

# The Summerland Experimental Farm and Ornamental Gardens

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

The Ornamental Gardens are an offshoot of the Dominion Experimental Farm, which was begun in 1914 to study crop development and animal husbandry within the context of the local environment. Most would-be orchardists coming to the area had little experience in horticulture, and needed advice on varieties, pruning, pest and disease control, irrigation, and other problems.

The Gardens were designed in 1916, in part to study the viability of non-food plants in the region, but also to bring English and Eastern Canadian beauty to the rough edges of the "frontier". The gardens grew to become a six hectare English style garden.

## BUILDINGS AND RESIDENCES



The "Log Cabin" (1917) was the centerpiece of the garden area, and served as a pavilion for visitors.

From the foundation of the Experimental Farm until the 1960s, the Farm was isolated and all staff all lived on site. It was largely self sufficient with a boardinghouse, various residences, greenhouses, barns, and machine shops. The only building left

standing is the Superintendent's home, built in 1926 under Wilbur T. Hunter.

Hunter was notoriously good at stretching a budget, and in addition to the day to day activities of operating the farm, he had constructed a nine hole golf course, a putting green (in the gardens), a tennis court, a baseball field, and a bowling green, all for staff use.

## THE PERPETUAL PROBLEM OF WATER



In the early days of the Experimental Farm, irrigation water was taken from the Municipal water supply on Trout Creek. Problems quickly emerged as local Summerland orchardists were given priority for water use, and the Farm supply was frequently shut off.

Without a reliable water supply, the Farm found it impossible to conduct tests and both the orchards and the gardens suffered. A new water source needed to be found. In 1921 a diesel water pump was installed at the lake, but it only helped the lower levels of the farm. Two years later, a pump house was installed upstream on Trout Creek just west of the KVR trestle and though it is not used today, it is still there. Finally in 1924 the groundwork was laid for a new pump house on Okanagan Lake.

**Water was a necessity on the semi-arid hills of Summerland, and great lengths were taken to ensure a consistent and efficient supply.**

## THE EXPERIMENTAL FARM

The people who lived and worked in the

Gardens were responsible for countless experiments studying plant pathology, irrigation, food processing, livestock, and poultry. At the end of 1957, 638 varieties of different fruits were under test at Summerland.

The Food Processing department at the farm developed the entire process used to manufacture commercial fruit leathers, as well as techniques to make use of low grade apples including juice, cider, syrup, and vinegar.

The Plant Pathology department was also kept busy. In addition to identifying and slowing the spread of pests, the department also investigated more obscure causes for plant disorders. A blight effecting apple trees known as corky-core (drought spot), was a major problem by 1930, putting some growers out of business. The cause was speculated to be water stress, infectious disease, or pruning practices, but it was eventually thought that a mineral deficiency was to blame. Researchers tested various mineral salts on effected trees, and in 1935 they discovered the soil was lacking boron. Boxcar load after boxcar load of borax were ordered, prompting the 20 Mule Team Borax Company to send a very confused representative to the Okanagan to investigate the order influx.

## THE KETTLE VALLEY RAILWAY



The Ornamental Gardens back up to the old Kettle Valley Railway line, and there are impressive views from the grounds of the trestle crossing Trout Creek. At one time, the words "Dominion Experimental Farm" were

planted in lavender to be viewed from the train.

It was after planting this lavender that Alf Aveson, the second head gardener, walked out onto the railway trestle to survey his work. Alf was almost stone deaf and he failed to hear an approaching train. He jumped over the edge just in time, clinging desperately to the trestle as the train passed overhead. It is said that after that incident he refused to step on the trestle for any reason.

## FARM PICNICS



The first farm picnic was held in the Ornamental Gardens in 1924, and its success prompted an annual event held every June 3rd (King George V's birthday). These picnics became the social event of the year for people in the Okanagan Valley, sometimes attracting up to 4,000 people. Families would picnic in the gardens, enjoy a baseball tournament and children's races, and go on guided tours of different areas of the farm and livestock barns.

One year, a teamster at the farm volunteered to play the bagpipes as entertainment at the picnic. He marched through the gardens and past the boardinghouse from 2:30 P.M. until 7 o'clock at night. It seems that each time he passed the boarding house, he received a wee dram and lost all track of time!



Thank you to the Friends of the Gardens Society for assisting with this guided historical tour. Established in 1991, the Friends of the Gardens Society is responsible for enhancing the garden experience, educating the public and promoting the gardens to the community. The Gardens are open most days of the year to be enjoyed by locals and tourists alike. A self-guided walking tour brochure is also available at the Gardens.

The Friends of the Gardens Society may be contacted by telephone at 250-494-6385 or by e-mail at [friends.summerlandgardens@gmail.com](mailto:friends.summerlandgardens@gmail.com)



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**ALWAYS GROWING**

A number of improvements and trimmings were added to the landscaped area of the Gardens while Nat May was head gardener from 1941 – 1961. Rock walls, a lily pond, and a long trellis covered in honeysuckle and grapes were added from the site of the Superintendent's house down to "Hog's Hollow"; the site of a bowling green, later a tennis court and sometimes a skating rink.

reduced to the basic planting and daily care. However, the Friends of the Gardens Society was established and they have managed to work in conjunction with Agriculture Canada to keep the gardens open.

\*In 2016 two significant events happened, it was the Gardens Centennial and the Friends 25th anniversary.

**GARDENS THREATENED**

In 1990, budget cuts at the Station threatened to close the Ornamental Gardens. The gardens were no longer used for research, greenhouses had been dismantled, and the Gardens had been



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**SUMMERLAND  
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**THE SUMMERLAND  
 ORNAMENTAL GARDENS:**

**HISTORY OF THE  
 GARDENS**

