

# NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

P. O. Box 3283 Courtenay, B.C., Canada V9N 5N4

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## Feb 3

Executive meeting will be at the home of Guy Courchesne, 2781 Windermere, Cumberland. Drive down the Cumberland Road from Courtenay, and when you get to the "Y" in the road (note Health Centre sign on the right), keep going on the same (left-hand) road. Windermere is the 2nd road on your left. If you get lost, phone 336 - 8642.

## Feb 10

Bring your really tough gardening questions - a panel of "experts" will be ready to solve problems. I have some all ready - who has been eating rhodo leaves right down to the main veins this winter? Did the slugs ever go into hibernation or have they been nibbling anything green?

## Jan 13

The only day this winter (so far anyway) that we had snow - and it really came down for a few hours before changing to rain. Most members were not brave enough to try to drive in the mess. Ward Porter came from Nanaimo and provided a lively discussion for the small number of people who attended the meeting. Thanks, Ward, please come again when the weather is more kind.

## MEMBER NOTES

First, notice of activities at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific, 505 Quayle Rd., Victoria. Phone 479 - 6162. You will find the calendar for the year at the front desk, so make notes if you are planning a trip to Victoria. Meantime, I would like to mention the Spring Plant Sale on March 14, and the Summer Plant Sale on May 2. On April 17 there will be a discussion on Azaleas in the Greenhouse and Garden, and on May 16, Rhodo Day, Norm Todd will be on hand to lead a tour around the Rhodo Garden there.

The Sunday Times (London) has issued a rather complete list of gardening events which will take place in Britain during 1998. Bill Rozel retrieved the information from the Internet, and this list is also at the front desk. Be sure to look over this information if you are planning a trip overseas this year.

## WHAT TO DO FOR MY RHODOS IN FEBRUARY?

So much depends on the weather from now on. At the moment, with snowdrops, cyclamen cuum and Hamamelis mollis in full bloom, we might think it is spring. But we know it can still get quite cold. Some

writers recommend fertilizing rhodos in November. Here, it might be all washed away by Feb. But I think, because of all the extra rain we received in 1997, it is probably time to give your plants a little pick-me-up in the form of phosphorus. Give 1 tsp. per foot of height of a rhodo blend fertilizer, superphosphate, or bonemeal. Also, a little dolomite lime a week before or after the fertilizer. Sprinkle the lime on top of snow if possible - it then slowly sinks into the soil. Do this job any nice day in the next few weeks.

A useful organic fertilizer (recipe from the Territorial seed catalogue) is comprised of 4 parts fishmeal or seedmeal, 1 part dolomite lime and 1 part rock phosphate (or 1/2 part bonemeal and 1/2 part kelpmeal). All quantities by volume, for easy measuring. Canola seed meal can be obtained in many retail garden centres. It is high in nitrogen, has a moderate amount of phosphorus and very little potassium. Buy finely-ground agricultural or dolomite lime. DO NOT use quick lime or slaked lime in the garden. Bonemeal and rock phosphate are effective phosphate fertilizers; bonemeal is faster

acting but much more expensive. Kelpmeal adds potassium and all necessary trace elements.

Organic fertilizers are slow-release, with much less danger of burning or over-fertilizing plants than with other fertilizers. Don't broadcast the mixture - place it around plants, avoiding touching the stems. It would be wise to mix it with a little soil first. Place a little under plants that are being transplanted.

Another job that can be done on pleasant days this time of year is to scratch and stir around the leaves which were used as mulch, but which have flattened down into a solid mass (blame the rain, again).

You will likely find slugs under large leaves. Have a container ready to slip them into. There might be crocus or other bulbs trying to push up through the leaves, so don't knock their heads off.

### **SOME FUNDAMENTALS OF RHODO AND AZALEA CARE**

This material is derived from a booklet "The Fundamentals of Rhodo and Azalea Culture" produced by the ARS.

