

NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

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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.

Jan 7, 2003

Executive meeting at the home of
Marleen & Dave Crucq, 2301
Seabank Rd.

Jan. 14

The annual "Ask the Experts"
session. Bring a written question to
get them started. Also members are
asked to bring slides of rhodos,
pictures from a trip or a garden or..

Dec 10

The annual Christmas party was well
attended and a lot of fun. The games
kept people moving around the room
wracking their brains, the carols were
sung off-key, the food was
wonderful. What else would anyone
want in a party?

MEMBER NOTES

First, a few reminders.
Paul Wurz will be in charge of the

plant sale May 4 this year. The tour
of gardens is set for May 10, and
Harry would like to be able to give up
this job. Who is willing to give a
hand? The Filberg Garden Show will
be May 9,10 and 11.

Remember to give your rhodos a little
dolomite lime during January, if you
didn't do it last year. Plan to fertilize
a few weeks later. It seems our
climate really is changing, and we
can't count on any kind of weather at
any time.

It is late December now, and no sign
of winter on the coast. There are
flowers on various bushes in my yard
- Hamamelis, Daphne mezereum,
Viburnum x bodnantense and V.tinus,
Mahonia "Winter Sun", some
Hellebores have 4-6" flower stems,
and early-flowering snowdrops are
pushing up. Of course they may be
covered with snow next week - but
they are tough.

We have had several horrendous
wind-storms lately. This is a good
time to check rhodos (and other
shrubs and trees) for broken
branches. The right time to do
necessary pruning.

Many members now receive their
newsletters by Email, saving a
significant amount of printing and
postage. If you can join this group,
please give your Email address to
Bernie.

Is there a carpenter in the house? We
have permission to build a cupboard
for holding library books. Who can
help?

Speak to Harry or Paul.

If any member is interested in or
willing to speak at other Rhodo
meetings in Dist.1, speak to Harry, or
make direct contact to <garth @
widemire.com>.

The R. schliffenbachia at our park has
died. Has anyone a plant they can
spare?

This is the time to thank everyone
most sincerely for all the work they
have done during the past year. The
reliable Social Committee providing a
never-ending supply of goodies at the
meetings, the Librarian, always ready
to talk about new books, and the
hosts at the Revenue Table, as well as
all the members who have brought
plants and seeds for sale. Thank you
all - the club couldn't exist without
you.

If you have a chocolate Cosmos that
was not dug up in Oct., it is probably
perfectly all right - but please put a
pile of compost and a cardboard box
over it now, just in case we get
winter in the next month or two.

Time to prune some shrubs . Cut
hardy fuchsias back to 6", and give
them a mix of compost and balanced
fertilizer. Did you cut 4' off the
Wisteria branches in August? Now it
is time to cut them again, back to 3
leafbuds. If this is done every year,
you will have flowers. Late-
flowering clematis can be tidied up,
but if you cut down the C. montana
you will lose this year's flowers, as
they bloom very early.

Some neat hints from Amateur
Gardening. If you have small "dead"
spots in the lawn, sprout a few grass

seeds on a damp, used teabag, then plant it when the weather allows. Slugs again: Slugs love to eat cardboard. Cut 6" squares of cereal boxes, which stay quite firm in wet weather, and lay them near plants the slugs enjoy. They will congregate under the cardboard, and are easy to scrape off.

OLD WOOD - NEW WOOD

Useful information from "Fine Gardening" July-Aug 2002
"Flowering on old wood" refers to the age of twigs on which flowers bloom each year. Old wood is any twig, branch or stem that was produced during a previous growing season. If you examine a plant in early spring, old wood would be that produced the past summer or earlier.

Some plants produce flower buds in mid- to late summer (rhodos for instance). These buds overwinter in a dormant condition, then bloom the next spring. This group includes Forsythias, Hydrangea macrophylla, and various Hollies.

Other plants produce flower buds during the spring flush of growth and they bloom as soon as mature. Since these flowers are on brand-new twigs that have just been produced, they are said to be blooming on new wood, for instance Buddleias.

