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IN THE GARDEN

Remembering David Lam
November 5, 2015, 6:30 pm • Section: In the Garden

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David Lam with pelargoniums in his solarium

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Posted by: **steve whysall**

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Victorian rose garden at Government House in Victoria

In this month of remembrance, I will also be pausing to remember David Lam, B.C.'s first Asian-Canadian lieutenant-governor, who did so much to promote and build gardens here and to encourage gardeners to appreciate beauty.

Lam died five years ago from prostate cancer, on Nov. 22 in 2010, at the age of 87.

He especially loved ornamental cherry trees and to honour his memory and mark its own 10th anniversary, the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival is offering a special deal on cherry trees.

You can find how to order your special "birthday blossom" cherry tree by going to <http://www.vcbf.ca>. You order a bargain-priced tree now and pick it up for planting in spring.

But my goal today is to tell you some stories about David Lam that I am sure you have not heard.



David Lam died at 87 in 2010 from prostate cancer

I first met Lam when I interviewed him in 1991 about his plans to renovate and upgrade the gardens at Government House in Victoria.

My appointment was for 10 a.m. and I decided to get the 7 o'clock ferry from Tsawwassen.

As I waited in the assured loading lane in the dark on that wet and cold Tuesday morning in November, I suddenly saw the ferry sail away — they had placed me in the wrong lane and I had missed the boat.

In a bit of a panic, I raced to Vancouver airport and got a ticket for the next plane.

At the airport in Victoria, I rushed out carrying my briefcase and got in a taxi. "Government House as fast as you can," I said.

I think the taxi driver thought he had immunity or something because he hurtled along, exceeding the speed limit, as if he were in a James Bond movie.

At Government House, the driver raced up the gravel driveway, slammed on his brakes and skidded at least 15 feet, leaving a long set of tire tracks and coming to a dramatic stop in front of the porte cochère where which Lam was patiently waiting. I was like Garfield, clinging to the window inside the cab.

I apologized for my tardiness but, as gracious as ever, Lam brushed away my apology and told me how he had also missed the ferry once and was left sitting in his official car with flags fluttering on the fenders. From that point, we got on very well.



David Lam with pelargoniums in his solarium

As a businessman, Lam was hugely successful, but his real passion was not for money but for beauty, especially the beauty of flowers and gardens.

As a philanthropist, he gave \$2 million to help establish both the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden and the Asia Garden at the UBC Botanical Garden, two of Vancouver's finest gardens.

And he also paid from his own pocket the \$150,000 to renovate and upgrade the gardens at Government House. This included the cost of the new Victorian rose garden, a copy of the 19th-century one at Warwick Castle in England.

It was as we walked and talked about the beauty of the garden at Government House that we became friends through our mutual admiration of the power of beauty to change hearts and lives.

"The beauty of the flower is very difficult to describe," Lam told me. "To me, it is a tonic. No matter how difficult my time may have been, when I hear beautiful music and I look at beautiful flowers, half of my troubles are gone.

A few years later, Lam called me at work to ask if I would quickly pop down to the offices of the Vancouver park board where he was stuck in discussions over what tree to pick for the new park at False Creek that was going to be named after him.

I dashed there and found Lam in a conference room with a lot of exasperated officials, who clearly did not like the idea of waiting for me.

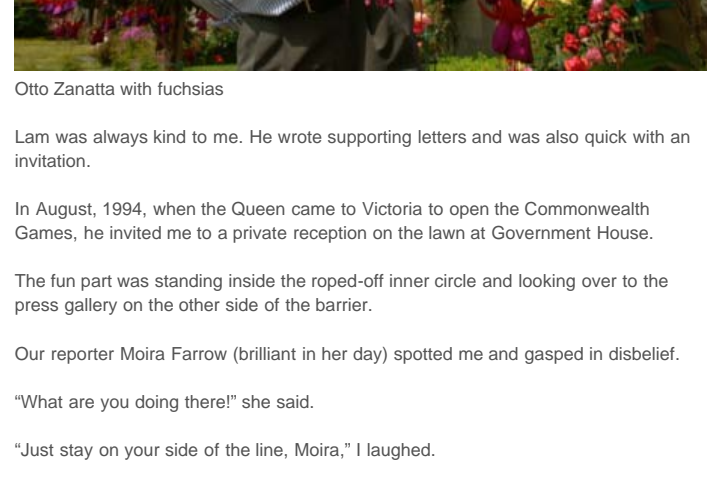
"Why can we not use only Asian plants in the landscaping?" Lam asked me. "There are some wonderful peonies and trees we could use.

"Imagine a Dove tree (*Davidia involucreata*) in full bloom. What a sight. What an attraction it would be. People would come from all over to see it. I want them to plant one but they say it is not practical. What do you think?"

I said I thought it was a beautiful tree, a perfect choice, especially appropriate because of the name and its Chinese origins.

And I added, perhaps to the chagrin of the listening officials: "It's your park, I think you can have whatever tree you want."

Today, there are two dove trees planted at David Lam Park.



