

# NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

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## Nov. 6

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

## Nov. 13

**Paul Wurz** plans to show slides and tell tales of his and Lynn's recent trips to New Zealand, October in rhodo time (their spring) and March (their fall).

## Oct. 9

A very instructive evening was spent, as **Bob Argall** gave useful information about narcissus and other spring bulbs, showing pictures of some of the unusual new narcissi as well as examples of some of the smaller bulbs that do well in our gardens, and several books. He advised N. Dutch Master has supplanted the old King Alfred daffodil, which is no longer available for

purchase. Dutch Master has a sturdy stem which better withstands the March winds. Daffs planted in partial shade seem to be ignored by the Narcissus bulb fly while those in full sun are attacked.

**Jim Greig** had interesting slides, maps and artifacts showing the countryside of Sikkim, where he visited recently. There are many tree-high rhodos, and sparkling-white mountains in that country and we enjoyed having a glimpse of how people live in that rugged land. No way anyone could or would want to dead-head those rhodos!

We all enjoyed the evening, and more time than usual was spent asking questions and learning from our speakers. **Kristi O'Donnell** was unable to come as plans for a giant plant sale were in progress at Meerkerk.

## MEMBER NOTES

The next morning, Oct. 10, some of our intrepid members drove off to Ucluelet, where over 20 rhodos were delivered, to be placed in or near the park dedicated to **George Fraser**.

Many thanks are due to members, including **Paul Wurz, Linda Easton, Madeleine Simmons, Bernie Guyader, Dave Crucq,**

**Ron Fidell, Dick Bonney and Harry Wright** donated well-grown plants for this venture. **Bill Dale** of Victoria is in charge of this enterprise and rhodos are being donated from each of the Island clubs.

**Grace Exner** has invited members to take one of Ernie's *Maddenii* rhodos and give it a good home, with a donation to the club. These are all tender here, hardy to +15F only. This may mean little unless we have a severe winter, but often the flower buds can be ruined by frost even though the plant is root-hardy. There are 5 rhodos, *R. iteophyllum*, *formosanum*, *burmanicum*, *crassum*, *calophyllum* (now a ssp. of *maddenii*), and *Fragrantissimum*, which is a hybrid of *edgeworthii* and *formosanum*. These are all 3-5 ft. plants, so they have done well in Ernie's Comox garden. Thank you so much, Grace, for your kind and considerate thoughts.

## A FEW GARDENING TIPS

**Grania Litwin**, writing in the Times-Colonist 18 October, made some interesting observations regarding the dry year we have recently experienced and the often serious effect on trees. A Saanich arborist, **Ron Carter**, said "The birch on Blanchard St., Victoria,

are in real trouble. It is difficult to say whether they are gone for good, because they have also been zeroed in by natural enemies like the Bronze Birch Borer too.

The garry oaks and douglas firs are fine, though one native tree that's taken a beating is Western red cedar. He notes that trees and shrubs that have been "babied along" for years by irrigation systems are most vulverable, because they never developed extensive root systems."

Arborist **Rob Bond** of View Tree Service explained stress to trees was exacerbated by the fact that drought conditions favor insects such as spider mites and aphids, which attack evergreen and deciduous trees and shrubs. He says lots of rhodos and other flowering shrubs have been lost. "Their leaves dried out then the summer sun scorched and burned them extra quickly."

Although there was some rain recently Bond said it is not nearly enough. "We need weeks and weeks of rain to replace what the soil has given up. You need something like six inches of rain to penetrate an inch of soil. For water to reach down a foot or two you would need a month or two of rain."

What to do? Keep watering in suitable weather. View Tree Service recommends mixing ground kelp with water and injecting it into the soil around trees, to stimulate the roots. Mulch is good too. "It adds natural nutrients when it breaks down, regulates the soil temperature, and keeps moisture

in the ground".

Mr. Bond recommends composted chip mulch, better, he thinks than bark mulch, because it includes the whole tree, not just the bark. It is ground and processed, then composted for a couple of years.

**Valerie Murray** of the Victoria Hardy Plant Group recommends doing away with plants that need water every few days. Why be a slave to the hose when there are so many interesting plants from Australia, New Zealand, Chile and around the Mediterranean that are becoming increasingly available to us.

Where does all this leave us with our precious rhodos? Mulch, water when possible, give protection from the hot afternoon sun, and try to plant them where they have high shade from trees whose roots go down deeply.

