

# North Island Rhododendron Society

PO Box 3183 Courtenay BC Canada V9N 5N4

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Articles not credited are by the editor.

## 1 March

Executive meeting will be at the home of **Bernice and Gerry Morrison**, 951 Aspen Way, Comox.

## 8 March

**Steve Hootman**, of the Rhodo Species Foundation, will again be a very welcome guest. Steve will be discussing "Under-used Rhodos in the Garden".

## 1 February

Members enjoyed a visit from Dr. **Roy Taylor** and his wife Janet. Dr. Taylor brought along maps of all the areas of the world where Mediterranean -type plants grow and where the soil and climate is suitable for them. This, of course, includes the West coast of North America, including most of the east coast of Vancouver Island.

He also talked of, showed slides of, and presented us with lists of suitable plants. Ed. Note: Perhaps we have tried, for too long, to "grow corn in the Antarctic", for looking over my personal weather records for the past 30+ years, I note we always have had dry summers, which can stretch from March or April to the end of October. Once in a while we have rain in July or August, and less often we have snow before Oct. 31, but DON'T COUNT ON IT –

## GROW MORE ORNAMENTAL GRASSES! (and get rid of more water-gobbling lawn.

Dr. Taylor didn't talk about rhodos at all, but our experience is that we can grow some rhodos in hot dry positions. They might not do really well, so why bother. Put them where they have some shade during the hot afternoons, and try to give them some water during dry spells.

Dr. Taylor's talk was spot on for all of us who have to consider lack of water. (I am on a shallow well). We are half-way through February and our mountains are almost bare of snow, which means a low water table and severe water restrictions this summer unless it rains and snows for the next 6 weeks. Take Dr. Taylor's plant list to the next plant sale or trip to the nursery and buy wisely!

## MEMBER NOTES DATES TO REMEMBER

**April 13** (Wednesday) will be the date of the April meeting.

Harry Wright is planning to stir our brain matter with an evening of "Rhodo I..D.". Be ready to identify rhodos from leaf examples and pictures.

**April 27 - May 1** ARS Conference in Victoria. Make every effort to go for at least one day, for there will be many beautiful and unusual

plants to buy, and interesting speakers. The conference doesn't

come to Vancouver Island very often, so the cost is sans ferry fares and driving in or out of the "big city". Also, if you check the local newspapers, you will find several hotels within a few blocks of the conference centre, with low rates.

**May** is always the busiest Rhodo month of the year. Sign up for helping at the plant sale and/or the tour of gardens. Other organizations also have interesting garden events so look for more lists next month.

**May 8** is Mothers' Day and our Rhodo Show and Sale.

**May 15** will be our tour of gardens, all, I hear, in the Miracle Beach and Saratoga areas of Black Creek.

Meantime, if you want to think Spring earlier, do try to attend the 10th annual **Flower & Garden Show** at Beban Park Nanaimo, presented by the Central V.I. Botanical Garden Society. You will find many displays of spring flowers, including rhodos, interesting speakers, plants and seeds for purchase over the 3 days, **March 11,12,13.**

Also on March 12, the Horticulture

Centre of the Pacific is offering its annual Heather Sale. A good chance to pick up some wonderful rhodo companions, if you are down that way.

In mid-April (I'll get the date later) the Central V.I. Orchid Society always puts on a fantastic showing of these beautiful plants, also in Nanaimo.

And, looking ahead a few months, the Victoria International Flower and Garden Festival is slated for July 28 to August 1.

Add the Streamside Nursery to your list of locations which will give a discount to members who show their membership card. And, by the way, if you haven't yet received a card, please phone Dave Crucq, 339-7845.

