

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Botanical dream

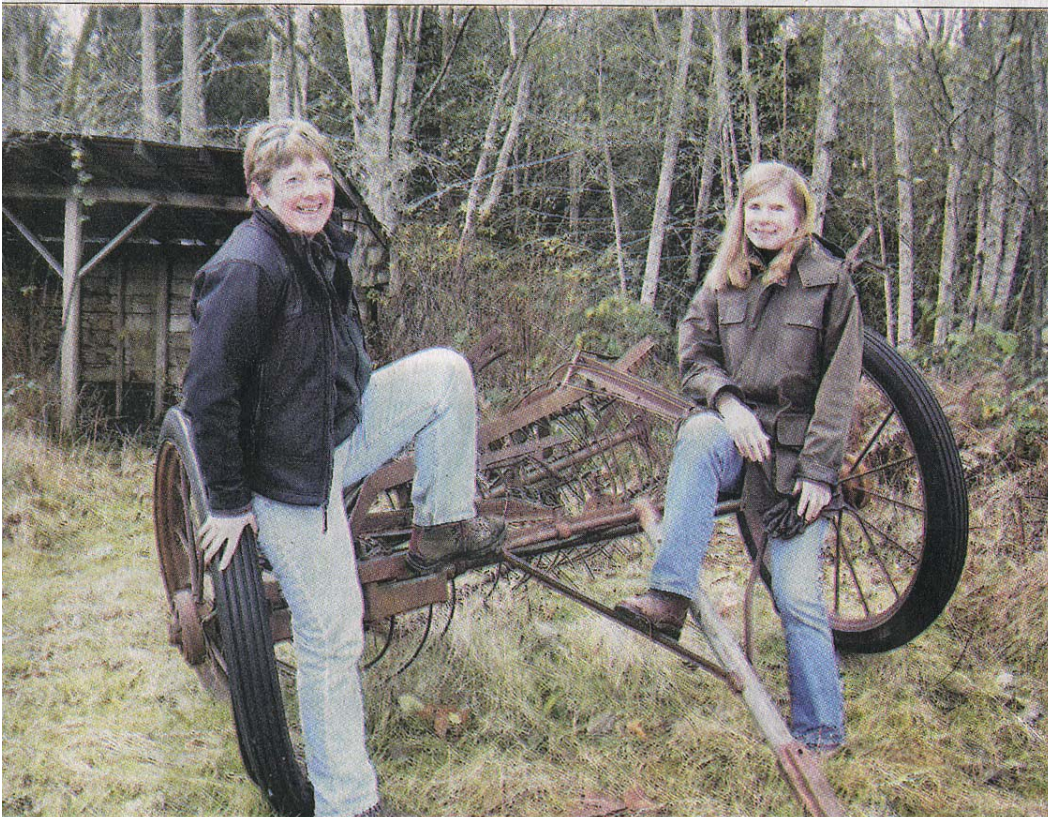
Sunshine Coast moves ahead with plans to build a botanical garden

By Steve Whysall, Vancouver Sun
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There's a lot of excitement today in the gardening community of Sechelt on the Sunshine Coast as final preparations are made for a gala Saturday at the local seniors' centre to raise money to build a classical botanical garden.

The goal is to raise \$870,000 to buy 16 hectares (40 acres) of agricultural land just outside town in the Wakefield Creek area at 5941 Mason Road.

Another \$730,000 will be needed to pay for new buildings and initial start-up cost of running the garden.



Mary Blockberger (left), treasurer of the Sunshine Coast Botanical Garden, and Lori Pickering, president, on the 16-hectare garden site on Mason Road in Sechelt. The society is in the process of raising \$1.6 million to buy the land and build the botanical garden.

It's an ambitious plan, but the Sunshine Coast Botanical Garden Society -- a group set up in 2002 by avid local gardeners -- has done its homework and is confident that the idea is not just a pipe dream.

It commissioned a 34-page feasibility study from Lees and Associates, a top Vancouver firm of landscape architects, with additional consultation from Doug Justice, curator of collections at the University of B.C. Botanical Garden, and soil expert Bill Herman, of Richmond.

Lees and Associates concluded that "it is timely and appropriate to promote a facility on the Sunshine Coast that will be a horticultural, artistic and cultural catalyst for the region and an attractive destination for both tourists and area residents."

Justice was impressed with the site and said it had "so many possibilities. "

And although it didn't have many commonplace West Coast trees such as Douglas fir, cedar and arbutus, Justice noted that it had some notable deciduous native specimens such as the bigleaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*), Scouler's willow (*Salix scouleriana*) and quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*).

Soil specialist Bill Herman found that the soil on the site was rich in silt, but deficient in organic matter. But he said this could be easily remedied by adding compost, dolomite lime and fertilizer to improve its fertility and workability.

The land is flat, contains three irrigation ponds, which have become habitat for wildlife, and is bordered on three sides by a turf farm, hobby farm and municipal works yard.

The idea is to create a place of "uncommon beauty" for all to enjoy, from young people to seniors.

