

What I Like to Do In Winter

by Dagmar Baur

Musings of a 'green dream visionary'

Because I'm a gardener in the big city of Toronto, I spend winters indoors pounding away at the computer, scheming, dreaming and waiting for spring—and going stir-crazy. I do, however, have a remedy for my cabin fever: it's called High Park. Every second weekend I trudge out to my Sunday solace—the heart and brains of the park—the greenhouses—where I meet my co-conspirators of the Volunteer Stewardship Program.

Aha, a conspiracy you say. And I say yes, we are conspiring and aspiring to transform High Park to its former glory. We are saving the black oak savannah! We are bringing back the lupines and the Karner blue butterfly, replacing concrete with greenery, caring for small forest or prairie plots while monitoring their health—and counting the birds and critters and noting that some of their numbers are increasing and feeling delirious with joy.

There are many other exciting projects to participate in. There's High Park Watch, planting, seed-gathering, weed-eradication, walks, lectures, festivals, plant sales and much more.

I like coming into the park on Sundays and walk in from different approaches. Sometimes I take the subway to High Park Station, walk down West Road to the Grenadier Restaurant and hang a left on Centre Road, then a right to the greenhouses. Or take the Carlton streetcar and walk down a quiet trail to Centre Road, over Spring Creek going north, then hang a left at the greenhouses. Sometimes a friend drives me right up to the door.

Every visit is different. On foggy days the oaks are obscured in mystery and the sounds of the city are barely heard. On sunny days the winter sun glows pale through the trees and I enjoy the textured silver and black of the trunks, the red of dogwood, the gold of dried grasses. Last Sunday I saw and heard crows overhead. They were scolding a hawk that was dodging them hither and yon. It provided a lesson on the effectiveness of group strategy.

On sunny days I like observing the passing parade. There are cyclists, runners, lovers, old folks with a cane, or parents with their tots in prams and the older children running about, climbing on everything, hugging trees, jumping, swinging, shouting: "Look at me, Mom, look at me!" Then there are dog people with their friends on a leash. I can tell the dogs are happy to be in the park. They walk with a sweet, self-important gravity, their tails wagging and they're smiling in that sappy, lovable way that dogs have.

Before I know it, it's 10:30 am. Passing the service yards, I enter the door of the greenhouses. Walking down a long corridor with glass walls on the right and light streaming through, is a long row of potting benches. Between them are glass doors to various greenhouses where tropical flowers like scarlet hibiscus and pink tradescantia cheer away my winter blues.

Oh, I'm happy and excited to be here meeting my fellow green dream visionaries and feel privileged to have access to this magical place. There's no pressure about attendance. You come when you can; the kind friends and gentle people of the VSP are always happy to see you.

The past few Sundays we've been discussing the ethics of restoration in the Victorian looking lunchroom where the

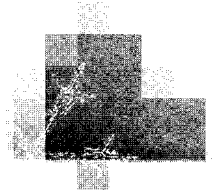


Lupinus perennis in bloom.
RIGHT: Mature seed pods closed and (lower right) seed pods open.





light is filtered green by leafy, ever-green vines climbing up the windows. At 11:30 we adjourn to cleaning seeds that we gathered in fall. (The hard-working park staff has prepared our work and it's important to mention that their levels of commitment are outstanding. They give up Sundays and weekends and work alongside the volunteers.)



So, it's two people working together per bench and box of seeds. I choose *Lupinus perennis* and Gillian, the VSP prez, brings a beautifully-mounted photo of these flowers and places it before me for inspiration. The lupine seeds look like small peas and they're variegated. Some are pale, some are black and some are striped. I can almost tell which ones are viable because some are thin and crumpled looking and others are shiny and round just waiting to burst out into the dreamy blue flowers that will transform the park in spring.

There's a lot of humming going on—from the heating plant that warms our glass palace and the happy hum of conversation: meeting someone new, just exchanging pleasantries or people catching up with each other.

Last Sunday I heard a priceless story from a staffer. It was about a beagle that chased a fox outside the green-house gardens. He heard excited yapping. Then he saw a fox squeezing under the fence and into the gardens, to save himself—and the canine in hot pursuit with his ears flapping. The fox managed to get in and under, but the dog caught his collar on the fence. My friend had to rescue the cussing cur, which was yelping, squirming and running in place even though he was trapped. Finally the dog was extricated and ran off. And the fox, later that day, was seen hiding in plain sight, relaxing on top of a shed. I always knew that foxes are smart, but not that they could climb. There are thousands of wonderful stories in High Park. This is just one of many.

At 1 o'clock some of us adjourn to Roncesvalles for Polish potato pancakes, pirogi and beers—and for trading more stories.

In February and March the volunteers will plant some of these native seeds in trays filled with moist soil. Then they'll be covered with see-through plastic domes until the babies sprout. Later we divide them and transfer them to pots. These grasses and flowers may be sold to the public on festival days, planted in High Park or used to beautify other parks in the city.

Hey, see you in the Park, O.K.? ❀

Dagmar Baur is a Community Garden Co-ordinator in Toronto. Programs run throughout the year. Further information about various volunteer programs or winter walking tours: 416-392-1748 or 416-392-6916 (Colborne Lodge) or High Park Citizens Advisory Committee. www.toronto.ca/wes/techservices/involved/outreach/vsp/index.htm

Dancing and swirling fog,
Mysteriously gray,
All day yesterday,
Whispering ominously.
Promising winter,
By tomorrow.

Bitter and raw wind,
Sharp and cutting.
All day today,
Piercing and penetrating.
Promising winter,
By evening.

And now, snow,
Softly and silently.
All night tonight,
Patient and gentle.
Promising peace,
By morning.

Tom Maccagno