

The Value of Gardens, Part 2, May 13, 2019

The ferry ride from Port Angeles to Victoria took about 90 minutes. We sat with our new friends from the ship talking about the day ahead.

Tom and I would disembark from the ferry and board one of the motor coaches headed for Butchart Gardens, a trip we had been anticipating for months. We love gardens and have fond memories of garden tours we took in historic Charleston, South Carolina years ago. Our friends, on the other hand, had hired a private driver for the day, claiming they were not “garden people.” They counted on their driver to show them the best places to visit.

The bus trip lasted another 40 minutes. We were trapped with a most talkative driver/guide who interspersed tidbits of local lore with weak jokes and silly comments. These attempts at humor elicited more groans than laughs. For example, the bus at one point slowly climbed a hill the driver called “roller coaster hill,” because going back down it was frightening, and everyone on the bus would need to raise their arms and holler as we descended on the way back to the ferry, pretending we were on a roller coaster. Seriously.

Three hours after leaving the ship, we finally arrived at Butchart Gardens. Before the driver let us escape, we were reminded to be back by 2:45 in order to make the last ferry back to Port Angeles, which left at 4 PM. We would have a mere three hours to explore the most famous garden in all of the Western Hemisphere.

Victoria was actually home to several gardens. Because of the mild climate, plants grow nearly year-round in a constantly changing array of color and form. Butchart Gardens was the largest and most popular of all the gardens, and it is still operated by the Butchart Family after over 100 years in existence.

As we presented our tickets and walked through the gate, we were greeted by beds of tulips, showing off in striking rows grouped by colors ranging from brilliant white to nearly black and many colors in between. Individuals seemed to stand at attention at the ends of their long, graceful stems, ready to greet visitors. The stresses of the trip by bus and ferry, complete with having to go through Customs melted away when I looked upon the tulips.

Consulting our garden map and guide, we chose to make the Sunken Garden our first stop. The abandoned quarry that now housed this centerpiece garden was what inspired Jenny Butchart to begin her garden. The mental picture of those first two lone plants placed in an ugly hole in the earth has been transformed to the inviting space you see in the picture below.

Later came the Mediterranean, Japanese, Rose, and Italian Gardens. The Butchart Family traveled the world bringing back plants from far off places to place in the gardens.

Besides the mid-May show of tulips, my favorite was the Japanese Garden. There is something special about the peaceful arrangement of plants, water features, rocks, and small, gracefully curved bridges. Being in a Japanese garden has an immediate calming effect on me. I was reminded of the Japanese

Garden I used to visit in Birmingham, Alabama, and was thankful to be here in British Columbia looking at one even more beautiful.

We followed the map back through the formal and stately Italian Garden, which was where we found the deep purplish tulips that were nearly black. It was too early for the roses, and we were hungry. We headed for the Blue Poppy Restaurant to redeem our lunch vouchers.

Imagine our surprise when we saw our friends from the ship sitting there eating lunch. We got our food and joined them, curious to know what they were doing here, since they said they were not “garden people.” Their driver had told them that if they had only one day to spend in Victoria, the place they must see was Butchart Gardens. Our friends were not disappointed. After lunch they went back to meet their driver, and we did a bit more exploring. We would compare notes of the day on the ferry trip back to Port Angeles.

British born neurologist and author Oliver Sacks (1933-2015) knew gardens had healing power. In his practice with patients suffering from serious neurological disorders, he regularly used music and nature with great success. You can find an interesting article on Oliver Sacks and the healing power of gardens by Maria Popova, the writer of Brain Pickings, a popular blog.

Now that we are back in New Hampshire, I have been searching for botanical gardens nearby. One that has caught my interest is called Bedrock Gardens in Lee New Hampshire. What first caught my interest in this particular garden was its history. The property was once a dairy farm. The original house is still standing, as is the barn. The gardens have been planted in just over 20 acres of the property.

I am anxiously awaiting the reopening of this garden, which is scheduled for some time in August. It has been closed all this year for relocation of the entrance and parking lot. I am looking forward to becoming a volunteer there. It could be the New Hampshire version of The Penney Farm for me.

Remember “roller coaster hill?” On the bus trip back to the ferry, everyone was in such good spirits after spending the day with nature that we all actually did raise our arms over our heads and holler as the bus descended the hill. Sometimes simple pleasures can be the best.