The botanical society also wants it to be a place for weddings, family celebrations and community events. It believes all of this can be achieved without disturbing the site's natural beauty or spoiling it as a setting where people can find solitude, relaxation and inspiration.

But one of the main goals is for the new garden to become an "economic generator" by attracting tourists and being "a boon to the hospitality industry, horticultural businesses and the retail nursery trade."

The site off Mason Road was at one time a tree nursery owned for more than 30 years by John Murray, who is better known in Vancouver as the former owner of Murray's Nursery in Southlands.

When the property came up for sale last January, the botanical garden society immediately recognized it as the ideal location for the botanical garden.

Unfortunately, the society didn't have any money to buy the land, so a friend of the group bought it and offered to carry the loan interest-free until the funds were available. The society has until June of next year to raise the money.

Lori Pickering, society president, says the response so far from the community has been enthusiastic.

"We have support not only from gardeners but from the community as a whole.

"They see the value that a botanical garden will have in connecting people to plants and bring people to the area. We know it will add significantly to the area's artistic and cultural richness."

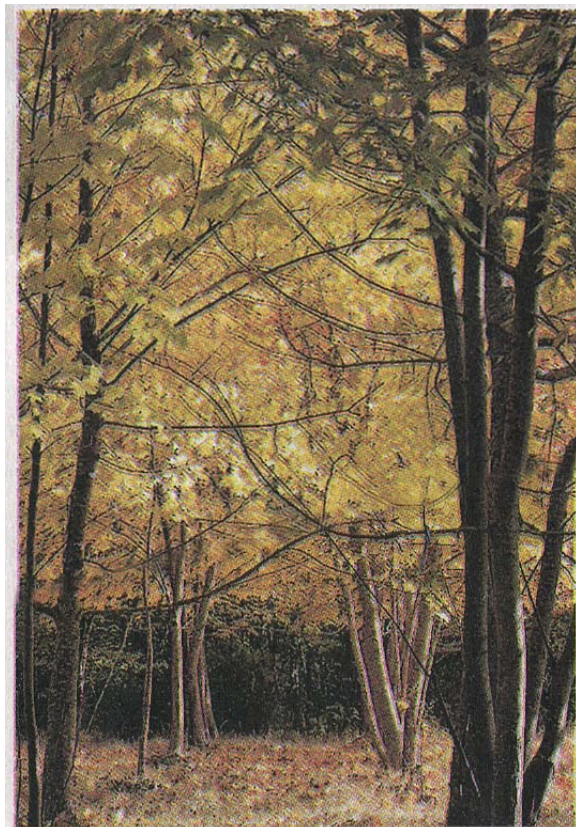
Paddy Wales, botanical photographer, author and one of the founding members of the society, says the project offers exciting educational opportunities.

"I imagine a generation of school children growing up to know where their food comes from and with some skills to grow their own. There's no better way to learn than hands-on."

Mary Blockberger, society treasurer, says the Mason Road property seems to have "a magical effect" on visitors.

"They come on tours, sometimes not knowing much about what we're trying to create, and leave absolutely committed to the project.

"The existing specimen trees, the incredible diversity of wildlife and the tranquillity of the surroundings captivate people and their imaginations."



The land set aside for the new Sunshine Coast Botanical Garden contains an impressive variety of deciduous trees including quaking aspen and Scouler's willows.

Over the past six years (even though it didn't have a garden to validate its title) the botanical garden society has nevertheless been busy organizing events -- more than 20 workshops, six festivals and numerous lectures and plant sales. Its membership has also been growing and today totals more than 500.

But the main focus is to acquire the land and develop the site. A design has been drawn up and work parties are waiting in the wings to get started on clearing blackberry and other scrub overgrowth.

For more information about the project go to www.coastbotanicalgarden.org. Or contact Lori Pickering at 604-883-0079 or at lori@jurassicplantsnursery.com.

BOTANICAL DEFINITION

When the Sunshine Coast Botanical Garden Society decided to build a botanical garden it had to decide what kind of garden it wanted.

It settled on a "classic multi-purpose garden," which is different from a university garden or conservation garden or ornamental garden.

In reaching its decision, the society considered various categories of botanical garden as defined by British experts Peter Wyse Jackson and Lucy Sutherland in their report, International Agenda for Botanic Gardens in Conservation.

They describe a classic, multi-purpose garden as "institutions with a broad range of activities in horticultural training, research, particularly in taxonomy, with associated herbaria and laboratories, public education and amenities."

The Sunshine Coast Botanical Garden's aim is to become a "learning lab" for school children and youth, "helping to raise a generation that will know how to care for the Earth."

The garden will also become a showcase for plants that are native to the West Coast, from northern California to Alaska.

Other goals are to make it a place to learn about ecosystems, organic gardening, conservation, sustainable food production, plant-related arts and crafts, garden design and water-wise gardening.

The outdoor space at the garden will also be used for meetings, horticultural shows and seasonal festivals.

The garden society estimates the first-year attendance will be 8,500, rising to 22,110 after 15 years. However, it will need an annual subsidy to operate, even though it is expected to generate revenues in excess of \$200,000 after 10 years.

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