Rhodos and azaleas belong to the genus RHODODENDRON of the family ERICACEAE, sometimes called the HEATH family, which includes heaths

and heathers, blueberries, Kalmia, and many other decorative plants. They all do well in our climate.

These plants prefer light acid soils with a high content of organic matter, either mixed with the soil or added on top. They enjoy moisture - our heavy winter rains don't bother them as long as they have good drainage. "Wet feet" for any length of time results in disease or death. They need moisture in late summer also, in order to encourage flower buds for the following year. Unfortunately this is the driest time of year for us, so supplemental watering is necessary, as is mulch to help conserve moisture in the soil.

Usually, roots of these plants are in a compact ball, so it is easy to dig a hole larger than the rootball, line it with bark mulch or compost and a sprinkle of bonemeal, and place your rhodo in the hole with the bottom of the stem level with surrounding soil. A good soaking, especially if dry weather is forecast, mulch around the plant (but not touching the stem), and your rhodo is ready to grow.

If the plant came "balled and burlapped", remove all plastic string or burlap. "Real" burlap will rot out eventually. If the root ball looks dry, soak the plant in a pail of water while

you prepare the hole and soil amendments. Peat moss, once dried out, is nearly impossible to wet again, so if you use peat moss, be sure to mix it with coarser material first. By the way, peat moss will soak up hot water very quickly but is slow to dampen with cold water.

Where to plant your shrub is always a serious consideration. Did you buy a dwarf rhodo or azalea, or one which is apt to grow to 10 ft. in 5 years? Read the label carefully, look up the variety in a book or ask a knowledgeable friend or nurseryman. A rhodo labelled simply "Pink" is probably not a good buy, regardless of price.

Don't plant rhodos up against the house, or where a sunny wall or length of cement walk is nearby. They will soon succumb from heat stroke, dryness or too much lime. Dwarf rhodos and azaleas love a partly-shaded rock garden and make really good choices for small town gardens. Plants which are due to grow to 10 ft. or 20 ft. are good choices for the edge of woodlands.

Between these extremes are many plants which will grow to only 4-5 ft. in ten years. Here is where the wonderful "yak" hybrids come in. These yakushmanum rhodos are all hardy enough for our climate, though some flower buds

might suffer in some of our repeated freeze and thaw winters. They have not only masses of delicate flowers but beautiful leaves covered with white to brown indumentum and tomentum.

Rhodos generally do not need a lot of fertilizer. If you mulch with fresh sawdust, ammonium sulphate (high in nitrogen) will be needed for the use of bacteria which are busy breaking down the sawdust. Rhodo fertilizer with added trace elements should be offered several times in spring. If leaves look yellow between the veins, a tablespoonful of epsom salts dissolved in water will counterbalance the lack of magnesium. A little gypsum or agricultural lime is needed occasionally.

In general rhodos should not need pruning. Remove broken branches after a heavy snowfall. Huge old plants can be cut back severely when necessary. (Cut down to 6" or so, half of the bush one year, the other half the next, and you will have a nice short rhodo again in a few years).

In our climate, rhodos and azaleas are good value for the money for they are spectacular when in flower, long-lived, and easy to care for once you follow a few rules.

#### **MORE MEMBER NOTES**

**Gwen Wright** wishes to thank all the members for deciding to award her a Bronze Medal. She feels honoured and overwhelmed by the thoughtfulness of members of the society.

Gwen has worked ever since the group was formed in 1985, supporting Harry, her husband, in every way, offering advice on growing rhodos and many other plants, to everyone who asks, and (most importantly) always being the most reliable organizer of the kitchen and food for hungry rhodoholics. Her home and garden are always open to friends and visitors. Thanks, Gwen, the club could not function without you!

#### **Suggestions from Fine Gardening # 54, April 1997.**

This is the time of year to clean and sharpen garden tools for the coming season. An easy method for cleaning is to have two buckets - one containing sand and any old oil, the other sand only. After scraping dirt off shovels etc., push them in and out of the sand/oil bucket a few times, then put in sand bucket to drain. Rub the wooden handles with boiled linseed oil.

