

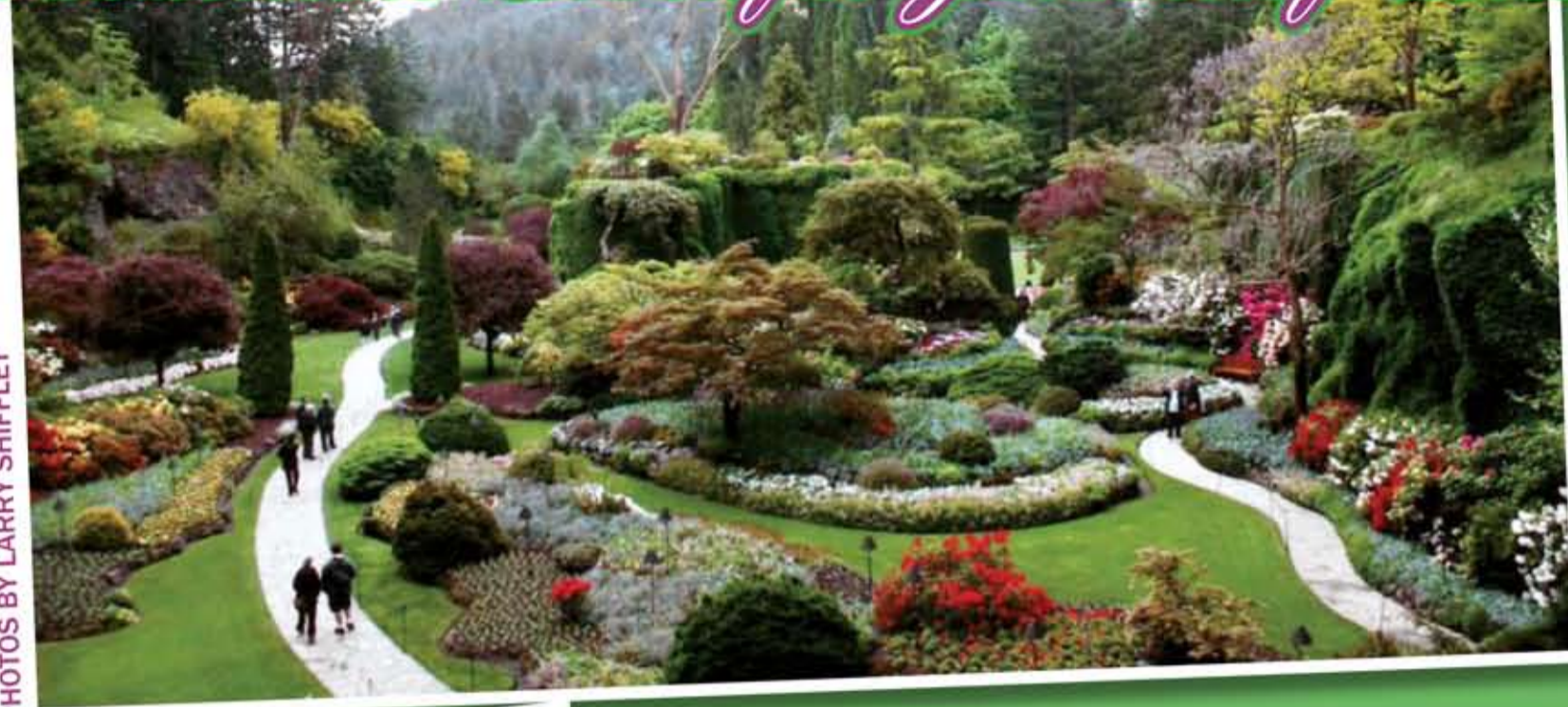
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## Admire the Beautiful Gardens of Victoria

BY CYNTHIA CALVERT

PHOTOS BY LARRY SHIFFLET



fascinating expanses, sharing her vast knowledge of plants with a dash of dry humor included.

