

NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

P.O. Box 3183 Courtenay, B.C., Canada V9N 5N4

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Articles not credited are by the editor.
The club meets the second Tuesday
of the month, except July and
August, at the United Church on
Comox Ave., Comox 7:30 p.m.

5 Feb.

Executive meeting at the home of
Kirsten Emmott, 170 Ellis St.,
Comox, which is a couple of blocks
down the hill from the church, close
to the water.

12 Feb.

Regular meeting but NOT at the
regular place. From central Comox,
drive down Pritchard to Knight Road,
past Farmer Dan's and Seiffert's
Market gardens, to the Womens
Institute Hall. From the Campbell
River side, drive down Ryan Road to
the CFB Comox gate, then right on
Military Row to Knight Road.

Our speaker will be Steve
Hootman, Director of the Rhodo
Species Foundation Garden at
Federal Way, Wash. This man has so
many interesting subjects to talk
about, from travels in China to plans
for the Species Garden, that one

evening will likely not be satisfying
enough for our members. **Bernie
Guyader** will offer good advice on
the use of fertilizers. Be sure to
attend this meeting!

8 Jan.

Paul Wurz and Mary Palmer
showed slides of gardens and rhodos
taken in gardens on Whidbey Is. last
spring. Members were intrigued with
beautiful new rhodos such as Elsie
Watson and Starbright Champagne
and the wonderful indumentum on
Hodgsonii Infinity, made up of Lem's
Cameo x Bureavii x Vanessa Pastel.
The rest of the evening was taken up
with gardening questions and
answers, with **Bernie Guyader** as
moderator. Useful tips and problem-
solving were thoroughly discussed.

BOOK REVIEW

In October there was an enthusiastic
review, in Amateur Gardening, of a
new book "Seeds", by **Jekka
McVicar**, with photography by
Marianne Majerus, and published in
Canada by Whitecap, cost about
\$30.00.

This really is an outstanding book, for
the photographs as well as the text.
Jekka McVicar has a successful herb
nursery in England, and has written
several books on the subject. In this
book she has included basic
information about different types of
seeds, how to harvest, store and plant
them.

To quote Ms. McVicar: "All the
plants in the book have been chosen
with simple criteria in mind. They are
all either common garden plants,

whose seeds are simple to collect, or
plants whose seeds are easily
available through retailers".

Well, the suggestions are not always
for the most simple seeds, for
instance ferns, palms and cacti, but
the instructions are always simple -
many of them laid out like cake
recipes. After perusing some of the
photographs you will want to "grow
one of those - right now!". Yes,
there are simple instructions for
growing rhodos as well as many other
shrubs.

I ordered my copy from Page 11 in
Campbell River - I am sure it can be
purchased from a Comox or
Courtenay book store also. It is a
"must have" book, in my opinion, for
anyone who enjoys starting plants
from seeds.

DATES TO REMEMBER

Time to mark your calendars so you
can plan to attend rhodo shows in
other towns, if and when you happen
to be there, as well as important dates
in our own area. I will add to this list
whenever information comes in.

April 6 Peace Arch Rhodo Society
Show and Sale

April 20 Fraser South Rhodo Society

Ap[ril 26-27 Victoria Rhodo Society

April 27 Mars Truss Show & Sale

April 18 or 25 (suggested
dates) NIRS bus tour Victoria gardens
(details not complete at this time)

May 5 NIRS Show & Sale

May 5-6 Filberg Lodge Garden Show
(we will have a booth again this year)

May 11 Tour of 6 gardens organized

by NIRS.

May 14 Our Annual Meeting.

Consider allowing your name to stand for an interesting executive position.

May 9-12 Rhodo time at Milner Gardens.

May 18 Open House,
George Fraser Garden, Ucluelet.

RHODODENDRON PONTICUM

I have often described the acres of woodland "infested" by this amazing plant in Britain. There was a workshop on the subject of "how to get rid of it" in Scotland last Nov., and on reading a report, Alan Campbell of the Cowichan Rhodo group (Dec. 2001 newsletter) wrote to Ken Cox for his thoughts on the subject. I quote from Mr. Cox's reply:

"R. ponticum is such a serious weed in parts of the UK that a noxious pest is being sought to control it.

Whatever is used will probably kill all other rhodos too, so we have a right to be worried. We could probably import one from New Zealand where they have the worst rhodo pests I have seen. (Thrips are the most unsightly, though they say they were imported from abroad).

David Attenborough, normally a reasonable and fair man, talked such rubbish in his last BBC documentary about it that I wrote to complain.

The BBC did at least admit it was somewhat exaggerated.

Attenborough claimed that ponticum 'poisoned the land' which is certainly not true. But it does spread by seed and suckers to totally dominate the landscape. The "scotch broom" of the west of the UK for all you living on the Pacific Coast.

Many of the postcards on sale in the UK show castles, lakes and lochs and acres of ponticum. I'm sure most people think it is native but it was planted for game bird cover by

gamekeepers in the 19th century and now they can't get rid of it.

