

# NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

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## 6 April

Executive meeting will be held at the home of **Marleen and Dave Crucq**, 2301 Seabank. Drive down Waveland to Seabank, turn right to 2301 on the corner of June Rd.

## 13 April

Our guest will be **Carol Dancer**, who will tell us all about growing rhodos on the Eastern seacoast of Canada.

## 11 May

The Annual General Meeting. We plan to tour a garden, then convene at the church for the business meeting and coffee. More exact details later. At the present time we still haven't lined up a secretary for the coming 2 years. Please, someone!

## 9 March

**Betty Kennedy** gave us a fantastic history of the Finnerty Garden at the University of Victoria. The trials and tribulations of the hard-working volunteers, battling flooding and mud, were enlightening and at times quite comical, from this distance. A lovely garden is the result of all their hard work, and Ms. Kennedy proved to be a very lively and entertaining

speaker. Thanks very much, and please come again.

**Marjorie Corsaut** gave an educational talk on growing plants from seedlings which have sprouted in the garden. First rule is - don't pull out weeds unless you are SURE they are weeds. Many of our garden plants drop seeds around their stems and these little fellows will thrive if given a chance. Marjorie gave a long list of successes in her garden. A very interesting talk.

## GARDEN TO REMEMBER

25 fortunate members of the club were able to visit **Bob Argall's** lovely garden the afternoon of 27 March. The rain held off for a few hours, but a late season meant many narcissi and other plants were not yet in bloom. Nevertheless, the group saw dozens of varieties of daffodils as well as tulips, crocuses, anemones, cyclamen and other spring-flowering bulbs in flower. There are several acres of lawn, ringed around with flower beds and shrubs, including many rhododendrons. There will be many more plants in bloom during the next several months, and members were invited to come "any time" to see the display.

After touring the garden, the group enjoyed coffee and cookies provided by club members in "the barn". We had a very enjoyable afternoon, and wish to thank Bob most sincerely for the opportunity to visit his garden.

## MEMBER NOTES

There are all kinds of details to list - hopefully I won't forget any important ones!

## 17 April

**Harry Wright and Bernie Guyader** will hold a sale of rhodos and alpine plants at Haida Gold Gardens, 769 Chaster, Courtenay.

**Linda Easton**, 4077 S. Is. Hwy, Campbell River, has rhodos for sale, including interesting species rhodos. Please phone first, and plan to visit on weekends.

**Paul Wurz**, 4367 Gordon Rd., Campbell River, is also in the rhodo business now, and has a large selection of plants for sale. Many members may be unfamiliar with this area of Campbell River, so I am including a map showing the location of several nurseries north of town.

## 25 April

Our Rhodo show and Sale at the Fairgrounds in Courtenay. Please plan to attend, and give a helping hand to the crew setting up or taking down the displays.

## 1 May

Bus tour to the Cowichan Valley. Have you paid for your seat? Remember to take a packable dessert.

## 2 May

Our second Show and Sale at the Willow Point Hall in Willow Point, south of Campbell River. Again, help is needed for setting up, displaying the rhodo trusses, and clean-up after the show.

## 16 May

Tour of 6 gardens from Bates Beach to various parts of Comox and Courtenay. Tickets are \$7, available at various garden centres in the Comox Valley and Campbell River. Your help will be welcome, to stamp tickets and welcome visitors to various gardens. At least 12 people are needed, so that no one will be obliged to spend the whole day in one garden.

## WHY RHODOS

On re-reading Graham Stuart Thomas's book "Colour in the Winter Garden" (3d Ed. Dent. 1984), I came across the following information, which I quote " No genus of plants has had so profound an effect upon the trend of gardening during the last 80 years as the rhododendron. In the days when labour was cheap the great garden owners planted hundreds of them, which now cover many acres...from Cornwall to the north-west of Scotland. Now, when only a few can employ a gardener, the rhodo, since the discovery of almost the entirety of its variations in the wild, has in many ways proved to be the most useful and valuable of all woody plants.

To put its value in a few words, this genus provides us with tiny creeping shrublets to giant shrubs, even trees, and among them will be found species and garden forms which flower at different times from January to August, and also compete in beautiful leaves and bark with the best of the shrubs in this book.

...But it is as foliage plants in particular and flowering plants as a secondary consideration that rhodos enter into these pages, and indeed, into any garden. Their value is immense, not only in their varied attractions but also because of the solidity of the bushes, which at once places them right in the forefront of useful evergreens, along with

bamboos, laurels and camellias, with which they make pleasing contrasts."

Mr. Thomas goes on to describe some of the more startling giant leaves, thick indumentum, decorative bark, aromatic foliage, and leaf colours and surfaces, which result in rhodos being the best shrubs for all seasons, regardless of when they bloom or the colour of the flower.

We are fortunate in this area to have the kind of temperatures and climate that these plants can tolerate or even relish. They must have acid soil and good drainage, which most of us can provide quite easily. We can protect them from severe sunburn and icy winds. We may have to provide water in summer, and help some plants to battle the weevils, but apart from these needs, they are very easy to care for, and give great pleasure to their owners.

