



NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

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5 Jan

Executive meeting will be held at the home of Hilda Fawcett, 6514 Poulton Rd., Merville.

12 Jan.

Judy Walker, a member of the club some years ago, is back with us, to talk about Landscape Design, always an enlightening subject. We are sure to receive useful advice on this topic.

8 Dec.

What can I say? Another lively and entertaining party, with slides, games, useful gifts for gardeners and good food. Some unfortunate people missed the evening, due to distance or unreliable winter weather, and we are sorry. Maybe we should have "Christmas in July" parties?

MEMBER NOTES

I am going to start the New Year with GOOD NEWS, in fact THE FINAL WORD about slugs. After re-reading it a couple of times, I cannot help but wonder if Amateur Gardening was pulling our legs just a little when they printed the following in the 14 Nov. copy of the magazine:

"A high-tech solution to one of the gardener's greatest enemies could be available within a few years. If you've ever dreamed of a garden without slugs, the mechanized SlugBot could make it a reality, and put an end to chemical pellets or disposing of slugs by squashing them.

The machine has been devised by Dr. Ian Kelly at the University of West England, Bristol. SlugBot is about 3 ft. long and tracks down its prey by using two small cameras set on a mechanical arm.

One camera uses visible light, and the other, infra-red. The robot's brain picks out slugs with the normal camera, but rejects things like earthworms, which do not have the same

infra-red frequency, with the other camera.

Once a slug has been located, a 5 ft. arm, equipped with 3 pincers picks up the slug and puts it in a storage tank. When this is full, the SlugBot returns to base. Methane is then extracted from the slugs' bodies and used to power a generator, which can recharge the robot.

Dr. Kelly said the team chose slugs because they are a major pest and they thought robotic control would be a good idea. To make sure SlugBot keeps on top of the slippery pest, it will be active when the quarry is. This will mean working during the night, and resting during the day to conserve energy.

Dr. Kelly said he hoped to have the first machine built within a year. Although this will cost 'thousands', he hopes to eventually bring the price of the robot down to under a thousand pounds." Article printed in its entirety.

More good news:
Harry had his Christmas wish

granted, and we now have a Vice President, Paul Wurz. Thanks, Paul, for taking on what should be an interesting job.

On Dec. 8, **Len and Madeleine Simmons** were presented with bronze medals, small tokens of appreciation for all the work they have put forth on behalf of rhododendrons in general and our club in particular. Over the years since they joined, they have assisted in many ways to keep the club running smoothly. Recently they have been busy making 2 1/2 acres of maple, alder and fir trees into a rhododendron haven which includes many interesting and unusual companion plants. Yes, this couple certainly deserves praise and many thanks for all the difficult jobs they have cheerfully taken on in the past 15 years.

HARDY RHODOS

Many of us have friends or relatives in less salubrious parts of Canada, where they bemoan the fact that they can't have beautiful rhodos like we have. Help is at hand! An article in *Plant & Garden*, July 1997, describes some of the tough new rhodos on the market from - Finland! Since 1973

Peter Tigerstedt and **Marjatta Uosukainen**, researchers at the University of Helsinki, have been involved

in a breeding program to produce rhodos tough enough for Finland and other places in the world with similar climates. Experiments showed U.S.D.A Zone 3 (central B.C., Alberta, and areas around the Great Lakes) are well matched.

Work was started in 1930, to breed some of the hardier rhodos, and this work will continue for another 25 years. Meanwhile some 14,000 plants were placed in city parks in Helsinki. Eight cultivars have been named, and several of them are available at The Plant Farm, 177 Vesuvius Bay Rd. on Saltspring Island. V8K 1K3. Write for a catalogue. One of these rhodos, R. 'Peter Tigerstedt' has a lovely frilled white flower with a mottled red-maroon blotch.

A note from **Ernie Exner**:

If you would like to see a picture of our display garden in Courtenay, here is how to find it on the Internet: Go to www.hedgerows.com Then go to clubs and societies. Then go to Rhododendron Society of B.C. (ARS Dist 1) If you have problems, call Ernie at hipoint@mail.comox.island.net

Is anyone going to Britain this year? I can loan you the Handbook for 1999 of the RHS, in which you will find

all kinds of useful information such as gardens open to the public, courses in various garden crafts, tours, RHS shows.

MISCELLANEOUS

Here are gardening tips and tidbits from recent issues of *Amateur Gardening*.

We have had some really severe winds this winter. Be sure to check stakes and re-firm newly planted shrubs when the ground thaws out. (As I write, everything is frozen and the snow is gently falling).

An easy way to multiply heathers: First cut about 2" off the whole top of a plant, give the plant a good soaking, clean off any dead branches, and dig a hole deep enough to contain the whole plant except for the top 2". Space out all the shoots, and fill to soil surface level with a mix of peat and sand. You now have a colony of 15-30 little heather plants. Keep them well watered for a year, at which time, dig them up and place the rooted stems in a bed or into 3" pots, in a mix of peat and soil.

HEBES

What luck have you had with these little rhodo companion plants? Some are hardy here, some are not. Small-leaved varieties are supposedly the

hadiest. Do not prune them in autumn. Leave the spent flowers on them until spring, if they flowered in summer or autumn, then prune. Prune spring-flowering kinds immediately after flowering. Give the large-leaved varieties some protection from cold winds.

What next?

Scientists have found a gene in carrots which acts like anti-freeze, and have transplanted it to tobacco plants, to make them more resistant to cold.

