NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

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5 Oct.
Executive meeting will be held at the home of **Ernie Exner**, 2160 Stadacona Dr., Comox.

12 Oct.
Norm Todd from Victoria will tell us all about "A Tale of Thailand".

14 Sept.
Harry Wright reviewed the year at Haida Gold Gardens, and brought back for us many memories of beautiful flowers, winter scenes, and even a fierce animal (it looked like a wet, angry cat to me) that helps guard the garden. Snow White and the 7 dwarfs were also in evidence - both painted cement and rhodos of the same names. An educational and lively evening. Thanks, Harry, we really enjoyed your presentation.

9 Nov
We are hoping to have an update on the planned Rhodo Conference to be held in the fall of 2000 in Duncan. Start saving pennies and plan your time for this event - we are looking forward to helping to put on a "really big shew" for fellow rhodo enthusiasts from far and near!

MEMBER NOTES
Remember to bring your chequebook to the Oct. meeting - ARS membership ($35) is due soon and we don't want to miss out on any issues of the ARS Journal. I hope you all read it as soon as it comes - there are many useful articles that I don't mention in this newsletter because I expect you will find them for yourselves. However, I was shocked to hear one member say he/she never bothers to read it! What do people want in a specialist journal that they don't already get?

Many of us have suffered, the last few years, with early blight and late blight on tomatoes and potatoes, so much so that your editor didn't try to grow tomatoes this year. But here is a new and fascinating twist on the subject:

Phyllis Stapley carefully removed 5 huge beautiful potatoes (and many smaller ones) from a plant that had grown, mixed in with a rhodo. A healthy potato eye must have survived in the compost that had been placed around the rhodo in the spring. No blight, and obviously the potato enjoyed the dash of rhodo fertilizer that had been spread around the plants.

BERRIES
Some plants have large amounts of beautiful berries this fall, the result, I think, of the wet spring. Diane Pertson wrote on this subject, a year ago, in the MARS Newsletter and I am going to quote some of her descriptions: "Ruby red, snow white, porcelain blue, pink, violet, yellow, orange, green, royal blue, purple, black, turquoise and amethyst - berries are the jewels of the garden. In clumps and clusters, they ripen to accompany autumn's richly-coloured leaves, then persist like gaudy spangles on the dull bare branches of winter".

What a lovely description, and how true! However, it is not quite true that they persist on the branches, for the birds feast on many of them. Flocks of robins seem to come through my garden in the fall, just in time to eat the ripened berries on one cotoneaster or another. Returning robins in January clean up the last of the pyracantha berries. The snowberries usually turn to brown mush if we get cold weather. But for many weeks, we can enjoy these bright garden accents after most of the flowers are finished.

In general, cotoneasters, berberis,

pernettyas, species roses and various sorbus (Mountain Ash) are easy to grow and give a wonderful show every year here. Ms. Pertson lists several other, more exotic plants, which may or may not be hardy in our area, 80-100 miles north of where she lives. Callicarpa bodinieri (look for the selected variety C. bodinieri var. giraldii `Profusion' is perfectly hardy here and the bright purple berries are startling the say the least. Clerodendron trichotomum is probably hardy to around 5F, but Clerodendron bungei, which I have seen for sale here, may or may not survive 15F. Their berries are fascinating.

Deciduous Magnolias have huge fruits which turn into "chunky red pine cones" Cornus mas, has tiny yellow flowers in March and lovely "Cornelian cherries" in the fall. This shrub/tree is seldom seen here, though perfectly hardy. Celastrus orbiculatus is a seldom-seen vine which has yellow berries which split to show off the brilliant orange seeds. Birds don't bother with them until the end of a hard winter. This plant is hardy to 0F.

Local nurseries are bringing in many "new to us" shrubs and trees, so there are new taste treats for the birds in future. Make a point of checking out some of these plants, and remember to ask about berries. They make wonderful decorations for the fall and winter garden.

DROUGHT

Have you noticed the results of last summer's long dry spell? Many younger Douglas Firs and other evergreen trees have succumbed this summer, even though we had the wettest winter in years. Several rhodos are looking very unhappy also, probably as a result of the same dry conditions. I must dig up several yak hybrids and move them to the north side of a large deodar tree, where the rest of the yak gang live. They do not enjoy several months of full sun each year, and though they have been watered regularly, many of their 2nd and 3d year leaves are turning red and falling.