### Government House

Four hundred volunteers come twice a week to tend the gardens here. Prince Philip designed the gardens, dedicated by the Queen in 1994. The gardens are filled with multi-season perennials. We met "Peter," one of the dozens of volunteer gardeners, who told us his simple philosophy: "You put things where they want to be." No chemicals are used anywhere onsite, and all the weeding is done by hand. The gardens boast mixed perennial and shrub borders, rock plantings and water features. The gardens offer stunning views of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the Olympic Mountains.

### Jewel Box Garden

Brian and Jennifer Rogers bought their cozy home in March of 1998 and brought in 46 yards of soil. He is the president of the Friends of Government House and a retired businessman and she is a leading member of the Vancouver Garden Society. They worked together on the design.

"It is the number one residential garden in Victoria," Looy said, and has been featured in numerous publications. The private garden has evolved under the watchful eye of two 100-year-old apple trees graced with a rainbow of hellebores and a stunning collection of wonderful companion plants.

### 4 Seasons Garden

Looy introduced us to Lily, the homeowner and gardener, a retired teacher who began her garden 20 years ago on a half acre of grass. As we stepped onto the driveway, Lily appeared to show us some of her work. "I learned as I went along," she said, "I didn't even join a garden club until years after I had begun. But I won a contest at my second meeting." Lily says her garden is all about contrast. "Things are always fading in and fading out." The pink heirloom peonies were amazing.

### Abkhazi Garden

A garden born of a love story. The garden's owners are both dead now but their love and joy lasts at the Abkhazi which they began in 1946. He was the proud but penniless Prince of Abkhazi. She was a young American heiress. In love, but separated by war, they connected years after their initial relationship. They married and came to Victoria, purchasing this one-acre rocky spot in central Victoria.

"This is the garden that love built," said Garden Director Valerie Murray. "The Princess was independently wealthy and chose to come here. This was the last undeveloped lot in Victoria with two-third of it rock. Middle-aged when they married, the garden became their child. They worked on it together for 40 years and after they died, no one wanted it. Eight years ago, it was going to be sold for development. Fortunately, it was preserved by a group of conservancy. More than 12,000 visitors came to the Abkhazi last year from March to September. "The garden flows around the rock, taking advantage of deeper pockets of soil for conifers, Japanese maples and rhododendrons, which over the last 50 years, have grown to an impressive maturity. Carpets of naturalized bulbs, choice alpines and woodland companions provide interest throughout the year to the discerning plantsman, but it is the overall design that leaves the greatest impression," Pemberton said.

Victoria is a sweet romantic destination. Harbor cruises, street performers, pubs, restaurants and shopping abound here. Visitors delight when enjoying a romantic horse-drawn carriage ride through James Bay, and don't forget to take part in a thoroughly Victorian indulgence: royal high tea at either the Empress Hotel or at Blethering Place.

Resources: [www.tourismvictoria.com](http://www.tourismvictoria.com), [www.victoria.ca](http://www.victoria.ca), [www.bcferries.com](http://www.bcferries.com), [www.capitalbikeandwalk.org](http://www.capitalbikeandwalk.org), [www.downtownvictoria.ca](http://www.downtownvictoria.ca), [www.oakbaytourism.com](http://www.oakbaytourism.com), [www.magnoliahotel.com](http://www.magnoliahotel.com), [www.victoriagardentours.com](http://www.victoriagardentours.com), [www.abkhazi.com](http://www.abkhazi.com)

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British Columbia is a lovely, amazing, vital place. Vancouver is the largest city of this westernmost Canadian province but Victoria, fertile, cool and lively, is the capital city. Last spring, we spent a long weekend enjoying some of the most enchanting gardens in North America, including the world-famous Butchart Gardens. Houstonians love to garden and if we only had their magical soil and nurturing climate – the things we would grow! An annual rainfall of 61 inches coupled with a unique abundance of sunshine (more than 2,200 hours a year) perfectly nourishes both the abundant and varied flora and the kind and generous spirit of its residents who seem to find gardening, and I mean thoughtful, serious gardening, practically a universal pastime. A trip to Victoria is inspirational – even to those who are not particularly earthy. A trip here will find you inspired to create smooth, contemplative vistas in your own yards. Built on the Inner Harbor, it is European in feel. Sidewalk cafes, along with lots of artsy galleries, shops and restaurants line the streets. I recommend a springtime trip when gentle sunshine and fragrant flowers fill every window pot, hanging basket and street corner.