Why did my cyclamen die?

Our old friend the vine weevil of course. This pest will attack indoor and outdoor plants, so check when repotting your Christmas cyclamen.

Did you get some fall planting done this year?

After such a dry summer, it was necessary to wait until the middle of October and even then, to give plants a good watering. Most trees and shrubs transplant more successfully in autumn, while the soil is still warm. Strong root growth can take place while very little top growth is being made. This gives the plants a head start in spring.

Here are some plants that thrive in dry sandy soil, close to the beach. Once established, they seem to get along well with just the bare minimum of

water. Look for Euphorbia characias 'Humpty Dumpty' (may be hard to find in this area), Spartium junceum, a broom-relative which has perfumed yellow blooms in fall and almost no leaves, Cistus 'Silver Pink', a neat bushy plant. Cistus is a short-lived shrub but easy to start from seed. Lavender Lavendula stoechas, with large pink 'ears' sticking up above the purple flowers. This might not be quite hardy here. There are two Tamarix, spring and fall blooming, both with tiny fuzzy pink flowers, almost no leaves. They both love the seaside, as does Hippophae rhamnoides, with thin grey leaves and bright orange berries (be sure to buy male and female plants). Plants such as these should be considered for anyone with limited water supply in summer.

Did you buy one of the little cycads brought to the meeting last fall? I would think they need to be kept as houseplants for a few years, but according to Amateur Gardening, some are fairly hardy when mature (to -5C in a corner protected from cold winds). Be sure roots are on the dry side when cold weather comes.

Check out outdoor plants in pots, for they may have become waterlogged during the heavy rains we have had

this fall. Poke a stick into the drain hole, to let water out, and stand the pot on a couple of laths or buy some of those little "feet" made to keep pots off the ground.

Did you know 35mm film cans hold just 1 oz. of powder? Handy for measuring out small quantities of fertilizer etc.

WHEN SHOULD I FEED MY RHODOS?

I am repeating advice given in an earlier newsletter. We had a nice fall of snow just before Christmas, and we may get more, so the first thing to do is rush out, while there is snow on the ground, and sprinkle a little dolomite lime around the plants. (1 tbsp. for a large plant, much less for smaller ones). It is two years since this was done in my garden, for there was almost no snow last winter.

Several weeks later (never apply lime and fertilizer at the same time), give the plants 1 tsp. per foot of a rhodo blend fertilizer, superphosphate or bonemeal. In Feb., when the weather is suitable, give them a little fritted trace elements or seaweed, and a foliar spray of 0-10-10 to encourage new growth.

In March, another tsp. per foot of height of fertilizer, superphosphate or bonemeal. All the above depends so

much on the weather here. If spring starts in Feb. you can hasten all these chores, and if it is still winter in March, fertilize when possible.

Remember, less is better than more. Old, 20 ft. rhodos don't need any fertilizer except leaf-mold.

In April, start battling weevils, and apply phosphate fertilizer if the job wasn't done earlier. In May, give a little full-strength rhodo fertilizer mix, and dead-head when/if possible. Spend some time admiring your plants, and make notes in other gardens on rhodos you covet, or better ways of arranging the garden.

In June, battle weevils, prune if necessary, and deadhead. July is time for full-strength fertilizer with plenty of water to make sure it soaks in. August is often spent giving water on a regular basis. A little phosphate fertilizer if you think it necessary, but **ABSOLUTELY NO MORE FERTILIZER CONTAINING NITROGEN** for the rest of the year.

If a plant has yellowish leaves, give it a little epsom salts, any time of year. Greer's Guide has good photos of various rhodo problems - check these pictures against any unhappy leaves on your plants.

Recently I have picked up many items of general

gardening interest, but by Feb. I'll be back to giving lots of rhodo advice again. Meantime -

THE LUMPERS AND SPLITTERS (taxonomists to you) have been at it again! According to Amateur Gardening, the botanical naming system is set for a big shake-up. A new system, based on DNA "fingerprinting" has rocked the scientific world, but gardeners probably won't accept it for another 20 years.

For the past 15 years, 100 scientists from around the world, have worked on the DNA system to decide which plants belong in which family, and this overturns the long-used system devised by Linnaeus.

Linnaeus classified plants on shared characteristics such as number of stamens or petals, and the system is used to cover the entire plant kingdom, by dividing and subdividing every plant into a giant family tree. This has seemed to serve us well for several hundred years.

The new study has revealed many strange results such as the pawpaw is related to the cabbage, the closest relative of the lotus is the plane tree (not a water lily) and the rose is closely related to stinging nettles and figs.

The number of plant families has been reduced from 565 to 464. This may be good, but as Peter Seabrook says "anyone can dissect a flower and count the parts and identify it - if plants are reclassified using genetic identification, that ability is lost. If botanists agree to use reclassification, in the short term (20 years) gardeners won't use it. Away from the laboratory, the good old human system of mechanical identification will be used".

LET IT SNOW--

Don't forget to knock snow off the rhodos when possible. If the snow partially thaws, then refreezes, the weight can cause branches to crack or break. This damages the plant's shape, and may let in diseases. Of course, it might give you just the excuse you needed to get rid of ugly branches and reshape the plant.

If a branch breaks on an early-flowering hamamelis, forsythia, cherry or plum, it will be worth while to try to encourage blossoms in the house. Put branches in a pail of water in the garage or other cool but frost-free place for a week or so, then gradually bring into warmth and light. Flowers will last longer in a cool room.