So, know your plants before pruning. Old wood - prune as soon as flowering finishes, which gives the plant a chance to generate flower buds for the next year. New wood - can be pruned severely in late winter. NOTE: In my garden, Buddleias pruned in late winter promptly die, so I leave pruning to early May (I read it in Amateur Gardening) and they survive. NOTE: Any rhodos pruned severely in late winter will not produce flowers that year.

Coppicing means cutting the whole plant back to 3-6" above ground.

Don't try it on a plant less than a year old, but it is a great way to rejuvenate an old bush with dead wood in the centre. Plants such as deutzias and spireas flower on new wood, and will bloom the same year. This job is done in late winter, according to "Fine Gardening", and late Oct. according to "Amateur Gardening". Pile lots of compost on the plant after coppicing, to encourage new growth.

This is a good way to keep shrubs in the perennial border within bounds. If variegated, the new leaves will have brighter colour. Flowers will often be larger, more colourful, and more of them.

Here is a list of plants which can be successfully coppiced: Abelia, Buddleia, Callicarpa, Caryopteris, Catalpa, Cotinus, Hibiscus syriacus, Hydrangea paniculata, Pyracantha, Rosa rugosa, Salix (willows of all kinds), Tamarix, Vitex agnus-castus. Some might be slow to come back from the roots, depending on the severity of winter here in any given year.

CARING FOR YOUR CHRISTMAS GIFT PLANTS

In general, most of these plants need cool temperatures (55-65F), moist atmosphere, and as much light as possible.

CYCLAMEN:

Watering is the biggest problem. They need copious watering as long as the temperature is around 55F(12C). It is then safe to stand them in a saucer of water, refilled as soon as empty. Cut down on water at lower temperatures. If the temperature is over 55F, flower production is inhibited.

We keep our homes at around 65-70F(about 15C), which is not satisfactory for these plants. Try keeping them in a unheated bedroom, and bring them out for a few hours

each day. Sit them in a saucer of gravel, with water to the top of the gravel. Water thoroughly once a week. Cyclamen also like as much light as possible.

POINSETTIA:

The new varieties last for many months in the house, and can be planted in the garden when all danger of frost is passed. Buy the plant from a reliable heated shop, and grow in good light at a temperature not less than 62F. Avoid placing them near cold window panes. They need a good watering, then allow the compost to dry a little before watering again. A weak solution of a general fertilizer like 20-20-20 every few weeks is appreciated.

INDIAN AZALEA (Rhododendron simsii):

This is a slightly tender evergreen azalea which can spend many months of the year outdoors. Many are sold in a medium which looks like pure peat moss, and is as difficult to wet once it gets dried out. A saucer of gravel filled to the top of the gravel with water, under the plant, and a thorough watering once a week, will keep the plant happy. Spray regularly also, to help provide a moist atmosphere, as the air in most houses in winter is dry.

ORCHID:

Orchids have become very popular house plants, as, with care, they will last for many years, and the flowers often last for months at a time. They do need more specialised care than other plants, however.

They need a moist atmosphere, so a saucer of gravel kept topped up with water is a must. Most orchids have been planted in a mixture of moss, chopped fir bark and/or styrofoam chips, so that when watered, the water goes right through. The plants must never sit in water. Drench the plant, in the sink, once a week, and

give a tiny bit of fertilizer occasionally (1/4 tsp to a litre or quart of water).

Most of them like a temperature of around 65-70F (15C) in the daytime, but 10-15 degrees cooler at night.

There are so many new hybrids coming on the market now, that it may be difficult to decide exactly which orchid you have. Best to buy or borrow from the library a book on orchids. It is easy to get hooked on these beautiful plants. Many of them are very suitable for windowsill gardening.

GARDEN COLOUR IN WINTER

M.J. Jefferson-Brown, writing in "The Winter Garden", pub. Foyles 1969, said it well:

"The winter flowering shrubs *Viburnum fragrans*, *Hamamelis mollis* and *H. japonica*, *Garrya eliptica* and *Chimonanthus praecox* are a few reliable ones that grow almost as easily as privet. Surely room can be found for these shrubs. Better by far to oust one or two spring or summer flowering shrubs to make way for them, than to do without. A single shrub blooming in the winter rejoices the heart more than a forest of roses and magnolias in spring and summer.

