

NORTH ISLAND RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

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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.

3 Feb

Executive meeting at the home of **Pauline & Dick Bonney**, 2393 Seabank Rd, Comox.

10 Feb

"The Experts" **Bernie, Paul and Harry** will be on hand to advise, explain and demonstrate gardening problems and successes. ALSO - this meeting includes a sale of books as well as the usual Revenue Table full of plants (if it doesn't snow)

DON'T FORGET THE BOOK SALE - BRING BOOKS AND BUY BOOKS

13 Jan

Slides sent in by various members showing rhodo people and gardens in various places, which helped remind

us that spring is on the way. Then **Paul, Lynn, Linda and Mary** tried to answer questions on various gardening subjects. It was not long before everyone in the room had opinions, answers and more questions, so the evening was in fact a lively general discussion on many garden subjects. We often learn more from one of these sessions than from reading one book or talking to one person. A great way to spend an evening!

MEMBER NOTES

Some items left over from the January meeting:

Tropaeolum nodosum - where to find it? Look in the seed catalogues that are appearing in our mailboxes. One of them lists these seeds.

Where to buy a Rhodo 'Pepperpot'? If anyone knows please let members know.

If you are starting seeds on a windowsill, a mirror placed behind the tray reflects light from the window, if you don't have a fluorescent light fixture.

LOOK TO THE ROOTS

Continuing the article started in January, and copying material from *Organic Gardening* Nov/Dec 2003: "Earthworms are important, but other organisms, too small to see, also exist in your soil. They are great friends with your plants and critical to good growth. Although a few kinds of fungi and bacteria are pathogenic (cause disease), most benefit plants directly or indirectly...

Unlike plants, **FUNGI** have no chlorophyll and so depend on soil

organic matter for food. They vary in size from the tiniest one-celled yeast to mushrooms. The kinds of fungi most important to plants belong in a group that partners with the plants' roots in an association called mycorrhizae, meaning "fungus root". In this symbiotic relationship, the fungi are nurtured by the plant, which provides them with sugars; the fungi repay the favor by essentially expanding the plant's root network and by providing increased access to nutrients such as phosphorus and nitrogen. This accomplished by the fungi's hyphae (threadlike filaments) which increase the surface area of the root hairs. Some kinds of fungi actually penetrate cell walls, while others merely live in close contact with roots. Almost all kinds of plants form a mycorrhizal association, with the notable exception of plants in the Cruciferae family (including broccoli, cabbage and cauliflower), and the Chenopodiaceae family (beets, spinach, chard).

BACTERIA are single celled microorganismz that are extremely abundant in soils, particularly those rich in organic matter. A single teaspoon of your garden compost may contain more than a million bacteria. Like fungi, most bacteria feed on soil organic matter and make the nutrients available to plants.

One group of bacteria, **rhizobia**, infect legume roots, prompting the plant to create nodules around the bacteria, similar to the way an oyster creates a pearl from a grain of sand. Each nodule on the legume root is capable of pulling, or fixing,

atmospheric nitrogen and making it available to the host plant, all without the use of synthetic fertilizers.

ACTINOMYCETES, a type of micro-organism with characteristics of both bacteria and fungi, are responsible for the deliciously "earthy" fragrance of freshly tilled soil. They feed on soil organic matter and are important players in the decomposition process. They also fight plant disease pathogens by producing antibiotic compounds.

In addition to providing access to nutrients, fungi benefit the soil structure by producing glomulin, a kind of glue that holds soil particles together. In fact, the moist and crumbly cake-like texture of a good garden soil is due in large part to the combined activities of bacteria and fungi. Beneficial microorganisms are important for disease suppression, too."

According to **Dr. Will Brinton**, of the Woods End Research Lab in Mt. Vernon, Maine, it is not necessary to purchase mycorrhizal inoculants, except for growing peas and beans, as long as your soil is healthy. Add a layer of compost (no more than 3/4") each year to the garden.

