

# NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

P.O.Box 3183 Courtenay, B.C. Canada V9N 5N4

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## Feb. 4

Executive meeting will be held at the home of Bill & Barb Rozel, 535 Pritchard Rd., Comox.

## Feb. 11

Harry Wright will give a talk on garden design and landscaping. Harry has been President of this club several times; has a beautifully-landscaped garden (and many excellent rhodos) and worked as a landscaper for the City of Courtenay for many years.

## Jan. 14

There were questions and discussion on gardening problems, and John Challender explained the use of soaker hoses, drip irrigation and timing devices, all designed to conserve water in dry weather.

Coming Events: **Steve Hootman** of the Species Foundation will be our speaker at the March 14 meeting. Steve will be telling us about a

seed-collecting trip to China in 1995. On April 8 our speaker will be **Bill Dale** of Victoria. Bill has a garden full of - not only rhodos, but unusual perennials and shrubs, some of which are marginally hardy in our area, but which we can admire and try to grow.

## MEMBER NOTES

My first thought is that I should stop talking about the weather. Did my remarks about "the worst winters" bring on the Christmas storms this year? We were fortunate in our area, for we had only a fraction of the snow, floods and ruined property that our southern neighbours had.

**Ward Porter**, writing in the Nanaimo Rhodo Society newsletter for January, gave advice regarding repair of rhodos damaged by snow. "If you find larger plants with broken or semi-detached branches, you may be able to make use of the newest growth

and take cuttings if the wood is still green. A pseudograft can be done for limbs with wood still attached to the plant. Take some heavy twine and tie the limb back on. Then take black electrician's tape and wrap every exposed part of the wound. There is a 50% chance that the limb will callus over and survive."

Several members are having trouble keeping their Japanese maples alive. After reading an account of a talk given by **Don McWatt** (Island Specialty Nursery) in the Nanaimo newsletter, I can see why.

First, drainage. Perlite or granite grit can be used to improve drainage. Next, Verticillium wilt. An open wound can admit this fungus, which causes death of branches or even the whole tree. When pruning out dead wood, dip pruning shears in rubbing alcohol or other disinfectant on a regular basis.

"Don't let Japanese maples dry out during summer but restrict water after Sept. 1 in order to discourage late growth and allow the plant to harden off for winter".

Well, now I know why several of mine have died. I have all these problems, and discouraging late growth is the most impossible to rectify in this area.

For fall colour, perhaps we should find native American and European maples that colour up well.

### HOLLY FACTS

Hollies (*Ilex*) do well in this area, and make fine companion plants for rhodos. There are many attractive varieties, particularly the variegated ones.

Just remember a few facts: They seem to do well in part shade or on the edge of a forested area. Most hollies are dioecious, that is, male and female flowers are on different plants. Unfortunately you cannot trust varietal names - 'Golden Queen' is male and 'Golden King' is female. Holly trees don't bear flowers and fruit for about 15 years after planting (unless you buy one already 5-6 years old). Many variegated types are male. There are some hollies that look quite different from the usual plants - *Ilex aquifolium* 'Ferox Aurea' has prickles all over the leaves; *I.a.* 'Camellifolia' has large spineless leaves; the new 'Blue' hollies - *I.x meservae*

have blue-ish leaves and dark blue or purple stems; *I. crenata*, a smallish plant from Japan with a neat, dense and crowded habit and no spines, and *I. verticillata*, a deciduous holly from the Eastern U.S., that is simply loaded with berries for flower arranging. So, if you are looking for an attractive, (usually) evergreen tree that will be happy in our climate and acid soil, do try a holly or two.

### INEXPENSIVE PLANT SUPPORT

A great idea from a reader of *Amateur Gardening*. Save the plastic beer can holders, and link several together with strong thread, then stretch them over bamboo canes when plants such as hardy geraniums are up 4-6".

The stems will grow right through the holes and the plants will be much sturdier.