It is a problem wherever rainfall reaches over 50 inches a year. Here at Glendoick we have less than 30 in. and it spreads very slowly if at all. We have a wood full of it and we have never seen a single self-sown seedling. Only 30 miles west it spreads much faster. I have heard people say that it is a super strain with catawbiense mixed up in it. This is nonsense: the foliage of ponticum is very distinctive and dark green, narrow and shiny. R. catawbiense gives all its hybrids a very distinct convex oval leaf. And catawbiense dies here; it hates our climate for some reason, though the selections such as cat. album grow fine.

If you want to see ponticum in flower, mid-June is probably the peak. It is spectacular." **Ken Cox**

Ed. Note: There is always something new to worry about for sure. As you know, all the rhodos I planted in "our woods" in the 1970s came from Mr. Stewart, who had a rhodo garden/nursery on Cliffe Ave. in Courtenay at that time. All the plants took many years to bloom, and when they did, most of them looked more or less like ponticums. I now have a solid patch of rhodos in one spot, either seedlings or branches knocked down by snow and layered. Sounds like I have a big clean-up job to do before these 'ponticums' take over.

ONE YEAR LATER

Talking of things to worry about, here is an update from Harry Wright about life in his garden:

"About a year ago, I told you about the pheasants digging up my lilies, and how I was going to stop this very unpopular habit by placing a wire netting over the plants. Well, I sure showed them who was in charge - not a lily has been touched. They are now busy digging up my

crocus."

VIBURNUMS

I cannot resist plants that bloom in winter, and there are several viburnums that fill the bill nicely. V. bodnantense of course, with its wonderful perfume. Mine starts to bloom in Oct., defys various kinds of miserable weather, and pops out a few flowers whenever the weather is suitable (like all this winter so far). In April it gives the main flush of flowers. Bodnantense's parents, V. grandiflorum and V. farreri also have heady fragrances. V. foetens is another good one; the name means nothing: it has a very sweet smell.

These plants are happy in well-drained soil; they dislike being in soil saturated in winter, and they enjoy full sun or part shade. Improve the soil with well-rotten manure, add bone meal, and if the soil is heavy, plant the shrub on a mound of soil and compost. Water them well the first summer, and prune, if necessary, by shortening all new growth in summer.

HELLEBORES

Bernie Guyader has sent us the following item regarding these fascinating flowers. In this (so far) warm January I look every day for flower buds, and my H. niger actually has three flowers!

"Hellebores belong to the same family as buttercups, columbines, clematis, winter aconite, globe flowers and marsh marigolds, which gives you some idea of their requirements.

The hellebores that are usually grown in our gardens and are more readily available include:

Christmas Rose (*Helleborus niger*)(black roots), blooms in Dec. and Jan.

Oriental or Lenten Hellebore (*H. orientalis* and its many hybrids),

bloom in Feb. and March.
Corsican Hellebore (*H. argutifolia*) (sharp-toothed leaves) blooms in Jan-Feb.
Stinking Hellebore (*H. foetidus*) fragrant but hardly stinky, also blooms in Jan-Feb.

Cultivation:

These plants are happiest in limey soils but they also do very well in acid soil. They are tolerant of sun or shade but do best when shaded from the mid-day sun. Growing under deciduous trees with a tall canopy of foliage is ideal. A good alternative is the north or west side of a house or wall. Organic matter is crucial. Leaf mold along with garden compost is the best choice. If this is not available, well rotted cow manure can be used.

When planting, dig a hole about 18 inches across and 12 inches deep. Use a planting mix of equal parts compost or leaf mold and compost-based potting soil with the addition of bone meal, osmocote or some other slow release fertilizer. Put a half-bucket of mix in the hole before placing the plant. The crown of the roots should be 1" below the surface. If planting from a pot, plant at the same depth as in the pot. Water in, with transplant fertilizer added. Use a full pail of water, mulch with about 2" of bark mulch. Remember that if they are happy they will grow quite large. Leave at least 3' between plants, and interplant with primulas and wood anemones.

Propagation:

Division is the only way to ensure your plant will be true to form. Orientalis: divide at the end of August or early Sept., the flower buds are already set so you will probably get some springtime bloom, but they may take a year's rest after that.

Christmas Rose: divide in spring,

early Feb. if possible, the sooner the better.

Dig the plants, wash off soil and cut apart. Try to keep at least one leaf with each division. Make sure the plants don't dry out. Cover with moist peat or a damp burlap. Pot up in rich organic soil mix or plant out using the procedure mentioned above.

From Seed: You can either hand-pollinate if you have isolated plants or take your chances with Mother Nature. As soon as the pods start to split, cut the flowers off and upend in brown paper bags (now is the time to label, if you want to keep the plants separated), allowing the pods to open fully and drop the seeds. Keep the bags inside in a dry location for a couple of weeks. Separate seeds from chaff and store in envelopes in a dry place. Plant out no later than mid-June. Germination should be excellent. If stored longer, they may not germinate. This is what probably happens when we order seeds. I've got some seeds in pots which have not yet germinated after two years.

