

IN THE GROW

BY TARA NOLAN

A trip around Vancouver Island reveals a number of public garden jewels amidst old-growth forests

You don't need to have a green thumb to appreciate the incredible gardens that dot British Columbia's Vancouver Island. These lush landscapes benefit from a temperate climate that puts the gardens in a growing zone that's much higher than the rest of the country. This means an earlier and later growing season, and plants that you wouldn't think could flourish in Canada. It's worth exploring the verdant rainforest, as well as a few gardens, to gain an appreciation of what can grow here. There are multiple stops you can choose from on a road trip of the island. Here is a small selection for your must-do list.



THE BRITISH COLUMBIA PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS IN VICTORIA



The Butchart Gardens

This picture-perfect garden really does not necessitate an introduction, as it is often the very reason for visiting Victoria. The focus here is on lively ornamentals and carrying on the legacy of the property's creative founder Jennie Butchart. The Sunken Garden, created in an abandoned quarry, is a shifting rainbow of colour throughout the seasons. Stunning bulb displays in the spring, and the summer-blooming roses and dahlias make it hard to decide exactly when to visit. Your camera will capture frame-worthy shots whenever you happen to go. butchartgardens.com

The Gardens at HCP

(Horticulture Centre of the Pacific) Volunteers, staff and students all help to maintain the various themed gardens on this property with a mission to educate about plants and sustainability. Visitors can learn about drought-tolerant plants, attracting pollinators, plants that grow on a sunny, windy slope, and food production. Plan to stay for a lunch of locally sourced ingredients on the patio at Charlotte & the Quail (charlotteandthequail.ca) and be sure to check out the only outdoor bonsai garden in Western Canada with its 60-odd bonsai trees on display. hcp.ca

Abkhazi Garden

In the middle of an unassuming neighbourhood in Victoria, this heritage garden is a tranquil oasis. Carefully carved around glacial rock, the one-acre grounds are landscaped with Japanese maples, rhododendrons and conifers. Created in 1946 by Peggy Pemberton Carter (who married Prince Nicholas Abkhazi), the land was saved in 2000 by a campaign that prevented a high-density townhouse complex from destroying the grounds. There is also a tea house where you can enjoy refreshments while admiring the gardens. conservancy.bc.ca/featured-projects/abkhazi-garden/

TOP PHOTO BY CANADASTOCK; BOTTOM LEFT PHOTO BY THE BUTCHART GARDENS; BOTTOM MIDDLE AND RIGHT PHOTOS BY TARA NOLAN

Milner Gardens & Woodland

Located in the Parksville-Qualicum Beach area, this garden features both a woodland garden amid an ancient, coastal Douglas fir forest with its indigenous plants, and traditional gardens with an extensive rhododendron collection and other botanical novelties around a heritage house that has hosted members of the royal family. Before heading to the main house overlooking the Strait of Georgia, meander for a bit through those woods. Indoors is also worth a peek. Stay for afternoon tea at the Camellia Tea Room. viu.ca/milnergardens

Kitty Coleman Woodland Gardens

At Kitty Coleman Woodland Garden, you'll feel as though you've stepped onto the set of Jurassic Park. Towering trees, enormous ferns and lush rainforest make you wonder if you'll round a corner and discover a velociraptor. Owner Bryan Zimmerman has lovingly carved this gem out of the bush to create pathways and water features. He's also put together an ocean stone labyrinth and built other structures that are scattered throughout the property. Hopefully Bryan is there to explain the garden to you when you visit. woodlandgardens.ca



PHOTOS: TOP TWO BY TARA NOLAN; BOTTOM BY SARA WINTER

Visit gardensbc.com for a complete directory of gardens you can visit while on Vancouver Island.

OTHER GARDENS TO VISIT

Tofino Botanical Gardens: If you make your way to Tofino, this quirky garden is worth checking out. tbgf.org

Victoria Butterfly Gardens: A great place for kids to explore! butterflygardens.com

The Cowichan Valley Lavender Labyrinth: If you enjoy the scent of lavender, visit the little barn for lavender-infused products. cowichanvalleylavender.com

WHERE TO STAY

Albion Manor was a delightfully quirky B&B that served a delicious breakfast and put us in walking distance of downtown Victoria. albionmanor.com

Crown Mansion Boutique Hotel & Villas provided a relaxing villa where we could prepare our own meals and relax after a day of hiking gardens and forest trails. crownmansion.com



STOPS ALONG THE WAY

Explore Victoria

It's worth a stroll around British Columbia's capital, from the Inner Harbour where you can grab a fresh seafood meal to the downtown streets featuring quaint little shops, restaurants and cafés. tourismvictoria.com

Duncan Farmer's Market

Duncan is a quaint little town located right off the highway with a sizable Saturday market, the perfect place to grab snacks and meals—if you plan on cooking for yourself! duncanfarmersmarket.ca

The Old Country Market in Coombs

I still refer to this place as "Goats on the Roof." Head here to pick up some snacks and fresh produce, and watch the goats munching away on the grassy roof of the market building. oldcountrymarket.com

Cathedral Grove

Take a walk around this ancient forest that includes 800-year-old, majestic, endangered Douglas firs. cathedralgrove.eu