MORE ON COMPANION PLANTS

Lynn Watts, writing in the Seattle Rhodoland Newsletter, says: "Cedars and large maple trees have very invasive root systems that rob rhodos of moisture and nutrients. Douglas firs generally have dense and umbrella-like canopies that prevent rain from moistening the ground directly underneath.

Low ground-covers that have invasive, nutrient-robbing root systems include St. John's wort (Hypericum), Vinca major and v. minor, ajuga, Creeping Charlie and ivies. Plants used successfully include all forms of Gaultheria, Cornus canadensis, wild ginger, Primula, Epimedium, Mahonia, most ferns and all bulbs, including Trillium, Lilies and Cyclamen.

MORE MEMBER NOTES

A new supply of Greer's Guide has come in; the price is $26. Dates have been set for our Plant Sales and Rhodo Shows next year: Fair Grounds, Courtenay, 30 April, and Thunderbird Hall, Campbell River, 7 May. The Garden Tour is planned for 13 May, and suggestions for a few more gardens are needed.

Remember Harry's list of "Do-Gooder Rhodos"? He has about 3400 names on the list now and would like more. After an extremely dry summer, the wettest winter on record, a cold wet spring, and a late hot summer this year, there are likely revisions to be made to the list. Look over your rhodos and let Harry know any new suggestions you can make.

It was decided at the Sept. meeting that the following donations would be made. $500 to the Rhodo Species Foundation, and $500 to the Courtenay Millenium Park which is in progress at this time.

The Times Colonist for 23 Sept. reports that a memorial for **George Fraser** is to be unveiled in Beacon Hill Park on Saturday Sept. 25. The memorial stone, donated by Scottish organizations, will be placed near Fountain Lake in the park.

Mr. Fraser was instrumental in the formation of the gardens at Beacon Hill Park, and later moved to Ucluelet, where he worked for many years, hybridizing rhodos and growing other companion plants.

DWARF SHRUBS FOR RHODO COMPANIONS

The May Newsletter from the Fraser Valley Rhodo Society listed some suggestions for useful rhodo companions. Lyle and Rosemary brought plants to the meeting for discussion and sale. Rosemary's list included: Chamaecyparis Pisifera Minima,

a tiny slow-growing conifer, ideal for the alpine garden, and Chamaecyparis Obtusa Pygmaea, which grows to 1.5 m in height. Colour changes from yellow bronze in spring, to yellow-green, to a rich coppery bronze for the winter. Vaccinium vitis idaea minus is a tiny evergreen with pink flowers in spring followed by red berries. Thuya Yellow Ribbon has bright yellow foliage year-round, and is a slow-growing, dense rounded bush.

Fothergilla Gardenii is a dwarf, slow-growing form with bottle-brush white flowers and brilliant scarlet and gold autumn leaves. Andromeda Polifolia Blue Ice is a slow-growing evergreen shrub with a low mounding habit and steel-blue foliage. There are also pale pink flowers in May. How about Viburnum farreri Nanum, with wine-coloured stems and fragrant white flowers. Pieris japonica Little Heath is slow-growing and compact with reddish new growth.

Lyle's favorites included Tiarella Ninja, with variegated green/black foliage and pink spikes of flowers over a long period. He mentioned several Epimediums - E. youngianum Roseum, which will grow happily under trees, E. rubrum, useful for edging or rock gardens, with red flowers, E. versicoloour Sulphureum with yellow flowers. This plant likes shade. Your Editor will guarantee these plants are happy in heavy shade with no water all summer unless it rains, and the deer never touch them, never in 25 years.

Lyle also listed some favorite Hostas, including H. fortunei Patriot, new and very expensive this year. White edge to bright green leaves. H. Tardiana June has dense mounds of golden yellow leaves with irregular blue-green margins. H. Night before Christmas is variegated. H. Frances Williams, one of the best. Seersucker bluish leaves with a band of creamy yellow. H. Sea Lotus Leaf has roundish leaves puckered and upturned like a lotus leaf. H. Great Expectations has round, puckered, variegated leaves. These and many other favorites were shown at the meeting. All of these plants will do well here and are available in the local nurseries.

I have noticed, in wandering around the nurseries this fall, that there are many new (to me) plants for sale, and I often have trouble finding them in my books. I believe there is a constant supply of (new to us) plants coming from Japan, Korea, China, and even E. United States. Plants that were often considered not hardy here seem to be perfectly hardy. Perhaps the climate is slowly changing, but beware the REALLY cold spell that happens on the coast once every 20 years or so. The Victoria Rhodo newsletter for June has an account of garden recovery by **Ken Gibson.** Remember last winter's rain and a sudden snowfall devastated his hillside. Quoting from his description " I have gone the Cathedral Grove look - truckloads of lower branches severed, dirt and leaves removed from the upper side of plants, ditches to improve drainage, 150 rhodos with a tilt or poor posture lifted and guyed back, severe pruning to restore balance and allow drying out, removal of the Volkswagens and enhancement of the Cadillac varieties, air circulation and fertilizer to improve root systems.