It just happens that the Dec. 2003 issue of the RHS journal "The Garden" has an article which ties in with the above information. "A British company has produced sachets of mycorrhizal fungi inoculant, which aim to improve the health of garden plants and their resistance to drought.

Recent research has shown that most wild plants have symbiotic relationships with beneficial fungi, which enable plants to extract nutrients more efficiently from the soil. Many of these fungi are lost when the soil is disturbed during building work and landscaping.

The company claims that the product can help re-establish the mycorrhizal fungi. Different formulations have been tailored to benefit trees, roses, and most other garden plants."

RHODOS AS HOUSE PLANTS

An article in the RHS journal Dec. 2003, recommends *Vireya Rhodos* as houseplants which can bloom in our winters. They need a cool conservatory or a spot in the house where they get all light possible in winter, and a moderate temperature. "Vireyas vary from small, delicate alpine plants, which would not outgrow the smallest windowsill, to large bushes and even trees in their native environments. Most are from Southeast Asia and are tender, so require winter protection in the UK (and Canada). They are often epiphytic (grow on branches of trees and shrubs), and need acidic, free-draining compost. Most vireyas will flower when small and there is a wide range of flower colours and shapes to choose from. Many are deliciously and sometimes powerfully scented.

Vireyas have an exotic appeal that has produced excited comment ever since they were first put on public display more than 150 years ago, but they remain a much misunderstood group of plants. They had a great vogue in the Victoria era with production of more than 500 hybrids from just six species that had been introduced from the wild at that time.

These plant introductions were made in the face of enormous difficulties of transporting plants by sea in closed cases. The original species, and the vast majority of hybrids developed from them, seem to have disappeared at the time of the First World War when gardens of many estates with large glasshouses and conservatories fell into decline. Today, by contrast, there are about 150 species in cultivation worldwide, including

several exciting New Guinea introductions that were not cultivated and hardly known before the Second World War".

Ed. Note: This article goes on to describe some of the beautiful *Vireya* flowers and more on how to grow them. If you are interested, I can copy more information for you. Incidentally, I just happen to have started collecting a few orchids for the same purpose - having flowers in the winter months - and on reading descriptions of the plants and the men who climbed through mountains in China, India and South America, to find these beautiful plants, one would think I was reading about the botanical explorers who first found and sent "home" seeds or plants of rhododendrons. There are very likely places where rhodos and orchids live on the same trees. I don't believe there are any rhodos in South America but otherwise the statement is true. The orchids I have need a very free-draining compost, made up of chopped bark, charcoal and moss. Add a bit of soil to this mix and many rhodos would be happy in a similar pot.

Harry Wright is or was growing *Vireyas* - I remember seeing some of them and smelling their wonderful perfume. How about trying one of them? I don't know offhand where to buy them in B.C. but we could do some research.

MORE MEMBER NOTES

How did you like our heavy wet January snow? Will we have more before spring? How did your garden come through? I have found some badly broken branches, on a few rhodos but mainly on the *Viburnum tinus*. Now there are snowdrops in full bloom, crocuses poking through, and hellebores with big buds on them.

We must give thought to

arrangements for the Presidents' (of District 1) meeting to be held here, probably August 15. Needed will be billets for about 16 people, food for a pot-luck supper, and a garden or two to tour. None of this is definite yet, but it is in the works, and more details will be announced later.

SAYWARD SNIPPETS

Rose-Marie keeps us supplied with all kinds of gardening information. "Another winter weather event prompts me to share the effects it had on my garden. This time Sayward fared no worse than neighbours to the south - our coldest recorded low was -12C, and snow quality was about the same as Campbell River and Courtenay. Good snow cover protected marginally hardy plants and damaged only one rhodo, the 'achy-breaky' 'Graf Zeppelin', which is more brittle than antique china. The other damaged rhodo was a mature 'Unique', and its story is a textbook example of why we're taught not to feed rhodos in summer.

