

# NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

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## 2 Feb.

Executive meeting will be held at the home of **Gwen and Harry Wright**, 769 Chaster Rd., Courtenay.

## Feb.9

**Alan Murray** of the Cowichan Rhodo Club will be our speaker. Alan has a mountain-side garden stuffed with rhodos and, if what I read is true, a large quantity of magnolias. We must ask him about that, and about the Western Conference which is in the planning stages. How may we help?

## 12 Jan.

**Judy Walker**, a Landscape Architect, gave an inspiring talk, mainly on what not to do in your garden. We certainly looked at our spring plans with a critical eye after seeing some of her slides. A very instructive and entertaining evening. Thanks for coming, Judy, we look forward to hearing more from you in future.

**Bernie Guyader** gave a useful

talk on Hellebores, with several examples of leaves and plant form. These plants make marvellous companions for rhodos, will take full shade, and are never bothered with whatever winter throws at us. However, I can guarantee they are not easy to start from seed (when I do it). None of the seeds planted last summer sprouted, but there are dozens of self-seeded Oriental hybrids in my woods. Why do I bother trying? By the way, this is one plant that the deer have never touched (yet).

Bernie advised hellebores appreciate a little dolomite lime. H. orientalis hybrids should be divided in July or August, H. niger in February, after blooming.

## MEMBER NOTES

First, many thanks to **Ernie Exner** for the professional job he did building our new cupboard in the church storage room. There is room in it for the quantities of ARS Journals recently acquired, as well as other items such as extension cords etc.

**Judy Walker** is organizing material for a planned book on the life of **Mary Greig**. Any members who have remembrances they would like to share should contact her.

Remember, gardens are needed

for four purposes in May. New gardens, old gardens, specialist gardens - people are always interested and there is much to learn. You don't have to get rid of every last dandelion or scrub the driveway!

## NOTES FROM AMATEUR GARDENING (via another member reader)

### AGAINST ALL ODDS

*Mother Nature is at it again,  
She's doing her worst and being  
a pain.*

*We start in the spring by planting  
the seeds-*

*She beats us again and throws up  
the weeds.*

*Seedlings pop up, they look just  
right.*

*Greenfly abound. Oh! what a  
sight!*

*We spray and we weed, we think  
we're on top.*

*Botrytis arrives, another big flop.  
Planting out time, frost is about.*

*The next thing we know, we're  
having a drought.*

*But somehow, each time, we get  
something right.*

*Our garden this year is a  
beautiful sight.*

## EAT YOUR WINTER JASMINE

Not only do those bright little golden stars of the winter jasmine shine out to cheer us through the dark days, but these edible flowers make cheap and attractive

cake decorations! Dry the heads gently on a clean cloth, then brush over with lightly beaten egg white, and dredge thickly with berry sugar. Allow to dry thoroughly on waxed paper before using.

Welcome to new members **Kate Fairley, Astrid and Gilbert DeRooy.**

**KEN and DOT GIBSON** of Tofino have sent a report on damage to their rhodos in the Christmas snowfall this year. They were away and unable to brush the snow off their plants, but it was the heavy wet stuff which is difficult to dislodge. Tofino received 12" in 8 hours that day, one of the worst in recent history.

Six or seven 30-year-old rhodos were snapped off at or under ground level, six or more uprooted, and 50 or more damaged.

R. Anna Rose Whitney fared the worst - 5 plants are gone or damaged. Large plants of R. Fortunei and R. Red Walloper, covered with buds, were snapped off, and landed on the driveway. Interestingly enough, an 11 ft. R. sino grande with its huge broad leaves, shed the snow easily.

Ken now has giant holes in his display - but he will be out there, happily moving survivors around with a view to trying to avoid a similar disaster in future.

A few notes from the MARS newsletter of Nov/Dec 98. Here is **Ingeborg Woodsworth's** method of propagating deer ferns. Cut a frond in the fall and place it

on a water-soaked brick, wrap in plastic, put in a cool dark place, wait 5-6 months. You will find the brick is covered with little deer ferns! Ed. Note: I am going to try this with other ferns too, and will let you know how it goes!

Mayo Creek Gardens and Nursery, 6596 McLean Rd., Lake Cowichan, has a wild plant sanctuary as well as garden plants. Visitors are welcome, and will find a wide range of groundcovers, shrubs and bulbs for sale. Please call before driving down there - (250-749-6291).

**Don Bridgen**, a MARS member, has plant lists from EVERYWHERE and if you are looking for a special rhodo, he probably can steer you in the right direction. Phone him at Port Alberni 250-723-3069.