For some time, the "Rhodo of the Year" has been chosen by members of the ARS, in the following categories: Elepidote, Lepidote, Deciduous Azalea and Evergreen Azalea. We are being asked to send in our candidates for the honour, for the year 2008. Rhodos for 2005 -06 and -07 have already been chosen. For instance, elepidotes for the years 2002 - 2007 are Ken Janek, Taurus, Percy Wiseman, Horizon Monarch, Pt. Defiance and Nancy Evans. The others for 2005 include Ramapo (lepidote), Nifty Fifty (deciduous Azalea), and Hilda Niblett (evergreen Azalea).

Included in the criteria for selection are - plants that are cold hardy, bud hardy and heat tolerant; easily propagated; easily grown in the average garden, and registered with the ARS. Please be ready to offer some suggestions at the March meeting.

**Revenue Table :** Remember to continue to bring plants, books, jam pots or unused garden tools to help boost our bank account. Also pot up a few "treasures" for sale at our plant sale in May. Proceeds from

this table also increase our cash position. Remember - even with a better Canadian Dollar we still have to subsidize the difference between our membership fee and the amount we send to the ARS every year.

I'm afraid a few members have not been receiving their newsletters - a mixup between snail mail and Email delivery. I am sorry about this - please let Dave Crucq know if you are not receiving the newsletter one way or the other.

Remember to add May 10 to your list - our Annual Meeting, which will be held at Dick & Pauline Bonneys' garden. We will be looking for a Secretary and a Membership person as well as a Program Chairman. Please consider offering your help if you have not volunteered for a year or two.

**Rose-Marie** has sent what she calls a SNIP and a MINI-SNIP this month.

There is another one of my pieces coming out in the next "Menziessii", the journal of the BC Native Plant Society. I had given them the longish piece on my hedgerow project a couple of years ago, and this one is on my experiments with Oemleria (Indian Plum). I'm always a bit bashful about sending them things as most items are by serious, bona fide botanists, but the editor keeps telling me they need horticulture-oriented bits too. The publication is most interesting - I keep all my back issues so if you would like to see some, let me know.

Ed. Note: I would love to see some of these newsletters (can you spare a few older copies for the Revenue Table?) As for Oemleria, I was given a plant by Colleen Christian, who has a fabulous cutting garden in Black Creek, and I am proud to say that even with our very dry summers, my plant is happy and healthy on the edge of the woods, and at the moment (Feb 20) has big

green buds ready to leaf out at the first rain.

It grows wild in the woods Nanaimo south, and by the middle of March you can spot bright green leaves and white flowers all through the woods where nothing else but skunk cabbage is showing colour in the south part of the Island. It will be interesting to see if it is hardy in Sayward.

To carry on with **Rose-Marie's** mini-snippet -

Indeed, spring is on the way. When I was currying the horses yesterday (Feb 14) we must have created a score of pre-fab bird nests- in a few more weeks, all the hair I brush out or cut from their manes, will disappear within hours of being deposited. One year we had a barn-swallow nest in the barn that was trimmed perfectly around the outside with white and black mane clippings, like an Elizabethan ruff... I think I'll go and sniff my wintersweet again (Chimonanthus praecox, please, Rosemary).

#### **RHODO OF THE YEAR 2005**

A note in the Rhodo News from the Portland Chapter notes "four rhodos have been named by the ARS as Rhodos of the year, 2005. A total of 25 plants were selected for the entire country, over the multiple growing regions.

Each year, four plants are chosen for each region. These plants must have excellent foliage and flowers, good growth habit, hardy for the specific region, and pest and disease resistant. The best of the best".

#### **BOOK REVIEW**

No, I haven't yet read this book - but can hardly wait.

The Pathfinder's Guide to Ornamental Grasses, by Roger Grounds, Pub. Timber Press.

Peter Kendall has written a comprehensive description of this book in the January 2005 Portland Rhodo News. He points out "It was William Robinson and then Gertrude Jekyll who first employed

ornamental grasses in a rather significant way in Victorian England. It was, however, left to German Karl Foerster and those following him in the mid-20th century to see grasses as a major garden feature. Foerster's vision of ornamental grasses as long lasting (providing a herbaceous perennial structure in autumn as well as in winter), and easy of cultivation, opened the door to their increasing garden usefulness...

