



Photo by Liberia Marcuzzi

STRATHCONA COMMUNITY GARDEN BUDDHA POND

Story by Derek Hodge. August 2016.

In the late 1980s, about 2 years after getting a plot, I noticed a large rock pile amid what was pretty much a central dump area in the Garden - all kinds of scrap, wire and wood bits were discarded among overgrown horsetail, broom, blackberry and weeds. The butterfly bush that still barely lives, on the west path side, and the honey locust bush in the northeast corner were established here at this time.

I was told this area was too wet and unsuitable for a plot and when the Garden was first cleared its huge rocks and concrete slabs were piled in this space with a Bobcat. During this process a massive concrete block ended up perched on top of two large granite boulders that now form the Buddha grotto.

Envisioning a pond with the rocks as a backdrop at one end I started to dig and I dug and dug and dug and dug over a period of months. The dozens and dozens of loads of soil I took out created a new seating area down by the big old pond. I recall all the odd looks from other gardeners and passers by - there I was covered in wet muck rabidly digging a huge hole to nowhere by hand. I remember mostly how deep the horsetail rhizomes penetrated down into the gray hardpan, clearly demonstrating why horsetail manages to be one of the oldest living plants on earth.

As I dug the pond, its shape took on a life of its own, depending on where I hit rocks and how deep the hardpan was - and of course, the boulders.

The original soil level was lowest around rocks and as I dug down I decided to carve a grotto where the Buddha now resides. People thought I'd get killed since the only way to make the grotto was to crawl under the overhanging boulders and literally dig it out, with a tiny hand trowel, while lying on my belly in muck with my feet sticking out. I did that nasty job during a very hot and dry summer when the pond was completely parched. I realized I had done enough when, one morning, I saw large soil cracks at the base of the rocks - because rocks were settling as I removed the soil under them. So the pond told me, *It's done*. No more crawling, or it's my pancake time.

At this stage I was "advised" to line the pond with a rubber liner. I think Rick, a gardener and landscaper, provided many square yards which I installed but after a winter season I saw the pond ebb and flowed naturally with the rise and fall of the water table and that trapping water caused flooding and caused the water in the liner to turn fetid and smelly. Next summer I tore it out and from then on I cleared the pond by digging out muck, weeds and garbage but only as far as the hardpan so as not to disturb the boulders.

That spring I found two big Douglas fir rounds and a heavily weathered old board beam on a beach in North Vancouver to make the *original bench*. As years passed this bench fell apart and around 2011 I designed, from a Magnolia tree cut down on the West side of Vancouver, a bench whose form reflects the shape of the pond - or of lily pad leaves - and so connects it to the water and the Buddha.

A foundation for the new bench was set in July 2016.

Over time I nursed a population of goldfish and had some success. But herons eventually won out as they became habituated to a fresh stock of tasty little fish treats each spring - so I finally surrendered that idea.

The smaller rocks came in bit by bit. Most of the stone lining the pond and forming paths and borders came from the Garden area. I also salvaged old granite Vancouver road blocks from the City Works yard - including a large square block that sits in front of the bench platform just above the pond.

With regards to walls and borders - that was a massive undertaking conducted over many months. Again, I "salvaged" the long cut granite blocks from a closed rock cutting business, sometime in the 1990s. I'd get about 8 at a time in the back of my poor car - and must have brought about 60 at least. Some are visible in front of the bench and as corner columns but most were set into the border of this garden, using poured concrete, stone and loads of gravel.

The most challenging part was installing a border with an adjacent plot. In the early stages I stacked up blocks, only to return and see them pushed over. As this plot's gardener opposed my project and always grumbled and cursed when I was there, I built a deep and substantial wall between his plot and the pond. I poured loads of concrete and used many blocks of granite, all which easily held back the hilled wall he built up and so protected my new young plantings.

Regarding plants I tried many things, starting with lovely clumps of blue Siberian Iris around the pond and among rocks which lasted many years. Then I set a gorgeous Gunnera to overhang the pond which perhaps gave too much privacy as drug use and sex work left me much to clean up after many a "nights business".

The high-low nature of the plot provided both a challenge and an opportunity to create unique staged plantings and flowering areas. I planned for blooms throughout the growing season - from snow drops by the first days of spring to fall asters, goldenrod and fall crocus into October and November.

Similarly I tried to integrate plants with varied leaf patterns and colours. In short I saw the pond area as a piece of ever changing art - the stone structures as the frame and canvas and the plants as the paint. But some choices were too prolific, as proved by the relentless variegated grasses that have taken over. As it now stands this garden is invaded by everything from mint, to yellow flag iris in the pond, to profuse grasses and only serious and persistent eradication will deal with it. I cleared bits each time I came to the Garden.

Lastly the Buddha. Somehow it came to me when I was at a temple in Japan where I bought a replica of the huge 15th century bronze statue at Kamakura, near Yokohama. At first I set it on a rock beneath the arch but it soon disappeared or was tossed into water by kids. When it vanished for good I got a similar one and secured it in concrete. This statue was also vandalized and in a very curious incident the head was removed one winter. Since I decided I would not replace it, the bronze Buddha sat headless for almost a year until strangely one day someone glued it back on. Very precisely. I have no idea if someone found it and did that or if the original thief got the "bad karma willies" and did it to redeem themselves. When that statue also disappeared I replaced it with the current Thai version in brass. Only a serious hammer will take it out as the Buddha's base is encased in concrete. Two full bags of mix, along with stone were used to secure it permanently.

This project was completed seven years ago.

The buddha pond is here for all to enjoy and to maintain, if it so moves them.

.. you build it and it shall build you .. ■