

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.

7 May

Executive meeting at **Paul Wurz'**
home and garden on Gordon Road
north of Campbell River. Turn off
the highway at Duncan Bay road,
north of the Pulp Mill, (watch for
Mystic Woods Nursery signs) and
onto Gordon Rd., just past Mystic
Woods.

**14 May ANNUAL GENERAL
MEETING** and tour of **Bonnie and
Wayne Steele's** garden at 6157
Whitaker Rd. Turn down Left Road
off Kitty Coleman Road, and drive
just past **Brian Zimmerman's**
beautiful parkland. Bring lawn chairs.
Try to arrive by 6.30 p.m.

9 April

Our guest **Carmen Varcoe** brought
slides and lively descriptions of many
beautiful rhodo companion plants.
Carmen inspired us to try "something
new" in the form of unusual forms of

old favorites or plants newly
imported from other countries. She
also provided a list of names of all the
plants pictured, so do take it to your
favorite nursery and ask for
something a little different. Maybe by
next year some of these treasures can
be shared among members.

Carmen brought a small display of
some of these plants, which was
added to the variety of plants on the
Revenue Table, and as soon as
allowed, a horde of members
descended on the table and soon
nearly everything disappeared. A
very satisfying evening!

MEMBER NOTES

Here is a paragraph from a column by
Indumentum in the Fraser South
newsletter. Do you agree? What can
we do about conserving water except
pray we don't have another summer
like 2001 for a few years.

"Politically correct gardeners do not
grow rhododendrons. They require
too much water and do not belong
here despite local efforts in
multiculturalism. Rhodo macrophyllum
would be the one exception as it is a
native plant in coastal B.C. and
tolerates drought conditions.

Politically correct gardeners approve
of native plants such as rotting alder
trees, to provide habitat for wildlife
and insects. To feel good about
reducing water use they even move
into xeriscaping and create a
landscape of dessicated cactus and
gravel with a few pieces of dry
driftwood to set the mood. Lawns
are frowned on unless they are small
enough to be cut with a hand

powered reel mower. Politically
correct gardeners wear Tilley hats,
buy their tools at Lee Valley and save
Steve Whysall's gardening pages in a
non-plastic binder made out of
recycled rose clippings."

After reading about his garden
problems - native plants include
chickweed and dandelions, and pests
include rabbits, deer and moles- I feel
we have little to complain about here.

There are so many gardening events
this next month or so, and so much
gardening to catch up on this late
spring, that we may have to limit
ourselves a bit. Do try to find time to
help with the display at Filberg Lodge
May 4-5, our own **Truss Show and
Plant Sale** May 5, (remember to
bring cookies), and our Garden Tour
May 11. If you can't spend 3 hours in
one garden, then buy a ticket and tour
all 6.

A table for members' donated plants
will be set up at the May 5 plant sale.
Can you bring a few or buy a few?
Every bit helps boost our depleted
bank account.

Food is also needed for the AGM
(more cookies) and the annual BBQ
(cookies, salads, hot dishes, always a
wonderful potluck mixture). I have
found an easy way to make a variety
of cookies. In the evening, wrap the
various mixtures in film for storage in
the frig for the night, and wash up all
the bowls and spoons.

Next morning, one batch after
another goes into the oven and out
onto racks to cool. Breaking up the

job in this manner seems to make it much less of a chore.

May 11 is busy day, and if you are not able to attend our garden tour, try to fit in the **Nanaimo club's Truss Show and plant sale** at Beban Park. **MARS** is having garden tours May 11 and 12. **Milner Gardens** has a Rhodo Festival May 9, 10, 11. We cannot attend all of them, but if anyone can go, please bring back a report for our newsletter.

There are several interesting excursions the following weekend; **May 18** a rhodo tour of **George Fraser's** garden in Ucluelet, and May 18-19 a trip to **Bernt Ronning's** garden near Holberg, organized by **MARS**. Remember, bring back reports to the Editor if you go.