How rich is the miracle of *Crocus* species covering the naked ground with silken robes. How many times more rich is this sight in the fleeting sunshine of winter than the most riotous display in borders below the golden summer sun".

We can be sure that cheerful little *Eranthus*, species *Crocus*, *Galanthus*, *Cyclamen* cum and various *Hellebores* will be welcome whenever they bloom.

One of the most reliable groups of plants we can have in the winter garden is heather, for various forms of *Erica carnea* bloom from October

to April, and many have strikingly coloured leaves as well as flowers. The worst kind of winter doesn't seem to bother them, and they make wonderful companion plants for the rhodos, happily filling in spaces between taller shrubs and choking out weeds.

Many shrubs have bright berries in winter - some eaten quickly by the birds, some left. *Pyracantha* and *Cotoneaster horizontalis* berries are eagerly eaten by robins returning in January. Other *cotoneaster* berries are finished off by robins moving south in Sept-Oct. *Berberis wilsonii* berries are in huge clumps like grapes, coloured pink then red, but never touched by the birds. The leaves of this shrub, before they fall, are the brightest red and orange you can imagine.

The bark of some trees shows up brilliantly in winter, especially if the sun shines. Some *Eucalyptus* are quite hardy in this area, with pale grey-blue evergreen leaves and beautiful bark. *Arbutus* trunks are brightly coloured. *Acer griseum* and *Prunus serrula* have striking bark also.

And then there are the ivies, the bamboos, the beautiful evergreen ferns - there is really no lack of colour in our winter gardens. Much of it is green, but what a variety of shapes, dull or shiny surfaces, and variegation in colour!

A FEW MORE MEMBER NOTES

An interesting bus trip is being planned for next May 17,18,19, destination beautiful gardens in Portland (and others along the way).

The plan is to leave Vancouver early on the Saturday morning, stopping at various gardens on the way to Portland. Two nights in a Portland hotel, and visits to gardens such as

Crystal Springs, the Cecil Smith Rhodo Garden, a Chinese and a Japanese garden. On Monday the group will leave Portland, and visit several more gardens on the way back to Vancouver, arriving in the evening. The cost will be around \$325 Cdn. (plus, I presume, hotel in US\$ and additional travel and hotel expenses on & off Vancouver Island).

Anyone interested should contact **Mike Bale**, 33623 Wildwood Dr., Abbotsford, V2S 1S2. Phone 604-853-8839.

Rose-Marie Silkens has been plagued this winter by power outages, but glad to say, I saved a "Snippet" just in case.

"In Praise of Larch Trees"

A this dark time of year, the second half of November, one of the few plants still contributing colour to the garden is the marvellous deciduous conifer, the Larch or Tamarack. My five-year old European larch, *Larix decidua*, stands in a group of trees and shrubs across a long sweep of lawn. It has been bright gold for at least 3 weeks, and has held on to its coloured needles through a week of north-Island southeasters. The tree is a classic cone-shape, already quite tall (over 20 feet), and draws every eye with its knockout colour.

Amazingly, on a dark night it is still visible from the house 100 yards away, a ghostly tree-shape standing out in the darkness (no street lights here). In spring, the larch's new needles are the brightest green imaginable, as fresh and young looking as if it were trying to be a metaphor for the season. What always surprises us too, is that the needles are very soft. A strolling passerby might expect a prickly brush, but instead finds a soft caress.

Larches grow quickly, and are too

big for the average garden. While I have lots of room, the larch is going to outgrow the spot I chose in only a few more years. (Planting too many things for the size of a bed seems a guarantee that everything will survive, and thrive). I should probably cut it down once I have started another in a new bed, with only shrubs for company. The annual needle drop seems a perfect mulch for rhodos, and in fact the few rhodos neighbouring my existing larch seem very happy indeed.