Driveways and paths that have become covered with moss, lichen or algae can be scrubbed with brush and vinegar, then rinsed with clean water. An old cushion covered with a

plastic bag makes a great kneeling pad in the garden.

Coffee filters, new or used and rinsed, make good liners for pots when transplanting your house plants.

Walk around the garden with a video camera, then review the pictures when planning changes. Flower colours that clash - paths that need to be widened, lawn that needs to be removed to make room for more rhodos - changes can be planned on a miserable winter day.

Large clumps of grasses such as pampas or miscanthus can be easily cut down if you wrap them tightly with string in several places (wear gloves to prevent being cut by the pampas). Use the weed eater to cut through the bundle at the base. In a warm winter, the pampas starts growing by January. Try to avoid cutting the new growth.

#### Quick notes on pruning clematis from Amateur Gardening:

First, the ones that give masses of flowers in early spring, such as montanas, alpinas and macropetalas. Prune only if they have outgrown their allotted space. Do not prune severely - they may die. Second, the large-flowered hybrids that start blooming

before June. Prune in Feb-Mar when fat new buds are well developed and easily seen. Take out all dead wood, snip off old ties, then cut right back to a strong pair of buds and tie each vine into position.

Finally, the large flowered hybrids, and some species, that bloom after mid-summer. These can be cut back to a strong pair of buds (2-3 ft. from the ground) in Feb. Mar.

A new plant should be shortened to 2 buds, 1-2 ft. above ground, as soon as you plant it.

### R. STRIGILLOSUM

Here is a striking plant that will grow to 20 ft. in 10-20 years. Striking because of the intense red flowers, 8-12 in a loose truss, perched over the downward hanging leaves, the branchlets covered with bristles, the dark red buds and the pale yellowish-green new growth.

Because it flowers early, it should be planted where there is protection from spring frosts. Early morning sun on frosted flower buds will do no good, and shade from the hottest afternoon sun is appreciated. It makes a splendid round symmetrical bush with flowers in all directions, if planted with plenty of space around it.

Several beautiful hybrids have

been derived from this species rhodo. Look for 'Crossroads', 'Double Winner' and 'Etta Burrows', all H.L. Larson crosses, 'Grace Seabrook', crossed with 'Jean Marie de Montague' by C.S. Seabrook, registered in 1967. The same cross by Frank Mossman, registered in 1972, gave us 'Taurus', considered by some to be THE BEST RHODO EVER. Another beautiful plant with hanging bells of brilliant red is 'Matador', produced in 1931 by Lord Aberconway. This plant was given an Award of Merit by the RHS in 1945.

Information gathered from "Greer's Guidebook", Cox's "The Larger Rhododendrons" and "Encyclopedia of Rhododendron Species" and van Gelderen and van Hoey Smith's "Rhododendron Portraits".



*R. strigillosum*

### EPIMEDIUMS

Here is a dainty, hardy little groundcover which should be

much more common in our gardens. Easy to please in our acid soil, they make yet another interesting companion for rhodos. They are evergreen, though you can trim off last year's leaves about the time the flowers appear in early spring. The new leaves follow the flowers.

Epimediums are related to mahonias and berberis, but the only similarity appears to be in the flowers, which in some varieties look like tiny yellow daffodils, dancing high above the plants.

Epimediums are happy in dense shade or in filtered sunshine. No pests or diseases seem to bother them - the slugs and deer have left them alone in my woods for the past 20 years!

Flowers and leaves show interesting variations in colour. There are white, yellow, red and mixed red and white combinations in the flowers, and the leaves of some varieties are yellow, orange and green in spring, changing to bright green for the summer. Others change to bright colours in fall, while some open bright green and stay that way until cut back (I left one plant for 5 years before trimming it off the path - the leaves never looked ratty, even after several heavy snow loads).