This 'Unique' grows right beside one of the display areas for potted material that I have for sale. During the August dry spell these pots of course needed frequent watering, and the runoff, rich with nutrients from the potting mix, went straight to 'Unique'. It looked positively splendid throughout the summer and fall, but when the frost came in early November (and only to -4C), all that lush new foliage turned black. Time to find a new display area".

Ed. Note: Funny, my 'Unique' looks the same - but - it grows under a maple tree, had no fertilizer whatever last year, and almost no water either. All last year's new growth turned brown, dried up and fell off the 15-year-old bush. What do I do now? At the January meeting, several people described the same problem, and blamed it on either the very dry

summer or the sharp frost in November, or both. Hopefully, our "experts" at the February meeting will have some answers for us.

"As the seed catalogs sing their siren songs to the gardener twitching for spring, I try to remember which past experiments with summer annuals were most successful and satisfying. New hybrids of nicotiana proliferate each year, and coastal gardeners can find great pleasure in this annual that prefers less sun than its petunia cousins. Last year I was charmed by the small size and delightful, subtle colours of a strain marketed as 'Saratoga'. It had little fragrance though, even after sundown. For that, I will continue to grow the tall, vigorous, white-flowered N. sylvestris. It self-seeds with abandon, but is easy to transplant if necessary. The volunteerism means it comes into bloom much earlier than plants started in the greenhouse. While it is tall for a bedding annual, it still manages to look handsome, even elegant, scattered around my bed of English roses.

Another handsome nicotiana, N. lansdorfii, is also 3-4 ft. tall with chartreuse-green flowers. A few years ago I planted it with Malva sylvestris, a short-lived, purple-flowered perennial which can be cut back to the same height as the nicotiana (and blooms better for that). The colour combination is nothing less than perfect.

GARDENING INFORMATION AND TIPS FROM FINE GARDENING MAGAZINES

BUMBLEBEES are one of the most effective and important pollinators in the temperate zone. They are the only pollinators of some of the showiest wildflowers. No native plant requires honeybee pollination.

There are many kinds and colours of

bumblebees and they are warm-blooded. If flying in 50F weather, they are 98F inside. Unfortunately they are declining. Plants that flower in mid-summer, when little else is in bloom, are vital for a bumblebee colony's survival. They love mint and sage, asters, foxgloves, veronica, goldenrod, single hybrid rugosa roses, Echinacea, Iris siberica, annual larkspur, snapdragon, morning glory, tomatoes and most legumes.

To make a new garden bed, or get rid of lawn, lay down 6-8 sheets of newspaper, cover it with animal manure, seaweed or compost. If you do this in the fall, by spring the worms will have done a good job of chewing the whole thing up and getting rid of the grass. **Bob Lofthouse** gave me this tip some years ago and I found it worked like a charm to get rid of lawn and make room for more rhodos.

HOSTAS

Time to start thinking of more companion plants for the rhodos. Hostas do so well, here, spectacular in summer, gone to ground in winter, making it easy to remove weeds, and add compost to the bed of rhodos and hostas. There are a few problems of course - the slugs love hostas and at times so do the deer. The slugs seem to be kept at bay in my garden by my habit of laying a ring of crushed egg shells (I save them year-round) and/or crushed oyster shells (sold at Black Creek Farm & Feed for chicken scratch), with a little sprinkle of diatomaceous earth on top (Bio Bug & Slug Killer) as soon as there is a sign of hostas popping out of the ground. The deer also relish a few nibbles, but in my garden they don't do it until the plants are turning yellow in fall. Except for an old lance-leaved hosta, whose flowers are a favorite dessert for our little friends.

"There are over 4200 hybrid hostas

now, about 100 of them yellow leaved. They are hardy Zones 3-8. The yellow leaved varieties need a little fertilizer every year, and if planted in fall, a mulch to prevent frost heaving. It is best to chop or dig pieces off big old plants for starting new clumps or giving to friends. The writer (in FG mag) of this piece found 15% non-soapy ammonia discourages slugs. Water around the plants at night, and repeat every 2 weeks. He found this did no harm to his plants.