### WINTER INTEREST

This year our favorite winter-blooming shrubs and flowers are already a month late, but they are showing some activity. There are a few flowers on the *Hamamelis*, several snowdrops are almost out, daffs and crocus are an inch out of the ground. Flowers on the *Helleborus niger* (Christmas Rose) seem to be slow. I read they like magnesium, so I dashed out between showers the other day to give them a dose of Epsom Salts. There are flowers on the *Mahonia Japonica* - the snow

ruined some of them (and flowers on the *Viburnum x bodnantense* 'Dawn') but they have put on another flush of bloom, and *Daphne mezereum*, as usual, is bravely opening a few flowers. I cannot detect the perfume of the *sarcococca* flowers, but perhaps a sunny day will make a difference. All in all, I feel the first stirrings of spring.

### BOOK REVIEW

My Christmas book this year is a copy of "Plants of Coastal British Columbia, including Washington, Oregon & Alaska", compiled and edited by Pojar & MacKinnon, and published 1994 by the B.C. Ministry of Forests and Lone Pine Publishing.

This will be a very useful book to take along in the back pack or car when travelling along the coast. It is carefully indexed and everything is colour-coded so you can quickly find a tree, shrub, flower, grass or moss. Flowers are listed by families. There are keys to many plants, a glossary, photos, and distribution maps which will be of great value when trying to identify plants. Often, use made by native Indian people is also listed. I found it a very readable book, as well as stuffed full of information on most of the plants we are apt to come across in our travels around the seashore, forest or local mountains.

## RHODOS IN FEBRUARY

The first thing to do, as soon as possible, is to check for winter damage. Split or broken branches and weevil damage are the most obvious problems. Weevils don't hibernate or go south with the birds, alas. Spray vulnerable rhodos with a mixture of Safer's soap and Isotox, Diazanone or your favorite insecticide. Wear gloves, and don't spray on windy days. If we have heavy rain, repeat the treatment in a week. A little fritted trace elements or Epsom Salts for plants that look rather yellow, and 0-10-10 fertilizer when the weather warms up a bit.

It is possible that nurseries will have plants for sale before the end of the month - keep them in a protected place, especially if they are in flower, for a few weeks, until you feel sure winter has departed. When you take them out of pots, inspect the roots. Are they tightly wound round and round or in solid clumps against the sides of the pots? Make a few knife slashes and spread the roots. If they have been planted in clay-like soil, wash it all off. If they are in bark mulch, watch for wood-bugs and dunk in a pail of water to wash them out.

Prepare a nice hole for your plant, lined with bark mulch with a sprinkle of bone meal, and put the plant in. do not tramp it down with boots - just push and tamp with your hands. More bark mulch or decayed

leaves around the plant, and remember to keep it watered if we have a dry spring.

Be sure to read the label - is this plant hardy in our area? Will the flower colour fit in with nearby plants? How tall is it going to get? Most labels have this information on them, but if not, check the variety in a book or ask a knowledgeable member of the club. Labels that say nothing but "Red" or "White" on them are rather useless and you might end up being very disappointed with the plant.

Here are a few suggestions for rhodos that bloom early, are hardy in the area, and will be very satisfactory inhabitants of your garden. Note: in an early spring or a year when we have no winter, but frost in April or May, you may have to protect the flowers on cold nights.

Cilpinense. Pioneer. Praecox. Racil. Ramapo, Sapphire, Impeditum and many other dwarf, small-leaved purple or mauve-flowered plants, moupinense, P.J.M., Nymph, Cowslip, March Sun, Snow Queen, Lucy Lou and Baby Lou, Bo-peep, Chink, Cream Crest, Lemon Mist, the list can go on and on. Be warned - these plants can be encouraged to flower early in the greenhouse, but the blooms will be susceptible to frost damage once they are out in the garden.

## THE PLANT HUNTERS

It is not uncommon, these days, to read of, or to see on TV, some of the concerns regarding garbage at the top of Mt. Everest, or the difficulties encountered by local people in provision of food and hot showers for the many botanists and tourists who are presently hiking into remote areas of the Himalaya and China.