Otto Zanatta with fuchsias

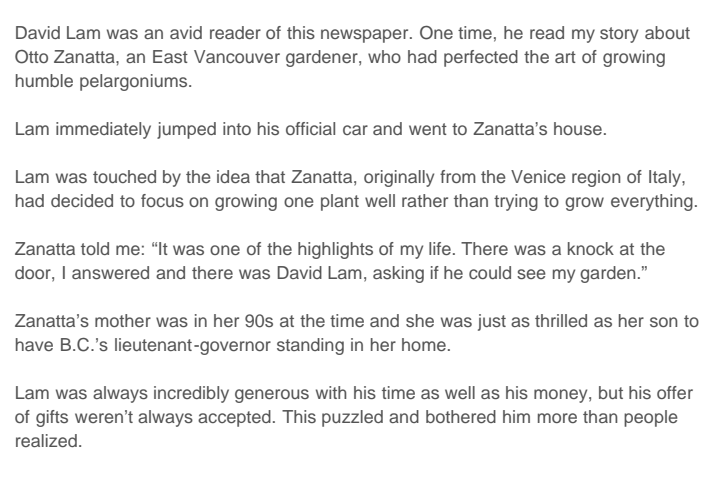
Lam was always kind to me. He wrote supporting letters and was also quick with an invitation.

In August, 1994, when the Queen came to Victoria to open the Commonwealth Games, he invited me to a private reception on the lawn at Government House.

The fun part was standing inside the roped-off inner circle and looking over to the press gallery on the other side of the barrier.

Our reporter Moira Farrow (brilliant in her day) spotted me and gasped in disbelief. "What are you doing there!" she said.

"Just stay on your side of the line, Moira," I laughed.



David Lam loved cherry blossoms

David Lam was an avid reader of this newspaper. One time, he read my story about Otto Zanatta, an East Vancouver gardener, who had perfected the art of growing humble pelargoniums.

Lam immediately jumped into his official car and went to Zanatta's house.

Lam was touched by the idea that Zanatta, originally from the Venice region of Italy, had decided to focus on growing one plant well rather than trying to grow everything.

Zanatta told me: "It was one of the highlights of my life. There was a knock at the door, I answered and there was David Lam, asking if he could see my garden."

Zanatta's mother was in her 90s at the time and she was just as thrilled as her son to have B.C.'s lieutenant-governor standing in her home.

Lam was always incredibly generous with his time as well as his money, but his offer of gifts weren't always accepted. This puzzled and bothered him more than people realized.

He once told me how he wanted to give \$10,000 worth of memberships to VanDusen Botanical Garden, so he could give them away to people in a spontaneous way as he met them.

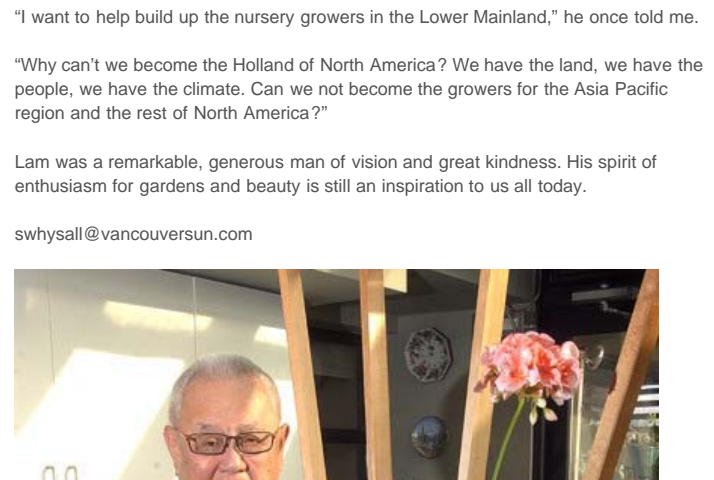
But he told me, with a shake of the head, VanDusen told him they couldn't do it because there was too much detail involved in processing a membership.

Lam never understood the logic of their argument; he just wanted more people to discover the delights of the garden.

He felt pretty much the same way about the park board when he offered to give them \$1 million to buy 10,000 cherry trees and he was turned down. He didn't understand why they wouldn't snap his hand off to make the city more beautiful and make an even more dramatic cherry blossom heaven.

Part of the problem was exactly where he wanted the trees planted — all along the waterfront.

In the end, he did pay for some cherry trees to be planted, but not nearly as many as he had wanted. However, the story does demonstrate his big heart and generous nature.



Linda Poole, president of Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival.

In the last years of his life in his penthouse home at the foot of Comox Street, Lam turned decks into little gardens and filled a solarium with exotic plants.

He always thought B.C.'s horticulture industry could become bigger and more successful on a global scale.

"I want to help build up the nursery growers in the Lower Mainland," he once told me.

"Why can't we become the Holland of North America? We have the land, we have the people, we have the climate. Can we not become the growers for the Asia Pacific region and the rest of North America?"

Lam was a remarkable, generous man of vision and great kindness. His spirit of enthusiasm for gardens and beauty is still an inspiration to us all today.

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David Lam with pelargoniums

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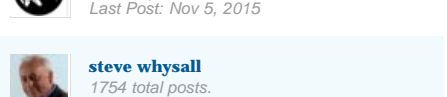
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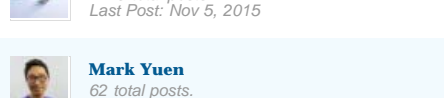
The Vancouver police have cordoned off Station Street behind the Ivanhoe Pub to investigate the city's 14th homicide this year.



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