I am quoting from an article by **Diane Pertson** in this same newsletter. "Friday 13th of November, a service was held to mark the passing of **Veronica Milner**. An auspicious day, the 13th, to hold her funeral, Veronica would have said. She was fond of omens, good and bad. She died peacefully after retiring to bed on the evening of Nov. 5 - an unremarkable death to end a very remarkable lifetime of 90 years...

I wanted very much to see the property preserved, along with the collection of hundreds of rhodos, most of them species and first generation hybrids from the Royston nursery of Mary Greig.

I persevered, Veronica rallied around, Masapina College accepted the challenge and good fortune shone on us all..."

Some of our members have seen this wonderful garden and it will be a worth-while destination for a future garden tour.

#### **FROST - TENDER RHODOS**

Some of the most spectacular rhodos are, alas, not hardy in our area. Those of you who have visited **Dave Dougan's** garden will remember the giant rhodos he had planted in huge tubs and pots. Even in that area, close to Victoria, the pots have to be taken in to a frost-free shed or greenhouse for the winter. But if you can figure out a way to protect them from frost, you will be proud and happy when the fragrant, lily-like flowers open. Their native home is along the lower slopes of the Himalayas, where the climate is mild and wet. It stands to reason, then, that they are also going to need plenty of water in summer, when we usually don't get much rain.

#### **LARGE-LEAVED RHODOS**

Another group of eye-catching rhodos includes R. sinogrande and R. macabeanum, with huge, paddle-like leaves which must be protected from wind. Their home is a little higher in the mountains so they can put up with a little frost. They must have shelter from wind and hot sun, and they appreciate high atmospheric humidity. They too will have to be given extra water in our dry summers. The advantage of having these plants is that the leaves are so huge and spectacular, it doesn't matter if

they don't bloom for 10-20 years after planting. Another point in their favor is that, in winter, the leaves hang straight down like evergreen tree branches in alpine meadows, so they shed snow very easily.

#### **SMALL - LEAVED SPECIES**

These rhodos are much easier to grow than the two groups above. Their home is high in the mountains, or even in the arctic, where they hug the ground and are usually covered with a snow blanket for the winter. The leaves are tiny and often covered with scales, the flowers often large for the size of the plants, and borne in such profusion it is often hard to see the leaves. They are ideal plants for rockeries, or the front of borders, but even these appreciate a good regular soaking in our summer dry spells.

#### **HARDY HYBRID RHODOS**

Derived from all the above-mentioned are the hardy hybrids, which vary greatly in size of leaf, colour of flower, hardiness, and cultural needs, these rhodos are, in general, easier to grow than many of the types previously described.

Take a chance - try some of each!  
Ed.note: This article was written for the Nov. 1995 issue of our newsletter, but the information is useful any time.

#### **BOOK REVIEW**

**Steve Whysall**, who writes a regular column for the Vancouver Sun, has published a useful little book "**100 Best Plants for the Coastal Garden**" (Whitecap Books, 1998). For anyone new to the West Coast, this book would

be an ideal reference, for it lists descriptions of some of the best annuals, perennials, trees, shrubs - a little of everything one would want in a garden full of various plants.

I really liked his idea of naming and describing a plant, then advising where to plant it, how to care for it, and suggestions for good companions, and other varieties or colours in the same family.

I looked for rhododendrons and found only one described, R. 'Temple Belle', others mentioned - but after all, he wanted to talk about 100 garden plants, not just 100 rhodos.

I expect every plant in the book can be found in one or another local nursery. It is often difficult to find information on plants that will do well in our climate and acid soil. Size (height) at maturity is always mentioned, as is the relevant hardiness zone.

The first chapter, "Before we Begin" has this rather humorous but very sensible advice:

"Know your garden: All the plants in this book are so dependable you could beat them with a stick and they would not give up on you. But you need to do a little homework to get everything to work out. Take time to figure out where the hot spots are in your garden and where the frost pockets are....where the shady areas are and where the damp, boggy spots are....Get the right plant in the right place...."

As you can see, I really like this book, and you will too.

It is a B.C. book, written for B.C. gardeners. Look for a copy at your local bookstore.

#### **MORE MEMBER NOTES**

Garden jobs that need to be done in suitable weather, during the next few weeks:

Prune late-flowering shrubs such as *Buddleia davidii* by cutting back to about 2" above the old wood.