## MORE NOTES AND TIPS FOR MEMBERS

Boiling water will kill weeds in sidewalk cracks or beside fences. An unwanted shrub can be killed with 3-4 containers of boiling water during one day.

A serrated grapefruit knife or an old paring knife can make a useful weeding tool, for twisting out single dandelions or other deep-rooted weeds.

**Peter and Kenneth Cox** are busy hybridizing new "bird" rhodos; 'Crane' has creamy white flowers and 'Pintail' has delicate pink flowers with long stamens. Evergreen azaleas bred by these men have "little animal" names. The latest is a sparkling white 'Arctic Fox'. It might be a year or two before we see them in this country.

## ROOT ROT - PHYTOPHTHORA WILT

**Margery Daughtrey** of Cornell University, writing in *Fine Gardening*, explains: Phytophthora wilt is a disease caused by any of several fungi, *P. cinnamomi* the most common one. Rhodos and azaleas are especially susceptible to this desastating root rot, which is associated with excessive soil moisture. The principal symptom is wilting of a lone branch or the entire plant. Wilting can also be caused by drought, rhodo borer or other problems.

This disease usually strikes newer plantings; it is unusual for a plant that has been growing well under one gardener's care for years to be stricken.

If you suspect a severely wilted plant has been attacked by phytophthora, gently scrape away some bark at the base. If you see a reddish brown patch or stripe, there is a good chance the plant was a victim. Unfortunately, there is nothing you can do but remove the plant, and avoid planting another susceptible shrub in that area.

There are probably no rhodo or azalea cultivars that are resistant to the disease. You can try drenching the soil with fungicide in the area, in hope that no other plant will be affected.

Prevention is the best cure. Do not overwater, and place rhodos in a well-drained area of the garden or plant in raised beds. Inspect the roots of containerized plants before purchase - roots should look whitish.

## INVASIVE GROUNDCOVERS

*Lamium galeobdolon* (called false lamium) probably purchased for a hanging basket, is a very hardy groundcover in this area, in fact invasive. I made the mistake of

planting it under azaleas and now pull it out by the barrow-load. A very decorative non-invasive relative named 'Herman's Pride' grows in upright clumps, with smaller leaves. It spreads slowly and can be divided but never sprawls through the bed.

### JACK LOFTHOUSE'S PROPAGATING CASE

Mr. Lofthouse of Vancouver has an interesting propagating case of his own design. There is a heating system in the lower section, made up of flood lights directed onto galvanized reflector plates that provide very even heating of the rooting medium, which is located in the section directly above the flood lamps. The two sections are separated by a sandwiched grid which holds the rooting medium, so that air passes through easily.

The sandwiched grid is also a Lofthouse invention, consisting of a layer of white plastic grid material (used to diffuse fluorescent lights), a layer of coarse screen and finally another layer of white plastic grid material.

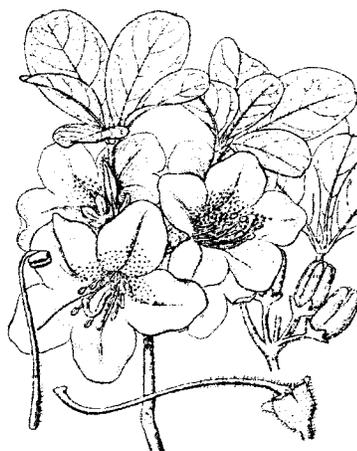
He then installed a misting system and a fan that draws air up through the rooting medium, removing excess moisture and providing plenty of air in the rooting mixture. He has obtained 95% rooting success with good quality cuttings and has rooted historically difficult-to-root clones quite readily in this propagating case.

### CONTAINER GARDENING

If you do a lot of container gardening, here is a book that you should borrow from the library: *Container Gardening*, written by **Ethne Clarke**, published 1996 by Sunburst Books, London.

This is mainly a picture book, with very little text, but the photographs are outstanding, and the ideas are

many and varied. There is even a recipe for hypertufa. There are articles on container basics, composts, how to plant in many different kinds of containers, and lists of suitable trees, shrubs, herbs, perennials biennials and annuals. The photos show many different ways of displaying the plants to their best advantage. This is a bright, cheerful book - just the right kind to browse through on a wet winter day.



Rhododendron schlippenbachii

### THOUGHTS ON BROWSING

The weather is slowly warming, and gardeners get itchy feet.

I have been browsing the catalogues and the nurseries, and am impressed with the variety of plants we are able to buy, compared to a few years ago. For instance, while visiting gardens in Scotland in early spring, I saw a plant with large, bright yellow buttercup-like flowers which made a lovely cheerful groundcover. "What is that?" I asked my hostess. "O, that old weed!" she replied. On delving through various gardening books I finally found its name to be celandine. But I have never found one in a nursery - until now, when I found it in Island Specialty's latest catalogue. Full name is *Ranunculus ficaria* or Lesser Celandine. I hope she brings one to our sale!

