NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

P.O.Box 3183 Courtenay B.C. Canada V9N 5N4 Vol. 12 No. 8

April 1
Executive meeting will be held at the home of **Jennifer and Robin Harrison,** 919 Highwood Dr., Comox. (Turn down Cambridge, off Pritchard, 919 is the first house on the corner of Cambridge and Highwood).

April 8
"Gardens in Victoria"
Bill Dale of the Victoria Rhodo Society will be here to tell us about some of the interesting and beautiful gardens to be found in the Victoria area.

March 14
Everyone who heard **Steve Hootman's** description and saw the lovely photographs he took of China in 1995 will remember them for a long time. Steve's enthusiasm and love of rhodos and the countryside which is their natural home, was catching, amd I feel sure many of us would love to make the same trip. We are all anxious to have him visit us again after the trip to Sikkim this spring. Thanks, Steve, we had a most enjoyable time visiting with you.

April 19
Sale of rhodos and alpine plants, by **Harry Wright and Bernie Guyader,** will be held at Haida Gold Gardens, 769 Chaster Rd., Courtenay, 9:00 am to 1:00 pm.

May 13
Garden tour and Annual Meeting will be held at **Linda Easton's** home on the Island Highway just north of Oyster Bay and south of York Road. Bring your own mug and chair please!

Please consider helping on the Executive Committee. Phone **Don Law** for further details. The work is not onerous, in fact it is an interesting and fun job. Your ideas and expertise will be of great value to the club.

May 24
Our annual tour of 6 gardens in the Comox-Courtenay area is being planned. Marion Lofthouse and Ann Chevrier are in charge of arrangements and will be asking members for help. Tickets and maps will be on sale at local nurseries.

MEMBER NOTES
We are saddened to report that one of our members, **John Cook**, died recently. He will be sorely missed.

A good rhodo fertilizer (10-8-6 plus trace elements) is available for members, at $16.50 per kg bag. Pick it up at Harry Wright's place.

Do you have one of the library books, borrowed in Nov. or Dec. of last year? It would be appreciated if books are kept for no longer than a month at a time, so other members can read them too. By the way, an order of new books has come in.

RHODO GARDEN
It is planned to plant out bed #3 on 12 April and your help is requested. Do you have rhodos to sell or donate? Can you be part of the work crew? Phone Harry Wright, 338-8345 by April 1.

RHODO SHOWS AND SALES
April 20 at the "Horse Barn" in the fairgrounds opposite Vanier School, Courtenay.

May 4 at the Thunderbird Hall, Campbell River. This hall is on the Indian Reserve, just off the Island Highway, more or less opposite the North Island College campus.

Members - please consider bringing trusses and staying to help set up the halls. Help is needed 10:00 am to 11:30 am. The public will be allowed in at noon both days. If you can't stay at 10:00, please come back later.

TIPS ON EXHIBITING TRUSSES

This useful information has been taken from an article in the Victoria Rhodo Society Newsletter, April 1996.

A day or two before the show, go around and make a list of the blooms you plan to pick, then check spelling of their names. Organize containers for transporting blooms to the show. Bottles in six-pack carriers are useful.

Picking always takes longer than you think, so start as early as possible the day before the show, and put branches or trusses in deep buckets or bottles of water, in a cool place. Look for trusses with straight stems. and sprays that will present themselves gracefully in the bottle. Prune judiciously if necessary. Almost-opened buds are good choices; they often open after being picked. Fully opened blooms might be finished before end of the show day, particularly if the weather is hot. Try to avoid severely chewed leaves.

TV PROGRAMS FOR GARDENERS

There are more of these all the time (and about time, too) and because the weather has not been very suitable for gardening on weekend mornings, this past month, I have been watching some of these programs.

