrate on other jobs and for moisture retention in the driest months of year. We have ordered

another 30 yards to complete the Island Beds and North Border which will take place later in the season.



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For more information on Dominion Brook Park, please visit <http://www.dominionbrookpark.ca>
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