GARDENING HINTS

When planting trees, in deer country, surround them with 6' wire cages. After a few years, take the cages down and cut into several arched half-cages which are laid on the ground around the trees, from late fall until late spring, when the trees will have leafed out and the deer have other food to eat.

For icy sidewalks, instead of using salt, sprinkle alfalfa meal, sand or kitty litter. All of these can be swept into the lawn or garden with no concern about burning plants.

If you have not gotten around to planting bulbs purchased this fall, plant them now, in pots if the ground is frozen. They may bloom late this year, and may take another year to form flower buds again, but if they are left out of the soil, they will not survive until planting time next fall.

Some good organic fertilizers:
For flowers and tomatoes -
20 shovelfull compost, 1 shovelful each of pure dry wood ash, rock phosphate and dolomite lime. Mix 1/2 and 1/2 with soil.

For Rhodos -
20 shovelfull of compost mixed with 5 of rotted seaweed and 5 of conifer needles or oak leaves.

NOTES FOR BEGINNING GARDENERS

There are easily a hundred good varieties of rhodos in just about every colour and size that you could wish. They are acid lovers, which means they will do well almost anywhere on the coastal regions of Vancouver Island. They like a fibrous loamy soil. In sandy soil this is accomplished by adding at least 60% coarse peat moss or bark mulch. In a clay soil, add 50% coarse peat or bark mulch and 10% sand. Add a good rhodo fertilizer to your soil mixture. When using sawdust or bark mulch, sprinkle a little ammonium sulphate around each plant.

Some rhodos grow in full sun, but most prefer semi-shade. Most bloom in April, May and June, but there are varieties that bloom as early as January some years, and others that bloom in July or August.

If colour is lacking in the leaves, give a small feed of ammonium sulphate in May, or Epsom Salts any time. As the plants finish flowering, you can feed them. Spread fertilizer around the plants and soak it in well. Foliage may be fed with liquid fish fertilizer, but this is not enough to set buds for the following year. Use a good rhodo fertilizer with trace elements, and do not feed after the end of June. Many small-leaved rhodos resent any fertilizer. Chopped leaf-mold and compost is all they need.

Rhodos are shallow-rooted. Their tiny feeder roots are located in the top four inches of soil. They appreciate a mulch of old rotted wood, coarse peat moss or bark mulch. Do not dig around rhodos when weeding or cultivating the garden.

Rhodos like 3-4 times the amount of water they normally get from summer rain in this area. They really

appreciate a fine spray of water on hot summer evenings. However, they need good drainage, and will collapse from wet feet if left in standing water for any length of time. If they are shaded from the hot afternoon sun, by the time they are 4-5 years old they can withstand summer drought very well. Recently we have had several very dry summers, and water has had to be conserved. Yet most of the rhodos in my garden have the usual number of flower buds for the coming spring.

Rhododendron camtschaticum

If you think all rhodos have large shiny leaves and grow to 10 ft. in height, here is one that is really different. As **Frank Dorsey** said, in the Vancouver Rhodo Newsletter in Jan. 1993 "This rhodo is an oddity. It doesn't look like a rhodo, it doesn't behave like a rhodo; it may not even BE a rhodo".

The home of this little fellow is both sides of the Bering Sea, from Sakhalin and the Kuriles in the west and along the Alaskan coast, including the Aleutians in the east. It is possible some grow in northern B.C. This preference for cold northern regions probably means the plant would be very unhappy here, with our hot dry summers. I wonder if it would grow on Mt. Washington? It does well in eastern Scotland and in Scandinavia.

The plant has habits quite different to most rhodos. There are no obvious flower buds in fall, when it loses its leaves (in bright autumn colours). The plant looks quite dead at this time, but in spring, the leaves appear, also small green prickly balls which develop into little trusses of 1-3 pansy-like flowers, coloured pink to reddish-purple, rarely white. The plant spreads by underground suckers. It grows to no more than 6" in height, in gravelly loam and rock crevices. (cont'd next month)