This same catalogue is stocking some of the super-hardy rhodos from Finland. Before you send one to Aunt May in Kelowna or Saskatoon, however, be sure to emphasize the importance of an acid soil and good drainage as well as shade from the hot sun in summer. They will likely have to plant their rhodo in a container or raised bed.

You can learn a great deal from visiting nurseries which have beds of shrubs and flowers planted out by the owners. How well does R. President Roosevelt do in that garden? Is it sheltered from strong winds? Is it in full sun - or full shade? Look - and ask questions. There is another variegated-leaf rhodo (*R. ponticum variegatum*) which might do much better in your garden. This plant is easier to please, will not snap off at the base, and has shiny dark leaves with white marks and nice dark purple flowers.

Both **Harry Wright** and **Linda Easton** have established gardens where rhodos are mixed with many suitable companion plants such as hostas and hellebores. **Paul Wurz** has beds of rhodos under fir trees, water features, and even some peacocks to liven up the garden. **Little River Nursery**, where club members **Jennifer and Robin Harrison** spend their days, has quantities of unusual rhodo companions such as hardy geraniums and ferns. All these people are willing and eager to share their experiences and gardening ideas. Give them your support when you go plant hunting.

### RHODODENDRONS ON LIMESTONE

**David Kinsman**, writing in "The Garden", March of this year, gives us some insight into this problem. Large areas in Britain have alkaline soil, and everyone loves rhodos. A German foundation has produced

"Inkarho" rhodos, hailed as the world's first lime-tolerant rhodos.

Most ericaceous plants, including rhodos, thrive in cool, moist temperate climates where the soil is well drained, nutrient-poor, acid and organic-rich. "They have evolved successfully to colonise and often dominate these low-nutrient ecosystems, where most nutrient elements are tightly bound within organic substrates.

This has been achieved largely through a symbiotic association between the roots and certain fungi, the so-called ericoid mycorrhizae. In the wild and most gardens nearly all roots are soon invaded and the mycorrhizae occupy the outer cell layer, replacing most of the functions of the normal root hairs.

The fungi can access nutrient elements from the organic components of the soil, which sources would not otherwise be available. Therefore the nutritional requirements of rhodos are really those of the rhodo-mycorrhizal association. As long as the soil is acid, in the range of 4.5-6.5 pH, the plants are happy".

**George Forrest and Frank Kingdon-Ward** often observed rhodos growing "on limestone" and there has been speculation ever since on how this could be. Forrest wrote "...most of the mountains of W and NW Yunnan are solely limestone formations and it is on those the greater number of rhodos are found. I am not in a position to give a decided opinion, but this I can state positively, that most of the rhodos I have collected in that region grow directly in, or on, pure limestone".

It is interesting to note plants from seed collected by Forrest and germinated in Britain, did not survive in any but acid soils.

Mr. Kinsman writes " I was intrigued by this unsolved problem and so made soil pH measurements when in Yunnan in 1996. Many of Forrest's collection areas were visited and I was able to confirm his field observations of rhodos growing over limestone. Yet pH measurements in the thin, often organic-rich soils overlying the limestone almost always indicated the soils to be acid (pH 4.5 - 5.9)...

The explanation, I concluded, must lie with the climate. The cold winter months are dry and evapotranspiration is low; little water is lost to the atmosphere by evaporation from vegetation and soil. In the warmer summer months, when evapotranspiration is high, the monsoon delivers large amounts of rainfall. Because rain is acid (about pH5), the plants, their shallow fibrous root systems and the upper soil layers are all bathed in acidic water which drains downward.

In the UK (and in many regions of North America. Ed.) there is no strongly developed wet or dry season but, over much of the country soils develop a net water deficit in the period from late spring to early autumn, when evapotranspiration is greater than rainfall. If the deeper mineral soils and rocks are calcareous, the alkaline waters are drawn up to the root zone, with chlorosis, or even death, the result". To the best of my knowledge, we on Vancouver Island do not have to worry about calcareous soils - we have acid rain and lots of it, all winter, which helps to keep our soil acid. In fact, this is probably why it is wise to give the rhodos a little dolomite lime every year or two.

#### **FLOWERING CHERRIES**

Do you like to have a flowering tree or two in the garden? Did you know there are early, mid-season and late

flowering cherries to be had? Ask for them by name to be sure.

Early Flowering: *Prunus cerasifera* has white flowers and edible fruit, "Beni-chidori" with bright pink flowers and "Accolade" with pale pink semi-double flowers.

Mid-season: "Ukon", semi-double creamy white flowers, *P. incisa* (The Fuji Cherry), pale pink or white flowers on a 25 ft. shrub, and *P. incisa* "Fujima", single white flowers and black fruit for the birds.

Late-flowering: *P. "Kanzan"* with its tight clusters of double pink flowers which, when they drop, give a beautiful pink lawn in your garden, "Amanogawa", pale pink, fragrant, a columnar tree, and "Ichiyo" with large, very pale pink flowers, grows to 25 ft. high and wide.

Information from Amateur Gardening 13 March 1999.



*Rhododendron oreodoxa*