This little gem, found in an article on "The Great Plant Hunters" in a recent issue of *Amateur Gardening*, really caught my eye and my imagination. I quote:

**"Joseph Rock (1884 - 1962)**  
The most extraordinary of the group was Joseph Rock. The son of a barmy Viennese pastry cook, he taught himself Chinese as a boy, fled to America and finally ended up in Hawaii, where eventually he became Professor of Systematic Botany in the University. which did involve a lot of hard work and a little fibbing about a non-existent degree from the University of Vienna.

None of this stopped him from being sent to India to seek out the Kalaw Tree (*Hydnocarpus kurzii*), which was supposed to be a source of a cure for leprosy. He found it and went on to expeditions in China.

Rock had some grand ideas. He would commission large numbers of porters and mules. However remote the camp site

he would change for dinner and sit down at a perfectly laid table and be served with his favorite Viennese dishes, which he taught his Chinese cook.

Most of his plant introductions had already been collected, but he did find the wonderful *Paeonia suffruticosa* 'Rock's Variety' and the yellow-berried *Sorbus* 'Joseph Rock'"

### THE COMOX VALLEY RHODODENDRON GARDEN

As you know, work on the garden (on the river estuary side of the Tourist Bureau, on Cliffe Ave. just north of the Driftwood Mall) commenced in April 1996. A second bed of rhodos was planted in Sept., and Bed #3 and #4 are planned for April and Sept. of 1997. At present we are still waiting for word from the City of Courtenay before deciding on definite dates etc.

If you have any rhodos you can bear to part with, we would love to give them a good new home. There is money available for buying plants from individuals.

A sign for the garden is being considered, and a brochure which will be available at the Tourist Bureau giving information about the garden. Look for further information in the coming months.

**Harry Wright**

### ALL ABOUT R. AURICULATUM

This beautiful rhodo blooms in the summer - July or August in my garden, and both **Lynn Watts**, writing in the Seattle Rhododendronland, and **Allyne Cook** in an article for the Vancouver Rhodo Society Newsletter, give interesting details about the plant.

If you have room in the garden for only one or a few of the larger rhodos, you should consider *R. auriculatum*. It flowers as late as August, and the scarlet ribbon-like bracts of newly emerging foliage provide an interesting contrast to the bright green leaves.

It was discovered by **Augustine Henry** in China in 1885, and introduced into cultivation by E. H. Wilson in 1901. In its native habitat it is found at altitudes ranging to 7500 ft., between latitude 30 and 32 north. Here and in the British Isles it seems quite happy at sea-level, latitudes 45-55 north.

This rhodo is tree-like, upright, spreading, and will reach a height of 33 ft. in the wild, but seldom taller than 15 ft. in gardens. It has 8-12 inch long leaves and flowers in clusters of 6-15, 7-lobed, funnel-shaped and creamy white to rosy pink. Flower buds are large, conical and tapered to a definite point. This rhodo should be planted so the flowers are not burned by the mid-day summer sun. Allyne Cook adds "With regard

to the successful growing of *R. auriculatum*, the following should be considered. By the end of May, all surplus soil water has been drained away. From now on, the soil gets steadily drier. Moisture is replaced by rain and watering. As most people sprinkle ineffectively, there is no replacement of soil water. The quantity of water needed by large-leaved rhodos is considerable. By July, there is only sufficient soil water to produce flowers for a very brief time. Because of the profusion of insects, flowers that open for 2-3 days will be fertilized, then will die.

The success of the *R. auriculatum* hybrids in and around the Stanley Park Pitch and Putt is only because they are all sited on top of swamps where surplus water from the greens accumulates. They are not sitting IN water, but above it, so they have unlimited water during the flowering period. There is always a good bud set.

It is interesting to note that the early flowering rhodos have lots of soil water, but because the weather is cooler, insects are not as lively, fertilization of flowers takes longer, and early blooming flowers stay open longer."

*R. auriculatum* is indeed an interesting and decorative plant. Try to find room for one!