

**ROCK
GARDEN
RENO**

Royal Botanical Gardens' Oldest Feature Renewed

WRITTEN BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT | PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS

In May 2016 the Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG) at the border of Hamilton and Burlington opened its renovated Rock Garden. New plantings, fully accessible paths and a beautiful Visitor Centre overlooking the garden have rejuvenated the historic property.





▲ The new Visitor Centre perches on the edge of the bowl that cradles the newly named David Braley & Nancy Gordon Rock Garden.

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The Visitor Centre is the new entrance to the Rock Garden, now called the David Braley & Nancy Gordon Rock Garden after lead donors, long-time supporters and volunteers with the RBG. The building's roof sweeps dramatically like a curved leaf. Inside is a conference facility that can hold 130 people, and a restaurant, while the outdoor patio and lookout deck give a

view toward the old Tea House on the opposite slope of the Rock Garden.

Young formal plantings surround the centre, but from this point you don't see much of the old garden. Amid the sounds of traffic, you can hear water flowing. Paths lead you down the slope into the Rock Garden itself.

A former gravel pit on the Niagara Escarpment, the garden was constructed between 1929 and 1932. As the earliest part of what became the RBG, the Rock Garden

has some old plant specimens that are still cherished today. The recent renovation of the garden included keeping some of the older parts of the garden.

Jon Peter, curator and plant records manager, indicates the very first acquisition, in 1930, a Japanese cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica*, the national tree of Japan. New plants were the selection of Janet Rosenberg Studios, a Toronto landscape architecture firm,

one of the biggest in Canada.

The neighbouring Beauty Bush, *Kolkwitzia amabilis*, is another original planting from the 1930s. When in bloom, this tree stops traffic in whichever garden it's located.

The second plant acquired for the garden, also in 1930, was the Bald Cypress, *Taxodium distichum*. Two specimens still thrive in the sheltered microclimate of the Rock Garden bowl. "A



▲ The magnificent design of the Visitor Centre suggests a sheltering curved leaf held up by sticks.

deciduous conifer, it drops its leaves in the fall,” explains Jon.

Why the Renovation

Part of the RBG’s mission is to inspire and nurture a commitment to the environment. The renovation aimed to respect the heritage of the old garden but move to more sustainable garden designs and management. Instead of the labour-intensive planting and lifting of more than 150,000 bulbs and annuals each

year, the new garden was designed to use less water, less upheaval of the soil and produce less plant waste.

The new garden “incorporates a best-practices approach to plant selection, design and management, including pollinator-friendly plants, species native to Ontario, and a broad representation of drought-tolerant perennials that provide wide sweeps of colour and texture



► This Japanese cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica*, was the very first acquisition of the Rock Garden in 1930. Blossoms of an old Beauty Bush are visible in the background.



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► Three of the finest and largest Manchurian maple trees in Canada, surrounded by brown mulch.



▲ Jon Peter, curator and plant records manager, with a 1959 acquisition, the Japanese dogwood or Kousa dogwood, in stupendous bloom.



◀ From the outdoor patio of the Visitor Centre there's a good view of the Tea House across the bowl of the Rock Garden.



▲ This old stairway has been retained in the redesign but the new handrail increases safety. This view was used for the cover photo of *Escarpment Views*, Spring 2010.

throughout the seasons,” states RBG information.

Jon adds more specific details by pointing out “One big reason for the renovation was the leaky waterways caused by two overgrown willows. The waterfall is always popular. The old one was retained but some parts of it were reinforced.”

Along the walkway to the Tea House, now renamed Garden House, at the edge of the garden are mostly native species of trees and shrubs, acting as a transition space to the natural area beyond the fence.

“The architects used a broad sweeping landscape

design as much for texture contrast as colour,” says Jon.