#### **ROOTING HORMONES**

I found several useful articles in the Nov/Dec 2000 issue of Fine Gardening. Plants produce auxins, one of 3 kinds of natural hormones. These decompose quickly once extracted from a plant, so synthetic hormones have been developed whose life is longer. However if you have a container several years old it might be best to garbage it and buy new. Some of these products have a fungicide added, but you can also add a little fungicide when watering your cuttings. Some plants form roots quickly, others take longer or not at all. Willows, fositythias and chrysanthemums root easily with no hormones added.

Willows seem to release the auxins easily, so you can cut a few branch tips to add to pelargonium or coleus cuttings in a glass of water and you will soon see roots. You can chop willow branches into 1" pieces, mash with a hammer, and pack a small container with them. Add water and steep for 24 hours. This gives you "willow tea" which can be used for watering cuttings.

#### **WHAT IS ORGANIC**

The same issue of Fine Gardening gives a little insight. **Lee Reich** says "Organic" in gardening generally means "natural". Organic matter is material derived from what is or was living. In chemistry, organic refers to molecules containing carbon. Originally the carbon-containing molecules were derived from living things, but there are many synthetic molecules that might contain carbon - DDT and 2.4-D for instance.

Recently, the US Federal Govt. has been working on guidelines and standards. So far it has been decided that composted sewage sludge and synthetically produced fertilizers ganerally cannot be used in organic agriculture. Concentrated, mined, naturally occurring fertilizers are allowed limited use.

#### **AGING POTS**

More tips from **Fine Gardening**, July/Aug 2000. A quick way to make terra- cotta or hypertufa pots look old is to mix up a pinch of tomato fertilizer to 2 1/2 cups of buttermilk, add some rainwater and dried and chopped-up moss. Smear this material on the pots and leave them in a shaded corner

for a few months or a year.

\*Water your hanging baskets with ice cubes - the water sinks in more slowly.

\*Use 5 gal. buckets with the bottoms cut out for containing some of the wide-ranging bamboos for a few years. Dig a hole deep enough to contain the buckets, and keep an eye out for little "fingers" sneaking out of the rims. This will likely work with some of the dwarf types of bamboo, but not with *Sasa Veitchii*, which is a beautiful but determined thug.

\*Here's a hint I have often used myself. When we put in the pool, I arranged pavers around it, planting various thymes and other dwarf plants in between. This area has become covered with spreaders, so when I need space for a new treasure I just take out one of the pavers. The writer of the magazine article lifts her pavers, and digs holes to which she adds leaves, grass and other plant trimmings. Later the good soil can be dug out and more organic material added - or a plant can be placed in the hole and the paver removed.

\*Another reader of the magazine takes a squeeze bottle of flour along when mowing the lawn. When a weed is spotted, she just squeezes a little flour on it, then goes back later to dig it out.

#### **A NEW SLUG BAIT - SLUGGO**

I don't know if this is available in Canada but look on labels for the active ingredients, iron phosphate and wheat gluten. This material kills the slugs, and any left over

breaks down into iron and phosphorus which are found naturally in soil.

#### **RHODODENDRONS ON A WESTERN SHORE**

Continuation of **Leslie Drew's** article in the (RHS) *Rhodos* 1991. The first extensive use of rhodos was in the creation of public parks. John Blair, born and trained in Scotland, imported them in 1889 for a mass planting in Victoria's Beacon Hill Park. Still in situ and flourishing, these Waterer hybrids included 'Mrs. John Clutton', 'Fastuosum Flore Pleno' and 'Mrs. John Waterer'.

Enticed out of retirement by the park and landscaping contract (subscribed by leading citizens at the mayor's urging), Blair had spent his working life laying out American parks and estates notably in Chicago, so when he ordered the rhodos from a Pennsylvania nursery he was probably dealing from experience. Very soon, and for the next seventy years, rhodos as plants would come almost entirely from England and Holland. Blair himself, meanwhile, remains a classic example of the British Columbian predilection for engaging men trained in the British Isles when gardening expertise was required.

Ed. Note: Here I will digress a little to note that in a report on George Fraser's rhodos, Bill Dale says:

"When John Blair heard of the great land available on Vancouver Island, he came north and moved his family to a lot he purchased at Sathlam near Duncan. When he won the contest to build Beacon Hill Park, the first thing he did

was to hire another Scot by the name of George Fraser to be his foreman. This was a wise move, and these two Scottish immigrants were friends until Blair's death in 1906."

