

BICENTENNIAL BOTANICAL GARDEN TOUR

- Bernie McKenna and Grace Beazley
(photos by Susan Holmes)

Date: Monday, July 6, 2026

Place: Dalhousie University Bicentennial Botanical Garden

Weather: 19 C, sunny, clear sky

Participants: 11 plus our leader

This tour was held at the *Bicentennial Botanical Garden* located on the Dalhousie Agricultural Campus at Bible Hill, near Truro, and so named for the university's 200th anniversary in 2018. The garden won the prestigious international 2023 Frank Cabot Public Garden award from the North American Rock Garden Society. The almost 11-hectare site living laboratory features four gardens containing over 3,000 plant species: Alumni Garden, Herb Garden, Rock Garden and Limestone Garden.



Andrew Stewart was our excellent leader. He holds a BSc degree from the school, is a life-long resident of Truro, and has been working at and with the gardens for 6 years as a landscape technician. He led us through this botanical world, all the while providing interesting facts about the gardens and the plants themselves.

Alumni Garden

This is the largest garden of the four, and was originally established as a research nursery that continues to thrive and retains a number of the original trees to this day. You



enter through the Barley Arch which

mirrors the Agricultural School's official ring. On entering one is immediately standing on a bricked gathering circle which was built by first year landscape students and was a wonderful start to the tour. Andrew told us all first year Landscape students do a project to improve or re-design a portion of the gardens. The Alumni Garden is spread out and contains a number of different perennial gardens with plantings of flowers, trees and grassed areas. The perennial beds held Rodgersia, Meadow Rue, Bugloss, Globe-flowers, alliums, lilies, and many more. An aside: Wedding parties must book a time to come here for wedding photographs. High school students also come on prom nights for photographs but times are not booked.

A stand-out was a small grove or clump of Rhododendrons that the deer had pruned up to about 5 feet, and left it reminiscent of a group of bonsai plants, very striking. [Deer are a prevalent issue in the Truro area.] There was also a number of mature specimen trees, including but not limited to, Harlequin Maples, Northern Red Oak, Red Maples, a very large White Birch, Blue Spruce, a young Tulip Tree, Eastern Hemlock, Eastern White Cedar, White Pine, Red Spruce, American Beech, Yellow Birch, Fire Cherry, tamarack, basswood, chestnut, and many more. The open expanse and variety of trees made for an interesting contrast to the three gardens that followed.

Herb Garden

The herb garden is laid out in the traditional/medieval four-quarter layout bounded on three sides by a red-leafed Barberry hedge, accessed by a well, defined opening. Note that deer do not like the sharp thorns! The fourth side has a dry-fitted horizontal stone wall with a dry-fitted, vertically-placed stone cap. The entry on this side is an impressive, dry-fitted stone arch about 8 feet in height. The garden itself had an assortment of typical herb garden plants, everything from



marigolds, mints, lavender, coneflowers (or Echinacea), Bronze leaf fennel, tarragon, lovage, lemon thyme, sages, chives, dill, lemongrass, oregano, cilantro, rosemary and several others. In years past, as today, these plants were used for medicinal purposes, fragrances, cloth dyeing, cooking herbs, organic pest control, and cleaning uses.



Rock Garden

As we approached the Rock Garden, Andrew explained how the late Dr. Bernard Jackson designed and built the Rock and Limestone Gardens from the ground up, solely relying on his inherent abilities as opposed to drawn out geometrical and spatial designs. The project commenced in the early 2000s. Dr. Jackson established the Friends of the Gardens Society in 1999; these volunteers assist in maintaining the gardens. Andrew said he considers himself extremely fortunate to have been so closely involved with Dr. Jackson in the building process. An aside: Andrew acts as the coordinator of the Friends, and in fact, there were some volunteers weeding while we toured the gardens!

This is the largest rock garden east of Montreal, it is about two-thirds of an acre in size, and contains roughly 800 tons of red granite boulders. Andrew showed us the fine gravel substrate that the plants are growing in, and how it provides the necessary drainage. This substrate is topped with a contrasting crushed red granite top surface that contrasts so well with the varied plantings. It boasts two bridges giving passage over two dry stream beds and allowing great views of the garden's features. The plants here include Prickly pear cactus, Japanese maples, numerous fern species, lilies, alliums, both creeping and upright conifers, dianthus, perennial Foxgloves, Paper bark maples, perennial begonias, and again too many other types to mention. Another section of this garden had more plantings in crevices in boulders and carved troughs, and again a mix of different size plants.

Limestone Garden

This treasure for the eyes is almost a limestone-barrens with dozens of miniature plants tucked into minute crevices and cracks. It is a marked difference from the three previous gardens, yet makes for an inviting garden continuation. The variety of plants tucked into very small areas included false sedum or stonecrop, geraniums, willows, creeping miniature junipers, alpiners, trailing rock cress and moss phlox. Despite the openness of this alkaline area all the plants were thriving and enjoying their locations. Andrew explained that all the limestone was donated and delivered by the Lafarge Canada Brookfield Cement Company located in nearby Brookfield.