Ed. Note: I keep reading this in various books but every time I do it in my garden, the plant dies. Most people do it with no problems.

Hard-prune late blooming Clematis, such as 'Jackmanii', *texensis* and *viticella* types. They will flower on new wood produced this spring.

Apply a general fertilizer such as 7-7-7 or an organic mix of blood, fish and bonemeal, around shrubs.

Remove dead flower heads from hydrangeas, and take out weak, diseased or crossing stems at the base of the plant.

Plant bare-root trees and shrubs, as soon as possible. Prepare the soil beforehand with compost and bonemeal. After the end of March, buy container-grown plants.

Divide large clumps of perennial flowers, throw away the old congested centres and replant or take to a plant sale the healthy growth from the outside of the plants.

After a thorough weeding-out of grass and dandelions, spread a 2-4" thick mulch of compost, leaf-mould or bark around your shrubs. If this material is fresh, add a sprinkle of sulphate of ammonia for the bacteria to work on instead of taking nitrogen out of your plants.

Check plants that might be suffering from wind-rock or frost-heave, check plant ties and labels that might be too tight after several years' growth.

Prune shrubby hypericums down to new shoots, and "St. John's Wort" (*Hypericum calycinum*) right to the ground - you can even use the lawn mower on this one, if you have a solid mat of it.

This material, with added comments, taken from the March 1991 "Gardeners' World" magazine.

### COMPANIONS FOR RHODODENDRONS

We on Vancouver Island are fortunate that we live in an area where rhodos live happily with little effort on our part. They need extra water in our dry summers, and protection from harsh winter winds. But our soils suit them very well, and we have access to leaves, bark and seaweed to help keep the soil moist and acid.

Look for plants which enjoy similar soil, shade and water requirements, and which can extend the flowering season.

**Ground Covers:** If you are just starting the rhodo bed, mulch

with bark or compost mix, and start rooted cuttings of crawlers such as periwinkle, ivy or ajuga. Within a few years you will have a dense ground-cover which will keep out all weeds.

Ed. Note: I wrote most of this article in 1989, and meantime have read that some experts think ivy and periwinkle are the worst things you can plant with rhodos. What is your experience with them?

**Low Shrubs:** Interesting companions include *Gaultheria*, *Vaccinium*, Heathers, and other Rhodo relatives. Small conifers offer a change of height and colouring. *Kalmias* bloom a little later than most rhodos. A mixture of dwarf azaleas and dwarf rhodos can give an interesting edge to your bed.

**Herbaceous perennials** which make excellent companions include hardy geraniums (*G. macrorrhizum* with its dainty white or pink flowers and aromatic leaves is a favorite). Many hellebores bloom during winter and early spring. *Primulas* and *polyanthus*, *pulmonaria* and *mertensia*, *hostas* large and small, *irises* (Siberian and species), *dicentra*, *violas*, ferns of all kinds. Other favorites which need partial sun include *alchemilla*, *brunnera* and *lamium*.

**Many bulbous plants** make fine companions. The following are happy to live in the woods - with light in early spring and heavy shade all summer - *narcissus*, *Anemone apennina*, *blanda* and *nemerosa*, *galanthus*, *eranthus*, *scilla*, *chionodoxa*, species

*crocus*, *erithroniums*, *trilliums*, *cyclamen*, *arum italicum*, *fritillaria*. None of these, by the way, have ever been attacked by deer. *Muscari*, tulips and hyacinths, on the other hand, are relished by these animals, but make wonderful companions otherwise.

**Taller shrubs and small trees** which make fine companions include bamboos (clumping, not running types!), deciduous and evergreen azaleas, magnolias, *circidiphylum japonicum*, many varieties of Japanese maples, *hamamelis*, *corylopsis*, *piervis* and *viburnums*. Many of these bloom before or at the same time as rhodos. Shrubs which give summer and fall colour include *hydrangeas*, *genista*, *philadelphus*, *deutsias*.

Nearly all of these also offer brightly coloured leaves in the fall.

**Berries** also give fall colour and usually winter food for the birds. Easy and spectacular plants include the *cotoneasters*, *berberis*, *pyracantha* (watch for spiky prickles on the last two), *stranvaesia* (now may be included with the ~~cotoneasters~~), *sorbus*, *PNUTINIXS*, *pernettyas* (these can be invasive and you need both male and female plants in order to have berries), *mahonias*, *Arbutus unedo* and *A. menzeisii*.

Some varieties of birch, maple and cherry can give handsome bark all winter. A few hardy camellias in a corner and you have colour all year round.