And by the way - I received an email from **Ken Gibson** the other day - if you have been planning to visit his garden, you may, but the Gibsons will not be back from Ireland until the 15th of May. If you prefer to have a guide, wait until after that date.

SUN OR SHADE?

People are always asking whether or not rhodos will be happy in shade, and which ones will take full sun. In my experience, the ones I planted "in the woods" 25 years ago have become very tall (reaching for light) and many bloom every second year only. Some rhodos are happy in almost full sun, but they appreciate a bit of shade in the hottest part of the day, especially in exceptionally dry summers like 2001. I have thrown old curtains over some and one friend had some old umbrellas that helped.

Here is an article from the **PARS** newsletter of January 2002 that will give some guidance as to which plants to buy for shady places.

"Rhodos and azaleas, which are

among the most popular flowering plants for shade, are commonly thought to be, as a group, amenable to low-light conditions. In fact, all of them need some sun to produce the most profuse flowers, but some need more sun than others.

The species and hybrids listed here bloom especially well in the minimal sun and bright light of open to medium shade, and two of them, "Snowlady" and *R. schlippenbachii*, the "Royal Azalea", will even bloom in deep shade. Despite their physical differences, rhodos and azaleas belong to the same genus and require the same growing conditions. The four rhodos are all evergreen; two of the azaleas are deciduous and one is evergreen.

R. calendulaceum, "Flame Azalea" is a native American species, with clove-scented yellow to orange flowers in early summer. Grows 4-6 ft. high.

R. carolinianum is a native American plant, with pink or white flowers, grows 3-6 ft. high.

R. kuisianum is a low-growing Japanese species, deciduous when young, evergreen when older. It has clusters of lilac pink flowers. There are many named hybrids derived from this species.

'King George' is a big hybrid rhodo with huge pale pink perfumed flowers. It can grow up to 12' tall (and mine has a spread of 8 ft after ten years).

R. schlippenbachii is a deciduous Japanese species with beautiful delicate pink flowers and bright yellow, orange and red leaves in fall. (Another 10'x10' plant in my garden.)

'Snowlady' is a hybrid rhodo, height 30 inches, snowy white flowers and fuzzy leaves. Watch for frost damage when it blooms in March. Again, use an old glass curtain to protect it.

R. williamsianum grows to about 4 ft., gives an attractive mound of bright green foliage and pale pink

bell-shaped flowers.

The taller rhodos and azaleas make great specimen plants or informal groups in woodland settings, while the smaller ones are happy in the shade of arbors or trellises, or as pot plants in tubs or containers on shaded patios."

Editor Notes: I have abbreviated parts of this article and would like to add to it:

If the woodland the writer refers to is comprised of trees with branches trimmed off quite high so lots of light gets in, fine, but in my mixed woodland, with maples, cottonwood, firs and alders, it is quite dark in summer. I have never watered in dry weather, whereas where more light and sun gets in, a watering system is essential. None of the above plants would do well in my woods - they would bloom seldom or never. Any of the azaleas would be happy in a situation where they get full sun much of the day, but protection from noon to 3 p.m. Unfortunately, trial and error is often the best teacher. You can easily have 3 micro-climates in one garden. But rhodos don't mind being moved - if one is unhappy in one spot, move it to another bed, into more or less shade, or with different companion plants.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING A LITTLE DIFFERENT!

BOOK REVIEW

I admit Hibiscus is not really a rhodo companion - but this little book looked so attractive in the library I had to bring it home.

HIBISCUS by **Jacqueline Walker**, pub. Firefly Books 2001.

This book is crammed with hibiscus facts and beautiful photos showing examples of many unusual flowers. Chapters headed Outdoor Cultivation of Tropical Hibiscus, Hibiscus in Cool Climates, Tropical Hibiscus in Cold Climates mean you can find one

of these plants for your house, greenhouse or garden. There are also chapters on pruning and maintenance, pests and diseases, list of hybrids, facts and sources (US) and a Canadian Ministry of Agriculture address for use in importing plants. Of course we can buy them in many local nurseries and flower shops.