At 8:30 am Sundays, Channel 4 (in our cable area) I find Rebecca's Garden to be full of great gardening ideas. For instance, make cement pathways by using aluminum foil pie-plates, at least 2" deep, for molds. Spray with cooking oil or smear with vaseline. If you want colour other than grey, mix powdered concrete colour with water, then add this plus more water to 6-8 cups of "Quick-crete" or similar concrete mix. Stir well in a bucket, then pour into your form. Level the top with a stick, bang it a couple of times to get rid of bubbles, then leave in a sheltered place for 24 hours before removing from the mold. You can decorate with bits of coloured tiles or press leaves into the surface if you wish. An advantage of this method is that you are making cement blocks that can be moved easily by a woman.

Another tip from Rebecca - make your own seed tape with paper towelling, and glue made of flour and water. Add a little food colouring if you wish. Drop blobs of glue on the paper, in even rows, with an eye-dropper, then add the seeds, one by one. This is a nice wet-day job. Leave for a few days to dry, then roll up your tapes and put away, ready to place in the garden later.

SOME OUTSTANDING DWARF RHODOS

Among my favorite Rhodo books is "Cox's Guide to Choosing Rhododendrons", written by **Peter & Kenneth Cox**, published by Batsford 1990 and listed in the Timber Press/Cavendish catalogues. Why? It is a small book, easy to tuck into a bag or purse and take on rhodo-hunting trips to the nurseries, and it contains descriptions and photos of most of the rhodos available to us and suitable for our area. I have made notes on some of the dwarf rhodos described in this little book, which should be useful if you are planning to go "dwarf-hunting".

If you have a small garden, or if you wish to use dwarf rhodos for a border in front of taller shrubs, here are some of the best. They are all hardy, will take more sun than most of the taller kinds, and are all species, though some of them have been used as parents for interesting hybrids.

R. calostrotum and sub-species riparium Calciphilum and riparium Nitens have large flat-faced flowers and bluish or silvery leaves on compact plants. Ssp. riparoides Rock's

form is taller, with deep purple flowers in spring and fall, and R.c. 'Gigha' gained an F.C.C. and is very compact with large rose-crimson flowers. These plants are easy to grow, easy to take cuttings from, and have spectacular flowers for their size.

R. campylocarpum is an easy to grow dwarf, and has been used for hybridizing such favorites as 'Moonstone' and 'Unique'. A dense, compact plant, unless in too much shade, with various shades of yellow flowers. Ssp. caloxanthum is more dwarf and compact. The best forms have striking glaucous-blue leaves. This plant demands excellent drainage to prevent stem-rot.

R. campylogynum is one of the best dwarfs, with its lovely little thimble-shaped flowers on long stalks above the foliage in unusual shades of pink and purple. The UBC form has the darkest flowers. This plant cannot stand too much sun or dry roots.

R. fastigiatum is another easy to grow and striking species, with tiny glaucous leaves and flowers of various shades of blue to purple. R. impeditum is virtually identical, but has greenish leaves. Another similar plant is R. orthocladum var. microleucum, a hardy, dense and dwarf plant with tiny leaves and masses of frost-hardy, small, pure-white flowers.

R. keiskei is the hardiest and most dwarf member of the Triflora subsection. It comes with pale to lemon-yellow flowers. The best forms include 'Ebino' and 'Yaku Fairy'. This last is a parent to 'Ginny Gee', 'Patty Bee' and many others. R. Hanceanum is a similar species and the very dwarf form 'Nanum' is very slow growing and scarce.

R. keleticum is another outstanding dwarf, flowering later than most of these listed. It has flat-faced, pale to deep crimson-purple flowers and a creeping or mounding habit. It loves full sun. The radicans group, is similar. It has deep-green, shiny leaves, the smallest of any rhodo. These plants do well in a rock-garden with a little shade.

R. Sargentianum is one of the best of the Pogonanthum section, whose main characteristic is the clusters of Daphne-like flowers in shades of white to yellow. 'Whitebait' has larger white flowers than usual, and 'Maricee' grows larger than the usual form. They have a lovely scent.

I find I have just scratched the surface on this subject, and will make a further list for a later newsletter. Look for the species rhodos at the shows and sales this spring, for it is not easy to find them in the ordinary nurseries. They are usually grown by specialists, and are often expensive because they take longer to grow to sale size.