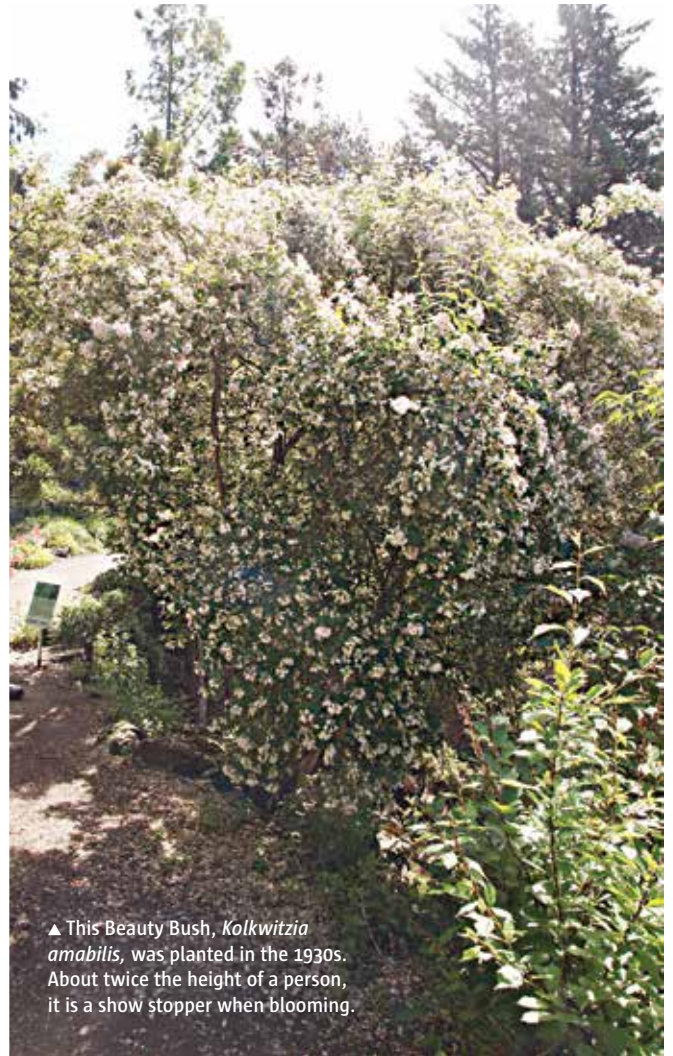
“There’s a long season of interest. I think this garden is at its best in the fall.”

Taking another path to the top of the bowl, it’s possible to enjoy several different vantage points to the whole garden below from the several lookouts. New fully accessible paths with gradual grades now make it possible to take strollers and wheelchairs easily throughout the garden.

Finest Specimens

“There are a lot of interesting plants from Japan,” adds Jon, “many of them unique. RBG has tried to represent what’s

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▲ This Beauty Bush, *Kolkwitzia amabilis*, was planted in the 1930s. About twice the height of a person, it is a show stopper when blooming.



◀ Two stately Bald Cypress, *Taxodium distichum*, planted in 1930, now tower to grand heights. Dropping its leaves in the fall, it puts out new coniferous growth each spring. The Visitor Centre can be seen in the background.



◀ The deliberately rough alignment of rocks in the Dalglish courtyard provides space for Alpine plants.

new in the horticultural world.” Returning to the Visitor Centre, Jon stops at some mighty trees surrounded by lawn, identifying them as Manchurian maple, with a trifoliate leaf, unlike a Canadian maple.

“These are three of the finest specimens you’ll see in Canada,” he declares. They were grown here from seed in 1973 and are likely the largest of their kind in Canada.

Outside a side door of the Visitor Centre is a new walled area, called The Dalglish

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Family Courtyard after other significant benefactors of the RBG. It's an intimate space with a water fountain; alpine plants are intended to grow in crevices of the rock walls.

As curator and plant records manager, Jon has a lot to do. Of the original garden, about 20,000 plants remain. With the renewed design, there are 143,800 individual

plants, forming 2,411 species. From 1930, the first year that plant records were kept at RBG, 39 accessions are still alive and growing well. Of the Rock Garden,



Jon declares “It’s our oldest and most precious site.”

In 2010, the old Rock Garden was featured extensively in this magazine when it was

called Escarpment Views.

*This feature is available to view on the website www.NEViews.ca as the cover story for Spring 2010 under Magazine – Back Issues. **NEV***

▼ A waterfall down the side of the Rock Garden bowl courses into a waterway that winds through the centre of the garden. New lights and a sound system have been added for more interest in the dark hours.

