

# 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.

## Sept. 2

Executive meeting will be held at the  
home of **Gwen & Harry Wright**,  
769 Chaster, Courtenay. All members  
of the "old" and "new" executive are  
welcome to help plan for the coming  
year and discuss other important  
items.

## Sept. 9

Our speaker will be **Eleanore  
Dempster**, a lively and interesting  
speaker from Mission. Her family  
has recently moved "from Sea to  
Mountain" and I believe they took  
most of their rhodos with them. We  
look forward to some good tips on  
how and when to move mature  
shrubs.

## 14 June

The usual lively BBQ evening. Time  
was spent looking over Lois'  
interesting garden, and Diana Scott  
provided some unusual "Rhodo  
games". The food, as usual, was  
wonderful. A cool evening - so the  
hot dishes were much appreciated.  
Some people who had several  
helpings of the exotic desserts will  
have had to work in the garden all  
summer to lose the extra pounds.  
Hard-working members **Marlene and  
Dave Crucq** were awarded ARS  
Bronze Medals richly deserved.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

We are looking forward to a visit  
from **Ken Gibson** in October, when  
he will tell us all about his trip to  
Ireland.

## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT Harry Wright

"Don't ask me where the summer has  
gone, but we are getting awfully close  
to September and that means time to  
start thinking about the Rhodo  
meetings. Remember they are always  
the 2nd Tuesday of each month, 7:30  
p.m. at the Comox United Church.

I haven't even finished dead-  
heading yet - O well, there is still lots  
of time. The plants are all starting to  
bud up, and now when a weed is  
pulled out there is a 50/50 chance of  
it dying. I hope everyone has enjoyed  
the warm weather.

The members "open garden"  
scheme has proved popular, so we  
plan to do it again next spring.

Our guest speaker in Sept. will be  
**Eleanore Dempster**, who will be  
telling us the trials and tribulations of  
moving a large rhodo garden from the

ocean to the mountains.

Have you noticed the days are  
getting a little shorter? Hope to see  
you at the meeting Sept. 2, and why  
not invite a friend to come along?

## MEMBER NOTES

Talking of visiting gardens, a small  
group arranged to visit the gardens of  
**Joan Walsh** and **Bev Johnson**, both  
of whom live close to the salt chuck  
near Union Bay. We were  
overwhelmed by the variety of plants  
in those gardens. Many we wouldn't  
try to grow for these people must live  
in Zone 9. Grevillias and other  
Australian plants looked perfectly  
happy. Huge old rhodos (these are  
older established gardens), many  
varieties of clematis, fantastic peonies  
- I could go on and on. These  
gardens are worth the short trip down  
the road. Don't miss out on them next  
year. A good garden tip from **Bev  
Johnson** - keep a notebook in which  
you write the name and date of  
purchase of plants, so it is easy, 10  
years later, to name that clematis or  
ornamental grass.

## PERFECT COMPANIONS

Some of us who visited **Harry  
Wright's** Kalmia collection in June  
wondered whether they could grow  
these beautiful shrubs, which start to  
bloom in June as the last of the  
spring-blooming rhodos finish their  
display. When I asked Harry for an  
article on Kalmias, he referred me to  
the Summer 1988 issue of the ARS  
Journal, where I found useful  
information, written by Harry. Here  
is the article, abbreviated just a little.  
"We always seem to be looking for a  
companion plant for our rhodos.

Here is one of the finest, *Kalmia latifolia* and its cultivars.

Botanists recognize 7 species of "Mountain Laurel" and group them into the genus *Kalmia*. All are native to North America. *Kalmia latifolia* is the best known species and is considered by some to be the most beautiful flowering shrub in North America.

*Kalmia latifolia* is a member of the Heath family and its needs are very similar to those of rhodod. They require a well drained acid soil with a pH of 4-5.5. The soil should contain at least 50% humus so that it is light enough for the fine roots to penetrate.

When planting *Kalmia* the top of the root ball should never be lower than the soil surface. Where drainage and soil aeration are poor, the root ball should be set on the surface and filled around with soil consisting of 50% peat or other organic material.

When selecting a planting site several factors should be taken into consideration. The more sun they receive, the more dense their growth and more prolific their flowering. On the other hand, partial shade from a high canopy of well spaced trees will extend the life of the flowers and prolong the blooming period.

The northern side of a building is one of the best planting sites for *Kalmia*; here the plants are shaded in winter because of the low sun angle, daytime temperatures are moderate and the ground is subject to less freezing and thawing. In summer, they receive early morning and late afternoon sun but are shaded from the intense midday sun.

After planting, mulch with bark, pine needles or any other coarse organic material to conserve moisture and keep the soil cool. This mulch will

also help restrict the growth of weeds. *Kalmia*, because of their shallow root system, should not be cultivated. Weeds should be pulled or shaved off with a sharp hoe.