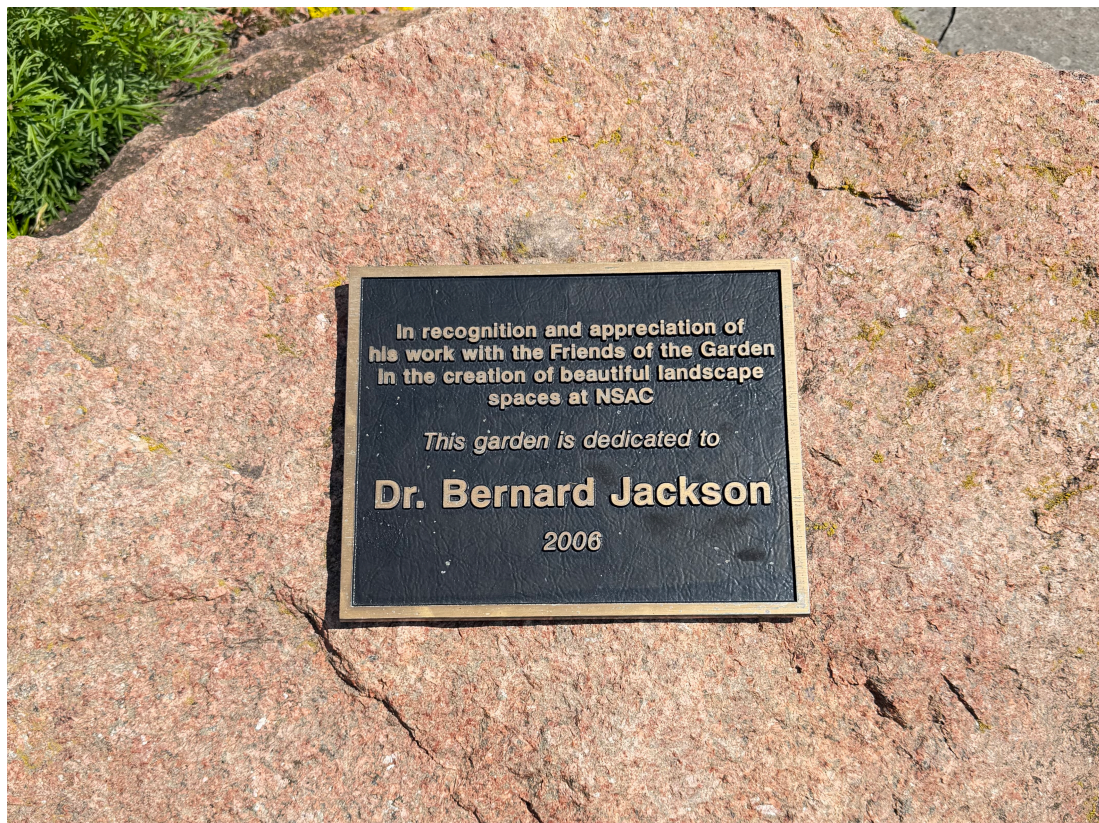
Another interesting point was learned when a question was asked. In addition to a variety of native plant species, the gardens feature unique species from many parts of the world.

As we finished the tour, the group gave Andrew a very much deserved round of applause before he headed off to his other garden duties for the day. However, before doing so, he set us up for a brief tour of the tropical plant greenhouse with its warm, moist atmosphere and varied plants that truly thrive in such a setting.

Bonus fact! During the entire tour a couple of our die-hard birders were taking stock and found time to notice Blue jays, a Downy Woodpecker, Common Grackles, Song Sparrows and a Red-eyed vireo, some by sight, some by ear.

Last words from Bernie: "This was an absolutely wonderful tour of an astonishing garden, every step, start to finish, revealed a new plant, unique settings and design features for us to marvel. It was a perfect day weather-wise and a perfect size group for such a tour! We are grateful to Dalhousie University, and in particular Andrew Stewart, for making it such a pleasurable walk."

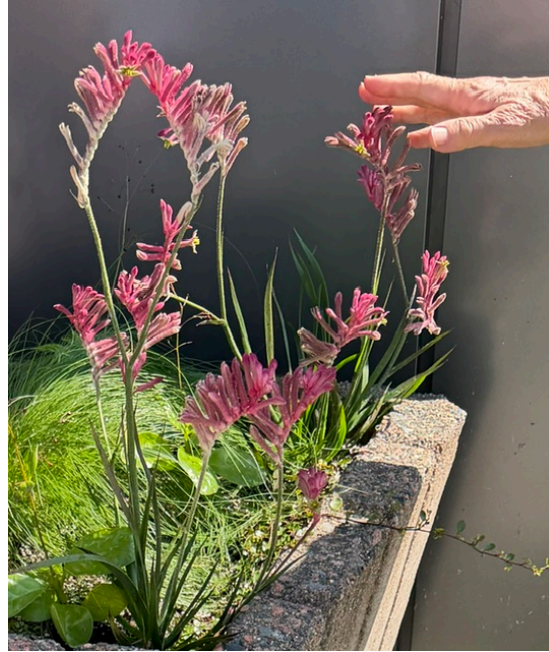
For the reader's information, the campus gardens are open to the public at any time of year. Learn more about the Bicentennial Botanical Garden at dal.ca/gardens



Some of the flora seen on this walk:



Bellflowers
Genus Campanula



Kangaroo Paws
Genus Anigozanthos



Chamomiles, yarrows and allies
Tribe Anthemideae



Anemones and allies
Tribe Anemoneae



Zinnias
Genus Zinnia



Milkweeds
Genus Asclepias



Caladium
Genus Caladium