Sowing in pots: Fill pots to within 1/2" of the top with a seed sowing mix. I can't over-emphasize the value of cleanliness, of both pots and seed mix. Clean pots with a bleach solution and if you are using soil, be sure it is sterilized. Sow seeds thinly, and because they will be in the pot for quite awhile, there may be a problem with damping off. Sow about 20 seeds to a 5" pot. Press seeds into the soil and cover with grit. Set the pots in a couple of inches of water until the top is moist.

Set out in a shady area, ensuring they are level. They may have to be plunged in coarse sand to ensure they don't dry out. Cover with chicken wire or some other protection to keep birds out".

Ed. Note:

Starting hellebores from seed is not easy. The most reliable method is to let the seeds drop on the ground around the plants and let them seed themselves. This way you can dig up hundreds of baby plants, plant them out or pot them up, and wait about 3 years for them to produce flowers. Naturally you will get a mixture of colours (I am talking of *H. orientalis* hybrids here).

I have found the pods often don't start to split until July, so it could be August before seeds are ready to plant. Is this too late?

I have just received a wonderful new book, "Seeds", by Jekka McVicar, published in Canada by Whitecap Books (see book review) and I will give here her recipe for sowing and growing *Helleborus niger*. Perhaps the same method will be applicable to *H. orientalis*.

RECIPE FOR SOWING, PLANTING AND GROWING *HELLEBORUS NIGER*:

Ingredients: 5 seeds per module or 8 seeds per pot and one module tray.
OR 1 - 4" pot.

Standard loam-based seed compost mixed with coarse horticultural sand to a ratio of 1 part compost to 1 part sand. Extra coarse horticultural sand to cover the planting, and a plant label.



Helleborus niger

METHOD: In autumn fill the tray or pot with compost, smooth over, tamp down and water in well. Sow the fresh seeds thinly onto the surface of the compost and press gently in with the flat of your hand. Cover the seed with coarse hort. sand, label with name and date.

Place the tray or pot in a warm light place, out of direct sunlight, at an optimum temp. of 70F. After 6-7 weeks place the tray or pot outside, on a level surface, exposed to all weather including frost. Do not worry if the containers become immersed in snow, as melting snow will aid germination. If you live in a frost-free area, put the container in a plastic bag and leave it in the refrigerator for 3 weeks, then remove the plastic bag and put the container outside.

Germination can be erratic, anything from 5-12 months. If there is no germination the first year, start again the following autumn with initial warmth for 6-7 weeks, followed by a period outside.

Prick out when the seedlings are large enough to handle. If you are using modules, you can plant directly into the garden as soon as the soil is warm enough to dig over".

Ed. Note: This method sounds so much like the "natural" method of letting them seed themselves, that it will probably be successful. In our area, when the seeds drop to the ground in summer, we usually have at least 8 weeks of warm dry weather, followed by the fall rains, frost or even snow.

This is a long article about hellebores, but they are such a lovely addition to the shade garden where rhodos are happy, making it an excellent companion plant. The one exception, in my experience is, *H. niger*, which, I have read, much prefers alkaline

soil. So mine is planted near the house foundations where there is slow steady leaching of the lime in the cement.

SNIPPETS FROM SAYWARD

Believe it or not, Rose-Marie has also sent an article on Hellebores which fits right in with the previous material.

"The hellebores are coming into their own at this time of year. The Christmas roses have been blooming since the solstice. *H. foetidus* has sent up many flower stalks, and the later species and hybrids are showing promising clusters of buds at their bases. Of course, we want to bring hellebore flowers into the house as much as possible, given not only their great beauty but also the time of year. Unfortunately the blossoms, and even the leaves, tend to droop or wilt rather quickly when placed in water. I have tried the various cumbersome methods of singeing or burning that are recommended in florists manuals, but have not found them successful. With Christmas roses, there are always some that don't wilt, so I cut a very large bouquet a day or two before I want it, place it in a vase, and the next day select the flowers

that haven't wilted. That is rather wasteful, and I am lucky to have a number of very floriferous plants. *H. foetidus* foliage is especially handsome in a vase, but it often wilts too, and I use the same cut/select/discard technique with that. The flowers of that species, with their woody stems, always remain splendidly upright for me, and I begin harvesting them for indoor display right after the Christmas season. Still, my favorite method of displaying hellebore blooms also solves the wilting problem: float the blossoms in a shallow glass bowl. This looks totally exquisite, whether you have one variety or colour, or many, to display. No flowers need be wasted, and the arrangement lasts a long time (at least a week, if you change the water every day or two). This method is advocated by Elizabeth Strangman in her book "Hellebores", co-authored with Graham Rice.

I too have been experimenting with crossing my plants, and have about 50 youngsters out there with their first flower buds showing. I can hardly wait to see what they will be like".



Helleborus lividus 'Corsicus'