Hibiscus belong to the Malvaceae family, which includes *Gossypium*, the cotton plant. *Hibiscus esculentus* is the vegetable known as Okra. *Abutilon* (Flowering Maple), *Althea rosea* (Hollyhock) and *Lavatera* are all members of this family. *Hibiscus syriacus* is a popular fall-flowering shrub for our gardens.

SNIPPETS FROM SAYWARD

Here are the latest snippets from **Rose-Marie Silkins**:

In late winter and early spring, rhodogardeners are apt to get a little breathless with the anticipation of seeing their treasures bloom, and the show of flower buds fuels the excitement. I am inclined to think that the ARS ratings should include a fourth category, for quality of flower buds. Some plants have such glorious buds that it is not just their promise of flowers that makes them a welcome sight. Most of the *R. yakushimanum* hybrids put on a fine display of chubby round buds, pale green to cream in nice contrast with the foliage, or silver-green on the species. In my garden, *R. 'Yaku Incense'* is perhaps the best exemplar, but all the other yaks and part yaks are in close competition. Another favorite is *R. 'Helene Schiffner'*. Her buds aren't particularly large, but their deep purple colouring through winter into spring is most appealing. Unequivocally though, the full-five rating would have to go to *R. 'Rotenburg'*, which sets such immense buds that they swell before your eyes as the days lengthen. Fortunately, the burst of rich cream bloom that is finally released is a

performance worthy of the overture.

Horticulture, as in so many other human endeavours, is subject to the vagaries of fashion, and the popularity of certain plants is often subject to the whim of influential media personalities. While I can't lament over anything that makes people more appreciative of the garden and its contents, I am sometimes sorry to see certain plant groups and gardening styles slip out of currency because no one has put them on the cover of a glossy magazine for awhile.

The last few years, that has been the fate of biennials, the once-ubiquitous wallflowers, Sweet Williams, and Canterbury Bells that were the mainstay of borders and cutting gardens. I am particularly fond of that trio. They provide plenty of garden colour, they are wonderful for cutting, and the first two have delightful fragrance to offer. I can't imagine my early summer garden without rich swaths of Sweet William backed by the lush intensity of Canterbury Bells.

Most often I simply discard them after bloom (after collecting seed), filling the spots with chrysanthus for fall, or annuals such as cosmos, or several of the new perennials I seem to be trying each year, that have been waiting in pots for their turn. When a particular colour is too endearing to discard, I cut back the plants quite hard, and in fact had both Sweet Williams and Canterbury Bells perform well for a number of years in consequence. Wallflowers last for many years here; they are planted along the south wall of my house, and I do cut them back hard after bloom. I grow the Sutton's "Persian Carpet" strain, which has a lovely colour range.

Ed. Note: I agree with **Rose-Marie**, but find these plants, particularly

wallflowers, to be very difficult. They prefer alkaline soil, and object to rain and poor drainage in winter. If you plant them near a wall, where a little lime is constantly being leached out, they do well. Perhaps they prefer a slightly cooler climate also - the most brightly coloured and healthy wallflowers I ever saw were in the city of Perth, Scotland. They had huge cement or stone planters full of them, and they absolutely glowed in the clean northern light.

Here are more of **Rose-Marie's** gardening thoughts.

At the other side of my garden is a totally different collection of plants in my Sayward version of a cottage garden. There the low growers that love the sun like the old-fashioned pinks and carnations. Because the plants become increasingly untidy with age (a bit like their gardener, perhaps), I usually replace them after 4 or 5 years.

However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find seed for the perennial varieties, as the catalogs list almost exclusively the bedding plant annual (annual-ized?) dianthus with flashy colours and big blooms, but little fragrance. A pink without fragrance is an anomaly to my mind (just like a rose without fragrance). Then, the bedding plant types bloom later in the summer, not with their traditional companions, unless of course they have been forced into early bloom in commercial greenhouses, in which case they don't at all display the natural plant habit of the old-fashioned pinks. I do propagate my own plants from cuttings and pipings, but of course one always wants new stock. There are a few specialist sources of "Victorian" seeds, mostly at a frightful price, so for the last few years I have acquired by dianthus seeds from England and Holland.