P.S. In my experience, none of these plants are ever touched by deer or weevils. Small-leaved evergreen azaleas on the other hand, are "breakfast treats" for the deer and have to be protected with chicken-wire in winter.

RHODOS, LIKE FISH, HAVE SCALES

Time for a reminder of an article in the newsletter in 1991.
Some definitions:
Lepidote - covered in small scales
Elepidote - without scales
Indumentum - a protective woolly or hairy layer on the undersides of some lepidote rhodo leaves.
Tomentum - a dense woolly covering on the upper surface of some rhodo leaves.
Papillae - closely-spaced waxy pegs which cannot be wetted.
Scales - minute mushroom-like cups which allow an air layer next to the surface of the leaf, and if closely-enough packed, overlap and thus resist water. Some have such thin walls that water can be transpired directly from them.

The foliage of rhododendrons reflects the influence of climate and altitude in their original homes. Species with large leaves are able to endure the evaporation of moisture through such large surfaces only because they live in the humid mildness of the lower elevations where the atmosphere drips through much of the year, and the rate of transpiration is very low. As

the altitude increases, the size of the leaves of various species diminishes to (in pygmy alpines) the size of hemlock needles, the better to resist the effect of bitter winds in the high mountain passes, where most of the lepidotes grow.

There are specialized structures on the undersides of rhodo leaves, which are needed for survival in the extremes of climate in which they live. Stomata, tiny pores which control moisture in most plants, are unequal to the task, so rhodos have developed additional means. Scales are only one of these marvellously intricate structures.

The majority of lepidote species are found in the Eastern Himalayas where the year is divided into a rainy season (June to October), a cold season (November to March) and a hot season (April and May, when temperatures can reach 80F at 10,000 ft.)

In the rainy season, it is necessary to take advantage of the large quantities of water by taking it (and needed food dissolved in it) up through the roots and out through the leaf undersides, as rapidly as possible.

Three different stuctures have developed; papillae, indumentum and scales. The planned result of this is to absorb as much water as possible through the roots, extract nutrients from it, and pass it out into the air, during the short growing season.

Next comes the cold dry season, with the attendant struggle to conserve every bit of moisture. Now the papillae form miniature windbreaks, the indumentum acts as an insulating layer, and the scales become efficient little valves, absorbing a few drops of rain or dew when possible, and closing tightly, even secreting a varnish-like film which dries and forms a secondary protective barrier when necessary. The plants are now protected for the hot dry season which follows. All lepidote species (and some of their hybrids) have scales, and can be identified by this means. It is not easy to cross lepidote and elepidote species, so you can save yourself time and effort by checking before deciding on plants for propagating by seed. The pleasure of going around the garden looking at these beautiful little stuctures adds to our appreciation of the plants.

It is possible to buy a pocket-sized, hand-held illuminated microscope (30x) with which it is very easy to see the scales on rhodo leaves. Radio Shack often has them in stock for around $15 and they are useful for observing leaves, flowers and bugs.

Main source for this information: Rhododendrons of the World, by David Leach. Published by Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961.

COMPANION PLANTS FOR RHODOS

There are many herbacious perennials that make very satisfactory companions for rhodos. Here are the ones that do well in my shaded to partly shaded area.

Geraniums - G. macrorrhizum is a spreading groundcover that is happy in dry shade as well as in sunny positions. You can find varieties that range from white to bright pink. G. phaeum will take full shade and is a clump-forming geranium with dark purple flowers. The clump-types, if cut back severelly after flowering, will make a new tidy bed of leaves and often flower again in fall.

Hellebores - H. orientalis comes in many colours through white, pink, green and purple, and blooms in Feb. or March. There are many other kinds, and they all make handsome plants nearly year-round.

Pulmonarias - There are many attractive varieties, most with spotted leaves, flower colours white to blue. They bloom early in the year, and are happy in part to deep shade.

Hostas - There is a huge variety available now. Most do well in my garden. They have two enemies - slugs and deer. The slugs can be controlled. The deer? Good luck!

Answer to last month's puzzle: chikor, aloha, romeo, manitou, egret, naselle. The first letters spelling out the name of that most beautiful of rhododendrons **CARMEN**.