The first half of the book deals with the easy forms that thrive in the garden (those needing only sun and earth). The second half of the book occupies itself with grasses for particular situations from shade to wetland, dry to meadow, tussock to container, alpine to trough, and from subtropic to conservatory. The book has six different appendices enabling one to find the proper items in the full panoply of offerings..."

Yes, this sounds like a very useful book to have on hand, so we can find the right grass for our garden situation. Some of them, such as *Pennisetum setaceum* "Rubrum", which everyone wants for the lovely flowers, are not quite hardy here, in fact all the *Pennisetums* are rather delicate. Best to keep them in a pot which can be taken in to a frost-free place for a month or two in winter. But so many of these handsome grasses are "tough as old boots".

Here are a couple of items from Fine Gardening magazine, Oct. 2002. **THOUGHTS ON TILLING THE SOIL** by Lee Reich, who often has thought-provoking articles in this magazine.

"Untilled soil contains thousands of dormant weed seeds waiting for light and air to wake them up. Untilled soil stabilizes over time and develops a network of large and small pores. The large pores are good for aeration and drainage of excess water, the small ones have capillary channels that hold water, and move water up or sideways to roots.

Organic matter is on the top, in nature, under that semidecayed, humus content is highest toward the surface and declines deeper. Most plants have very shallow roots. Think of a Douglas fir, felled by a storm. Very shallow roots.

It is better to put mulch on the top, rather than digging it in, so it will gradually decay and filter into the top layers where it is needed.

When planting a tree or shrub, try not to disrupt the soil any more than necessary. Dig a hole just deep enough to get the roots in, and make it a wide, shallow v-shaped hole. Put the same soil back into the hole around the stem, add compost. The only exception is if soil is clay - then it has to be broken up by adding peat, or better still, sawdust, with added lime and a little nitrogen fertilizer.

Put a thin layer of mulch or compost all over the soil to discourage weed seedlings, and improve water penetration. Soil compaction is bad, so make little paths among your rhodos, with cement slabs or other stepping stones.

### **DROUGHT AFFECTS TREES AND SHRUBS**

Short-term drought - one dry spell gives wilting, leaf-scorch and some defoliation. Long-term, over several years, includes stunted growth, branch die-back, and possible death. Many plants take over 3 years after a drought to display long-term effects. Stem dieback means feeder roots have been destroyed. Many pests don't live in healthy trees, but in one badly stressed they have a field-day. Wood borers, bark beetles, spider mites, aphids and others can be seen. If small wounds are not healed, pathogens invade and cause stem canker diseases.

It is wise to choose the right plants for your location, incorporate organic matter, weed regularly and

water deeply and as often as possible, using a soaker hose or drip irrigation and lots of mulch.

### **JAPANESE MAPLES**

If you are considering purchase of one of these lovely trees this spring, here is some advice from Fine Gardening # 65.

Japanese Maples are good companions for rhododendrons, but they need some specialized attention. Their natural habitat is along the edge of a forest, understory to other trees, or growing in the duff on the forest floor. Most are hardy to Zone 5-6. They do need protection from hot sun and sweeping winds.

An ideal spot for them is in dappled shade under trees, or the east or north side of the house, a fence or a large tree. Cooler areas of the yard where you have an outdoor seating area are ideal. Soil - any good garden soil, quick-draining and loose, with some peat moss mixed in. Winter munch can be compost or well-rotted horse manure, and a 3-4" layer of similar material for summer, to keep the roots cool. They don't need any other fertilizer, in fact lawn fertilizers and osmocote can burn the roots.

In pots, these trees need a good commercial potting mix, NOT garden soil. Fertilize container trees with a liquid feed such as Miracle-gro or fish emulsion, every 2 weeks, half strength. Regular watering is essential to good health. They are shallow-rooted, so water often but not deeply. An emitter on the irrigation system is good, then give a couple of really good soaks during extended summer droughts.