#### **SNIPPETS FROM SAYWARD**

**Rose-Marie** continues to provide us with her personal views on life in the gardening world.

"Fall colour in the garden is one of the consolations of the waning year. In the rhodo family, the deciduous azaleas reliably put on a bright display in spite of wet, dark weather. I think my favorite is *R. viscosum*, a tough azalea that doesn't mind boggy parts of the garden (it is also called Swamp Honeysuckle) In late spring its abundant creamy blooms are intensely fragrant, and in the fall its brightly coloured leaves stay on the plant for a long time. My other fall favourite is *R. schlippenbachii*, Royal Azalea. Its pale pink spring flowers are exquisite, and the fall colour is exceptional. My plant is still small, but it is so colourful that it catches the eye from a considerable distance.

A couple of favourite rhodo companions have served my fall garden well for many years. Surprisingly seldom grown, *Enkianthus campanulatus* blazes bright red for much of October. This deciduous shrub has small clusters of delicate yellow and red flowers in spring. Its growing requirements are the same as those of rhodos, including excellent drainage. *Fothergilla* shares these requirements. It has charming, brush-shaped white flowers in spring, and spectacular fall foliage, more yellow-orange than red. Its leaves begin to turn

late in October, when many others are finished, so that it prolongs the seasonal display very effectively. *Fothergilla major*, which grows slowly to 6 ft., is most often recommended. However, I grow the dwarf *Fothergilla gardenii*, to 3 ft., and while it is normally regarded as less vigorous, both my plants have been remarkably easy and dependable throughout 20 years in the garden.

The maples and oaks, of course, are the stars of autumn colour. This year two of my seed-grown infants have impressed me with their colour show. A small tartarian maple (*Acer tataricum* subsp. *ginnala*) flamed bright scarlet in its 2 gal. pot. A tiny pin oak (*Quercus palustris*), grown from an acorn picked up near Vancouver General Hospital, turned its half-dozen leaves the most intense shade of red imaginable. I suppose the colour intensity was partly brought on by those little trees being in pots, though they were well-watered and in part shade. I hope they continue the display when they grow up! The paperbark maple (*Acer griseum*) doesn't need fall colour to be one of the most welcome trees in a garden, but it nonetheless provides a fine, bright show, a little later than the other maples, so doubly welcome.

All too soon the garden's last hurrah of colour will be over as we slip towards a grey coastal winter. Thank goodness for the rhodos, that remain a shiny green presence throughout the garden year, their chubby flower buds promising a better spring than ever.

**Rosemary Verey**, British gardener and writer extraordinaire, died earlier this year. So much of my inspiration has come from her books that there are few garden activities that don't bring her to mind in some way. At this time of year, as I prepare to plant bulbs, I remember that the best advice on planting came from her. Plant them in long ribbons meandering continuously through a bed. This looks quite wonderful, and as the planting matures and the ribbons become thicker, it gets better and better.

I tend to prefer the smaller snow crocus, and use only one variety in each area. Last year my crocus plantings were badly damaged by a marauding rabbit, so my ribbon-making has to begin anew this fall. Rabbit control doesn't come up in Mrs. Verey's books, and perhaps my control methods might be inspired by the style of a more local heroine, *Cougar Annie*".

Ed. Note: Various plants seem to act differently in different gardens. I too love the little species crocus, and 20 years ago planted several dozen in various beds. The flowers get bashed down time after time by snow or heavy rain and I seldom see a seed head; nevertheless there are now countless thousands of these crocus, mainly *C. thomasianus* crossed with others, all through the lawns. They aren't ribbons, they are carpets!

## MILNER GARDEN

Sunday Oct. 21 was Open House at the Milner Garden in Qualicum. **Phyllis Stapley** invited me to go with her, and we had a lovely day there. Yes, it rained in the morning, but everyone had rain gear and umbrellas, and there was plenty of hot coffee and delicious cookies to help keep our strength up. The garden is lovely, with several late-blooming shrubs and trees noted as well as many flowers. Everyone spent time in the nursery, where a sale of plants, seedlings and cuttings of plants in the garden, was in progress. There were large numbers of enthusiastic and knowledgeable volunteers in the garden, helping to guide people and answer the many questions.

It was not necessary to walk down the road as giant golf carts were provided. There is, however, a lovely trail through the woods which made for easy walking among the giant Douglas Firs and sword ferns.

When the rhodos bloom during April and May, (there are 500 of them) the place will be a must-see destination for garden lovers. This is a mature garden, with many rhodos 10-15 ft. in height. Firs in the garden area have been limbed quite high up, a perfect setting for the tall rhodos. This garden is one of the treasures of our Island. Malaspina College is very fortunate to have been given the chance to care for it.