BLUE HOSTAS

Huge ones include *Hosta sieboldiana* 'Elegans', which soon grows into a 4' wide x 2' tall clump with thick corrugated leaves. Other giants include 'Blue Mammoth', 'Blue Angel', and 'Blue Umbrella'. 'Krossa Regal' is vase-shaped, and 'Salute', with smooth cup-shaped leaves has a vase-like habit on a much smaller scale than 'Krossa Regal'. The first flat-spreading blue is 'Hillbilly Blues'. Smaller ones include 'Popo' and 'Baby Bunting', tiny and compact.

The blue colour is a layer of wax over green. Sunlight, heat and rain all cause the wax to disappear. Most blue hostas require a bit of light shade to preserve the blue colour and prevent leaf scorch. They like moist soil, humus and morning sun. Give them lots of good compost and manure. Blue hostas with thick leaves are more resistant to slugs than the thin-leaved variegated ones. It takes about 5 years for a plant to become a good size.

If you must divide them, dig up a plant, quarter it, and replant the quarters. Or chop a piece off the side (some need the use of an axe). Look for crowns - some varieties continue to grow new plants around them instead of solid clumps. These are easy to divide". Note: Editor added bits to these articles.

DROUGHT AND HOW IT AFFECTS TREES & SHRUBS (FG# 71)

"Woody plants can feel the effects of drought for many years, whereas perennials can die back but grow again the next year. Short-term damage (1 dry spell) includes wilting, leaf scorch, some defoliation. Long-term damage happens over a period of years and includes stunted growth, branch die-back, even death of the plant. Many woody plants will take up to 3 years after a drought to display negative long-term affects.

As soils become dry in the hottest summer months, fine roots in the upper soil surface may be stimulated to increase in number to get available water, but if the soil continues dry, they start to die, putting the root system out of balance with the amount of foliage above ground. When the rains return, the plant can't take advantage of the much-needed water because of the reduced root mass, resulting in branch dieback. If the drought persists into the next growing season, the plant may die.

Many pests that do not survive in a healthy tree will rapidly invade a tree weakened by drought. These include bronze birch borer, black turpentine beetle and many species of conifer bark beetles. Some pests such as spider mites, lacebugs and aphids can be detrimental to their hosts, for the plant can't grow faster than the rate of damage because of lack of water. Many beneficial insects also slow down or cease activity during drought conditions.

Also, drought-stressed trees exhibit reduced ability to isolate small wounds, allowing pathogens to invade. Stem canker disease is more commonly seen in years following a drought, displaying sunken greyish cankers on branches.

No one can predict with certainty how long a drought will last, but they do occur periodically over time.

Choosing the right plants for your location and caring for them properly are the best ways to lessen a drought's long-term impact. Incorporate organic matter, weed regularly, water infrequently but deeply with soaker hoses or drip irrigation, and apply mulch around plants- these are the best ways to help weather a drought".

EPIMEDIUMS

These plants have recently become better known and popular in the past few years. Mine have done well in the woods for over 20 years. They are wet in winter and dry in summer. They spread slowly there, and flower in early spring.

More and more varieties are being discovered in China the past few years. Darrell Probst has been exploring there. These plants belong to the Barberry family, and some varieties have flowers that look exactly like berberis flowers (like little daffodils). They combine well with ferns, hostas, pulmonarias, hardy gingers and other shade-loving plants.

Flower colours can be white, pink, yellow, purple, orange or a mix of these. Foliage can be deciduous, semi-deciduous or evergreen, depending on species and climate. There is great variety in the shape and colours of leaves. They are hardy Zones 3 - 9, prefer at least part-shade, and object to hot mid-day sun. Keep plants moist through their first summer and when planting, place the crown no more than 1/2" below the soil surface. Late spring freezes can damage the plants (though not here). The only pests to worry about are slugs and black vine weevils (again, not here).

Note: I have again added bits to the FG #80 article.