Prune these trees only to remove crossing or broken branches, or to give a light grooming. They have two growth periods, one in spring; they are dormant in summer, then a more vigorous growth spurt in late summer. In order to keep the plant small, prune back all the late-summer growth.

These plants have few pests, but watch for aphids, which can be hosed off. Soaps (even Safer's) might defoliate the tree, but for persistent aphids, use malathion. In containers of heavy soil, root rot might appear. If the tree appears to need water though the soil is wet, or if several branches are dead when the tree leafs out in spring, spray and drench soil with a fungicide, but be sure it is one appropriate for maples and follow directions precisely.

**WOLLEMI PINE** - a very rare discovery.

I found this material on the Internet. This "living fossil" is certainly one of the greatest botanical discoveries of our time. In Sept. 1994 David Noble, an officer with the New South Wales National Parks & Wildlife Service, discovered some trees he didn't quite recognize. In a deep, narrow canyon of the rugged Wollemi National Park, he discovered what we now call *Wollemia nobilis* or Wollemi Pine. It's rare, it's endangered, it's strange-looking, and at first we didn't know all that much about it.

The worldwide demand for this plant has been enormous. Research into the horticultural development of this pine is being conducted at Mount Annan Botanic Garden, and, with commercial propagation well under way, plants should be available in 2005.

The Wollemi Pine is a conifer that grows to a height of 35 metres with a trunk diameter of over one metre. The leaves vary from bright lime green on younger foliage to an apple green on mature foliage. The trunk is particularly unusual because it is covered with brown, knobby, spongy bark.

The leaves are broadly based and have no mechanism for shedding individually from the tree when they have passed their usual life span. Instead, whole branches are shed,

giving the litter on the forest floor a very distinctive appearance.

This tree is known as the Dinosaur tree because it dates back about 300 million years.. It is a member of the ancient conifer family Araucariaceae. It grew all over the planet between 200 and 65 million years ago. At about the same time the dinosaurs disappeared, this tree retreated and disappeared from the northern hemisphere.

How fascinating that a small group of these ancient trees survived in an Australian mountain canyon to this day!

### **RHODODENDRONS IN POTS**

George Radford wrote an interesting article in the May 2000 copy of Coastal Grower. I will summarize, sometimes quoting.

"A container must subtly enhance, not dominate the rhodo. It should be in proportion to the mature height and substance of the plant. I find earthy colours like terracotta or aged, patinated cedar wood are companionable and harmonious."

Remember that when filled with soil, these often heavy containers will be almost impossible to move. Place them in their permanent spot before planting. If you plan to use a rhodo that is tender, such as *R. fragrantissimum* (hardy to about 15F/-9C), place the pot on a saucer with wheels so it can be easily moved to a protected spot in winter.

Remember also that rhodos have shallow roots, need very good drainage but cannot be allowed to dry out. You can place the pot in a larger one and fill the space between with peat moss or even newspaper, kept damp. Protect from the hottest part of sunny days and cold winds.

Fertilize after blooming with granular rhodo fertilizer or liquid evergreen fertilizer. Deadhead so the plant's energy goes into new leaves and flowers.

Prune in order to keep the plant shapely, or remove broken branches. Best to choose a naturally clumpy plant such as *R. impeditum* or *R. keleticum*, to avoid the need to prune.

Growing tips - remember cement planters may contain more lime than a rhodo likes. Soak the pot in water for a time to remove some of the lime. A dash of potassium permanganate helps remove lime. Soak in a "pink" mixture, then rinse several times. Plant firmly but don't cover the rootball with more than 2" organic, peat-mix soil. Don't let the plant ever dry out, and don't let it sit in water during the heavy fall rains. Excellent drainage is essential. Don't add aggressive companion plants to the pot.