Fertilizing *Kalmia* should be done sparingly, as they are not heavy feeders. Plants in good nutritious soils have a lustrous green to blue-green colour, good growth and leaf retention. Those in poor soils grow slowly, have poor colour and retain only the current year's foliage.

Removal of faded flowers is essential to consistent flowering. Failure to do so will restrict new growth from forming, thus reducing bud set for the following year.

In the past, *Kalmias* have always been grown from seed, as they are slow and difficult to propagate from cuttings. From these seeds have come some very interesting colour forms and shapes. Now, with the aid of micropropagation, some beautiful cultivars are becoming available. Some forms well-worth having include: *Kalmia latifolia* "Ostbo Red", "Pink Charm", "Olympic Fire", "Pink Frost", "Nipmuck", "Goodrich", "Shooting Star" and "Silver Dollar".

#### BOOK REVIEW

The Color Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses. Rick Darke, Pub. Timber Press 1999.

This is a marvellous book - containing photos of 500 grasses in the encyclopedia section, (including sedges, rushes, restios, cat-tails and some bamboos). Pictures of grasses in various landscapes - in the wild, in parks and in the home garden - are outstanding and take up about 1/2 the book. There are chapters on the beauty of grasses, families and names, growing, maintaining and designing with grasses.

If you don't have any ornamental grasses in your garden, a look

through this book will be very tempting; and if you are afraid they will "get away on you" and take over the garden, you will find many listed that are suitable for growing in pots. I found this book in the Whitecap catalogue and feel it is one of the best on this subject.

#### MEMBER NOTES

I mentioned at a recent meeting that the tall feathery bamboo I bought at Trent River Nursery some 35 years ago is in bloom, and wondered if anyone else had purchased a piece of this plant from Mr. Cox.

In the book "The Color Encyclopedia of Ornamental Grasses", Rick Darke, Timber Press 1999, I found information about this plant which made me feel I might not lose it after all, for the rumour is that every bamboo dies after flowering.

This delicate bamboo has had so many name changes it is hard to remember from one year to the next. "The botanical names of these bamboos have undergone considerable change during the 1900s. This is largely because taxonomists have had to work without the flowering characteristics usually of critical importance. The flowering of these bamboos is likely to lead to further name shifts." Names have been *Arundinaria murielae*, *Arundinaria spathacea*, *Siarundinaria mulielae*, *Fargesia spathacea*, *Thamnocalamus spathaceus*, and the latest is *Fargesia murielae*.

The plants form dense clumps, are evergreen, cold-hardy to -20F (-29C), lose some leaves in late fall, grow very slowly outward from the centre of the plant, and never send out runners.

"First collected in China in 1907 by Ernest Wilson, who sent plants to the Arnold Arboretum, which sent plants

to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Named for Ernest Wilson's daughter Muriel. Flowering began in the late 1970s in northern Europe and is still in progress. Hardy to Zone 4".

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The above was written in March of this year, and as at August the two plants are still alive though, as usual, we are having a very dry summer.

#### MEMBER NOTES

One of my favorite summer activities is going through copies of the journal "Horticulture", picked up in the library. In fact every time I read a copy I think I should renew my subscription. This is a good solid horticultural journal, full of useful material for the gardener; often there are articles on rhodos, and many articles by **Christopher Lloyd** of England, writing on subjects useful to the North West gardener (us). No pages advertising autos, clothes and lipstick, as so many magazines do these days. I have picked up useful information in several copies recently read.

Did you realize that gardening is one of the best ways to ward off osteoporosis? Yes," women 50 years and older who do yardwork at least once a week have higher bone density readings than those who performed other types of exercise including jogging, swimming, walking and aerobics". Research at the University of Arkansas has demonstrated that only two activities are significant in maintaining bone mass: gardening and yardwork, and weight training.(Oct 2001)

If you have a *Rhodo mucronulatum* (a super-hardy native of eastern Siberia, Mongolia, Korea and Japan) in the garden, it has been found to be an excellent subject for late-winter forcing. Richard Brooks, a Past President of the ARS, starts cutting branches right after Christmas, and September, 2003

brings in a few every couple of weeks thereafter. (April 1999)

Recommended evergreen ground covers for placing beneath rhodos include *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*, *Gaultheria procumbens*, *Viburnum vitis-idaea* subsp. *minus*, *Asarum* (wild ginger of which we have quantities in the woods), *Tiarella*, and several others. They suggest *Lamium maculatum* but my experience with this plant thug says "Never let it out of a hanging basket!" (April 1999)

Have you noticed the beautiful pink-flowering dogwoods (*Cornus kousa*) this summer? This same issue (April 1999) has an excellent article and excellent photos, describing various dogwoods and recommending some outstanding varieties.