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We flew into Vancouver and then took BC Ferries ([www.bcferries.com](http://www.bcferries.com)) for the 90-minute ride from Tsawwassen to Swartz Bay. The scenery is gorgeous.

A huge bouquet of fresh flowers greet guests in the lobby of the Magnolia Hotel and Spa on Courtney Street, one block from the Victoria's Inner Harbor. Many of the boutique hotel's 64 rooms have a harbor view – be sure to ask for one when booking. The Magnolia is a four-diamond luxury hotel with a friendly staff and gracious amenities. Just open in the hotel is the lavishly decorated and celebrated Prime Steakhouse & Lounge featuring beef from High River, Alberta,

along with other local favorites such as lamb. Coming soon is the newly-expanded Spa Magnolia, located adjacent to the hotel. The Magnolia, winner of multiple Condé Nast Traveler Readers' Choice Awards this year, caters to business and vacation travelers, along with their pets.

Our first goal was exploring Victoria; we walked all over downtown. Victoria is a comfortable, yet hip place. Check [www.modernurbanguides.com](http://www.modernurbanguides.com) for a complete listing of locally-owned restaurants, art galleries, boutiques and eclectic shops. The city is very friendly to walkers – in fact, the Canadian government says it is the fittest and most walkable city in all of Canada. More than 10 percent of its 80,000 residents walk to work. Fort Street is known for its antique and collectible stores. Lo Jo, or Lower Johnson, is two blocks filled with more than 40 stores mixed in with impressive heritage buildings. Victoria's Chinatown is Canada's oldest, where gambling halls and opium dens could once be found. Today it is filled with decor and furnishing shops, restaurants and Fan Tan Alley – Canada's narrowest street – don't miss it.

The city is built around Inner Victoria Harbor, a beautiful and busy place where seaplanes take off and arrive constantly. Thousands of boats nestle into marinas while apartment buildings and whole floating neighborhoods dot the shoreline. Busy boats both large and small dart back and forth carrying tourists and residents to and from area destinations.

The city offers a broad range of things to do – from museums to a lively array of outdoor activities including year-round cycling, cruises, sailing, golf, hiking, fishing, surfing and birdwatching. Do plan a quick trip to Oak Bay, a seaside village just east of downtown. Oak Bay is filled with fabulous shops brimming with lovely, handcrafted jewelry, garden and parks and great dining including the very English Penny Farthing Pub.

The moderate climate of Victoria (rarely below 32 degrees or above 86 degrees) not only offers outdoor enthusiasts the chance to enjoy the stunning scenery every month of the year, it also creates a near-perfect environment for growing plants and flowers. And what is grown is simply stunning. People move here from all over the world because they love gardening and because Victoria grows the broadest variety of plants in all of North America.

### Butchart Gardens

Graham Bell, director of public relations, guided us through the magnificent Butchart Gardens. It is best to come before 11 a.m. or after 1 p.m. All of the plants are grown in greenhouses and perfectly planned to please visitors year after year. It is the most frequently visited, privately-owned attraction in Canada. Now celebrating its 104 year. Jennie Butchart planted Lombardy poplars in 1910 to screen the old chimney stacks of her husband's cement plant. Over the next several decades, the Butcharts personally collected thousands of specimens from around the world and created the famous Sunken Garden, followed by the Japanese, the Rose and Italian Gardens. One million people visit the Gardens each year, arriving by bus, car, limousine, canoe and even float planes. In summer, there is nightly entertainment and fireworks. We were delighted with afternoon tea at the Dining Room Restaurant. Beautiful floral china, delicate sandwiches and signature desserts were magical.

Joan Looy is a master gardener and owner of Victoria Garden Tours. Looy led us through a series of