Lessons learned: Watch for wires etc. restricting growth and weakening stems. Too much water and soil turning to loam is a problem. Don't water unless your plants start to droop. Mature plants can and should survive on their own."

IS IT TIME FOR A LITTLE HUMOUR AT OUR RHODO SHOWS?

I note in the Fraser South Rhodo Newsletter that they have trophies at their shows for the following trusses: Most flaccid, most elegantly weevil-notched, best hammerhead (whatever that means!), best speckled, and most lurid.

BUILDING A ROCK GARDEN

The columnist "Indumentum" writing in the Fraser South newsletter describes how he built his rock garden. It is sure to be a tremendous success, after all the work put into it. "For the soil I used a magic mix of equal parts of sand, pea gravel and compost. Rock plants demand perfect drainage for their tops but grow long roots down into the gravel and under rocks, searching out coolness and water. This is the key to their survival on dry windswept mountainsides with the occasional torrential rain. So it is also the key to survival in the garden.

The special soil mix was placed up to 3 ft. deep and is underlain by rock rubble for even more

drainage. After planting, to simulate mountain scree conditions, we topped off the soil with a mulch of clean pea gravel to exclude weeds.

Every time it rains, every drop of water available will pass though the gravel and move directly down to the plant roots. Pea gravel is more efficient in this way than bark mulch, which absorbs rainfall when it is dry, so less water is available for the plants. Bark mulch should not be used in a rock garden as it induces conditions which are too acidic. Until the deep roots are established on the new plants we will have to ensure the plants are well watered".

DO'S AND DON'TS OF RHODO CULTURE

This information taken from an article in the Quarterly Bulletin of the ARS for Fall, 1979. Nothing much has changed in the garden in 20 years, and everything in the article is as true now as when it was written by Alfred Raustein of Holbrook, N.Y. (At times I will paraphrase)

"A question frequently confronting the Rhodo grower is `why has my rhodo died?' Generally the primary factor for such fatality is improper soil culture - poor planting and growing conditions.

Yearly thousands of hybrid rhodos are propagated, grown on, and sold to the public. Unfortunately, many of these plants end up in the compost pile because of ignorance of basic requirements of these beautiful plants. The end result is that numerous old but fine varieties, suddenly fade out of existence and are replaced by a succession of new hybrids - which succumb to the same fate as their predecessors.

Why? This tragic situation is a result of two practises - using the hoe and rake, and indiscriminate use of chemical fertilizers which show utter disregard of the special requirements of rhodos and other ericaceous plants.

The simple rules for proper care have been known for a century. It is sad when one realizes that early explorers endured incredible hardship, even death, to bring these beautiful plants out of the wilderness into civilization.

At any new site, whether one stripped by the tract builder or an established piece of properly cared for land, the inexperienced new owner can make his sad and costly errors.

The first impulse is to clean all beds of debris commonly known as mulch. Never cultivate surface rooted plants such as rhodos, and never expose the roots by removing mulch. Peat moss has become popular as a mulch, but used alone, is not suitable. When it is dry it repels water. Fertilizer should not be added to peat moss or other top dressings except in early spring. Grass clippings are not suitable either because they mat and repel water and air. Fresh sawdust is another "no no". Add sulphate of ammonia to this material and stack it for a few months to allow bacteria to break it down.

Two or three inches of oak leaves and/or pine needles are among the very best materials for use as mulch, but in our area bark mulch, stable manure, sawdust or chips, small twigs and seaweed are excellent, especially if they are stacked for about 6 months before use.

The feeder roots of rhodos are very delicate white threads, produced in great quantities while the plant is in excellent growing state. These roots occupy the top 3-4" of earth and plants planted too deeply must produce new surface roots or die. It is wise to plant at the same level or slightly higher than the original growing environment, no deeper.

Plants do not eat like humans or other animals. They produce their own food through photosynthesis, a process using air, sun and water. Decayed mulch ends up as a powdery mold, furnishing the root system its needed nourishment.

At times, a little fertilizer may be necessary, but in general the plant asks for neglect. Given too much loving care and cultivation, it most likely will perish."