RHODO FERTILIZER

If you prefer to mix your own organic fertilizer, here is a recipe made up by **Terry Richmond** of MARS. Terry grows and sells rhodos in Port Alberni.

2 parts fish meal
2 parts canola or flax meal
1 part worm castings
1 part dolomite lime
1/2 part each bone meal, kelp meal and green sand.

Filler recipe

5 parts sand
5 parts double-screened fir bark
5 parts composted fish waste
The filler, equal in volume to the fertilizer total, is used to prevent clumping of the meal type fertilizers and to minimize the dust problem associated with mixing finely ground or powdered materials.

If you are unable or unwilling to do this work, you will find the rhodo fertilizer formulated by Green Valley to be one of the best. It contains important trace elements in addition to an improved NPK ratio.

WINTER INJURY

This past winter was an "easy" one in this area, except. Constant freezing and thawing is not good for plants. Occasional snow with warm weather in between is not good. And to top it off, we had not only snow but a bitter north wind at the end of March which put paid to several plants that had started to bud out. *R. cilipense*, Snow Lady and her relatives all had flowers, alas. Here is an article which might be of use to us in winters such as this.

WINTER INJURY AND DRYING OF RHODOS by Sharon Douglas of the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, copied from Seattle Rhodoland newsletter, Oct. 2001

"Rhodos throughout Connecticut often exhibit symptoms of winter injury and drying. Symptoms are present on shrubs of all ages and on

those growing in both windswept and sheltered locations. This type of injury is a result of many environmental factors which often have little in common but that they occur during winter.

The causal factors are very diverse and include sudden temperature fluctuations, excessive or late season fertilization, lack of snow cover, drying winds, and late spring frosts. The most common type of winter injury on rhodos is excessive drying. This results from factors which create a water deficit in the shrub. This type of injury occurs when water evaporates from leaves on windy or on warm sunny days during the winter or early spring. Drying occurs because this water is not replaced since the roots cannot take up enough water from cold or frozen soil.

Winter injury is important in and of itself but it also predisposes the shrubs and renders them more vulnerable to secondary or opportunistic pests. Another important characteristic of winter injury is that quite often, the symptoms are not evident until some time after the injury has occurred. Symptoms may appear in early spring when growth is just beginning or they may not appear until early summer or even later in the season. This can make diagnosis difficult.

Symptoms of winter injury and drying can be varied but are usually characterized by tip or marginal browning of leaves, dieback of tips and branches, desiccation of growing tips or twigs, and longitudinal rolling of leaves along the mid-vein. Symptoms can develop on one or two individual branches or on the entire shrub. Sometimes poor root health contributes to damage, particularly recently transplanted shrubs which lack well-developed or established root systems, and

established shrubs of all sizes and ages which have root systems damaged by excessive water or drought.

Strategies for control:

We cannot control the weather but there are steps that we can take that are aimed at minimizing the effects of winter injury.

1. Select the appropriate site for planting and maintain optimum growth by using proper growing practises
2. Have sufficient moisture in the root zone before the soil freezes - this can be accomplished by giving the shrubs a deep watering before freeze-up in the fall - mulching also helps -
3. Avoid late summer and early fall fertilization - this stimulates and encourages growth late in the season which may not harden-off properly for the winter,
4. Prune and remove any dead twigs or branches which can serve as sites for secondary invaders or opportunistic pests.
5. Provide physical protection from water loss and drying winds - this is especially important for new transplants or plants in exposed locations; burlap wraps and sprays of anti-transpirants can be used".

Ed. Note: This article points out many of the problems we had this past winter. Unfortunately last summer, the driest in many years, had already weakened plants that had not been established for long. The fall rains came before any frost, but the damage was done. Now I look around a recently-planted bed of small rhodos and see leaves with brown edges and plants with no leaves at all. Maybe they aren't dead? When is the best time to plant? Spring, when summer may be extremely dry, or fall, when an early frost can damage the plants? These are the questions that keep gardeners in a state of hope and expectation year after year.