Dating to the late 1930s, Rhododendron Glen has long been one of the most special and beloved places in Washington Park Arboretum. It has it all: dramatic topography, tall trees—including four enormous dawn redwoods (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*)—and a babbling brook, where dramatic sweeps of western skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus*) announce the arrival of spring. And of course, it’s filled with beautiful, unusual rhodies—such as *Rhododendron concatenans* and *R. eclectum*—and companion plants, such as alangium and magnolias.
Over time, however, important parts of the Glen have lost their luster. The canopy has become too dense in places, resulting in a loss of understory plants; trails have deteriorated and are impacting the stream; and key sections of the stream and its associated rock work have silted up and become ill defined. In fact, the original design for the Glen called for an integrated set of water features that were never fully optimized—including the Upper Pond, Lower Azalea Way Pond, and the stream running down the hillside connecting it all and then flowing into Arboretum Creek.

Now, thanks to a very generous gift of $750,000 from long-time Arboretum Foundation volunteer Mary Ellen Mulder and her husband, Gordon Mulder, the partners at the Arboretum have been presented with a unique opportunity to renew and augment this major park landmark. Moreover, because of the project’s focus on the stream, there is hope that it will have a cascading effect, generating interest and funding potential for additional, wider-reaching improvements.

“The Rhododendron Glen project has been identified as one of the most important Arboretum Master Plan priorities for the next five years,” says UW Botanic Gardens Interim Director Fred Hoyt. “Given its potential to improve the quality of our local waters, we believe that—beyond its immediate benefits—the project has the ability to attract matching funds from state and local organizations. It could even jumpstart significant improvements to the watershed in the entire central part of the Arboretum, including Arboretum Creek and the connections from the Japanese Garden pond.”

Site Analysis and Design
With the Mulders’ gift—augmented by a recent planning grant from the Seattle Garden Club—the Arboretum partners can now move ahead to the next stage of the process: conducting a comprehensive site analysis and developing a conceptual design. That planning stage is anticipated to begin later this year. The team anticipates that the design will help identify logical phases for the work as well as the interdependencies within various parts of the watershed.

While the design process for the central part of the Glen is being conducted, a joint team from the Arboretum Foundation, UW Botanic Gardens, and Seattle Parks and Recreation will simultaneously identify and begin some clean-up work, site preparation, and replacement plantings. These include eye-catching improvements to the upper and lower entrances to the Glen.
Upper Glen Entrance
“As you walk down the stairs from the eastern approach to the Glen, there is a landing area that offers a sweeping view and immediate perspective of the character of this special place,” says Jason Morse, Arboretum Foundation board president and landscape architect. “This landing should be the place that begs you to stop and take the perfect postcard photo, but the rhododendrons here have become more sparse over time, with only a few of the prized specimens visible. A new, lushly planted corridor adjacent to the stairs would create a dramatic and noticeable entrance.”

A seasonal crew will start removing aggressive groundcovers and weedy species from the area starting in April. This should also uncover some lovely rockwork that has been mostly obscured from view. A gift in memory of Caroline Feiss will augment the funds for additional plantings in the entrance area.

Lower Glen Entrance
With the completion of the Centennial Garden in 2017, many people now choose to enter the Glen from an existing—though newly popular—trail that runs from the outer edge of that garden up the hillside. Increased visitation to the Centennial Garden and use of that trail has brought more attention to the condition of the stream as it channels down into the Azalea Way Pond.

“This area of the stream currently is overgrown with blackberry and other invasive plants that are both unsightly and hide the channel. We’ll work to remove the persistent weeds and then define and mulch the area so new plantings that highlight the creek and improve its ecological function can be installed. We can turn this part of the stream into a feature that nicely complements the Centennial Garden,” says UW Botanic Gardens Curator Ray Larson.
Central Glen Plantings
When the core parts of the project begin, plantings in the heart of the Glen will also get a makeover.

“During the early years of the Glen, a diverse tapestry of rhododendrons and other woodland garden plants created a dynamic understory to an open tree canopy,” says Ray. “Over the years, however, the tree canopy has grown denser, causing the plants below to become increasingly sparse. Flowering decreased or ceased, and plants became leggy and starved for light. A combined approach, including canopy thinning and restoration of the plants at the ground and intermediate levels, will bring new life to this historic open space.”

Along with new rhododendrons, Ray says he plans to add mahonias, woodland perennials, additional members of the heather family, and ferns, as well as small specimen trees to build on existing collections of magnolias, snowbells and maples.

Watershed Enhancements
While perhaps less noticeable to the naked eye, the improvements to the watershed may provide the most far-reaching benefits of the project.

“We know there are overall connections between Arboretum Creek and Puget Sound, as well as the connecting flow through Rhododendron Glen and the Woodland Garden and the nearby Japanese Garden Pond,” says Fred.

The Rhododendron Glen stream is first observed at the eastern edge of the Arboretum. It is daylighted in some spots and runs through pipes and culverts in others. The stream channel has also been scoured and eroded during storm events between the upper and lower ponds.

In its current condition, it picks up runoff from the eroded walls of the lower stream channel, as well as from adjacent trails and the surrounding hillsides. Some of the anticipated improvements would be strategic placement of rocks, the addition of weirs, creation of a catchment pond to settle out any silt, and other mechanisms to clean and reduce the turbidity (cloudiness) of the water before it flows into the Lower Pond.

“The Upper Pond, which sits at the intersection of two well-used trails, offers a potentially lovely birds-eye view down the hill to Azalea Way,” says Jason. “However, time has taken its toll on this pond—it has silted up and lost most of its definition. We expect this to be a central focus within the comprehensive design, as well as looking at the areas of the stream above and below.”

Improving the quality and flow of the water moving into the Azalea Way Pond will have multiple benefits. It should help ameliorate the conditions that lead to regular summer algal blooms in the pond, and it will have help improve conditions for aquatic life and other wildlife farther downstream in the watershed.

We would like to express our deep gratitude to Mary Ellen and Gordon Mulder for making this project possible. Their gift is a catalytic one that, beyond its immediate and obvious benefits, will enable the Arboretum team to gain additional knowledge to springboard other projects in the watershed. We look forward to further celebrating the Mulders’ generosity at the Foundation’s June 19th Annual Meeting.

Jane Stonecipher is the interim executive director of the Arboretum Foundation.