Many people are afraid of grasses - there are so many wild ones ready to take over the garden - but there are some large handsome specimens that make wonderful accent plants, and (so far anyway) have never set seeds in my garden. "Grasses do not want to be "herded" together in an all-grass border, since their straplike leaves are too similar in character, density and feel. They do make wonderful accent points however; try contrasting them with other plants with totally different leaf shapes, habits and textures. Don't close them in - allow them to stand free of their neighbours, where they can be seen as individuals.

Take note of their ecological and cultural requirements, too. Many grasses want to be in an open, sunny position. Some will tolerate having their feet wet, while others prefer it hot and baking. A few will run, like *Leymus arenarius*, whereas the majority will remain in clumps. (March 2001)

The above issue has a lovely article in praise of *Rhodo* "Ken Janek", a compact yak, now properly known as

*R. degronianum* subsp. *yakushmanum*. Dark green leaves, a fuzzy white coating in spring (which gradually washes off) and thick beige indumentum.

The flowers have reddish pink buds which open to soft pink flowers which gradually fade to white. It is a very hardy plant, safe down to -15F or lower. It prefers a little dappled shade, though it might be safe in almost full sun in our area.

Another useful article in the same copy (March 2001) describes some of the hellebores formerly known as Lenten Roses, or *H. orientalis*, now identified as *H. xhybridus*. You have noticed the new and unusual colours - pinks and reds and almost blacks, spotted or not - and the prices, which seem to go up every year. Much intensive breeding and selection has been done the past few years in England, Germany and the U.S., and as we all know if we start plants from seed, it will be 3 years before we get a flower.

These plants are happy in shade, get along without water all summer in my woods, have NEVER been eaten by deer in 25 years, flower starting in January in our area, and look attractive year-round. If hit by frost or snow, they flop over - and spring back up when the weather moderates. If you need something to brighten up the dark days of winter, plant hellebores, surrounded by snowdrops and little species crocus. Borrow this journal from the library so you can read all of the fascinating information about these plants. (March 2001)

**ANOTHER BOOK REVIEW**  
"**Gardening in Containers**", a compilation of various articles from "Fine Gardening" magazine, Taunton Press 2002.

This book has several dozen articles on various ways to use containers in

the garden - including tiny water gardens, creative plant combinations, elegant hanging baskets, flowering bulbs, as well as information on potting soils, drip irrigation, potting and repotting, winter as well as summer container gardens. There are quantities of beautiful photos also, which are sure to inspire you to try yet another way to beautify a dull corner or brighten up the front door of the house. I found the book in the Campbell River library.

Among the book reviews in the Summer 2003 issue of the ARS Journal I found an article on "Modern Rhododendrons" Euan and Peter Cox, Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1956. I just happen to have a copy of this book, found at an Early Spring Show in the RHS Horticultural Halls, London, Feb. 1991. It was a discard from the Kent County Library. Why? It is in excellent shape and just as interesting to the reader as when published. In fact it must have been a Godsend to rhodo lovers at that time, for there were few books available then. There are several lovely paintings and many line drawings by Margaret Stones. I will quote information on Hybrid Rhodos as we still see the results of all seedlings in a batch being given the same name. Remember this information was written around 1956.

"We have described earlier how a number of groups within some of the series are still in a state of flux, and how their range of variation shows that they have not yet settled down into their definite grooves and become established species; in other words how they can still be considered as natural hybrids. In turn this means that particularly good varieties within these groups can only be reproduced by vegetative means, if their special characteristics are to be perpetuated.

If this is the case with so-called species that are possibly natural hybrids, how much more so is it with man-made hybrids. There are a few examples, but not very many, where all the progeny of a cross show very little variation, such as that fine hybrid, Polar Bear (diaprepes x auriculatum), where a large batch was grown at Tower Court, Ascot, all very much alike. At the other extreme we suppose the best-known example is that splendid hybrid between R. griffithianum and R. fortunei, which is usually called R x loderi, and presumably under the new rules should be called by its prior name, R.x kewense. It is only natural that R.x kewense should differ from R.x loderi, as the former was raised at Kew and the latter at Leonardslee from different parents.

It is said that the pollen parent, R. fortunei, was much superior at Leonardslee. But that is not the whole story. There is great variation among R.x loderi, and no less than 23 different varieties have been considered sufficiently distinct to be given a varietal name".

They go on to say "It must not be thought that we are prejudiced against hybrids, very far from it, but have tried to make our choice in a more or less logical way". After listing the following "rules" they comment on various hybrids, listed by colour.

1. The hybrid must be obtainable in the nursery trade, even if not kept by every nursery.
2. A hybrid is either (A) unlike any other rhodo in cultivation or (B) like something already in cultivation. If it is (A), it can obviously be included. If it is (B), it would have to be a plant either:
  - (a) with a better habit than anything already existing; or
  - (b) more easily grown than anything already existing; or
  - (c) that flowered at a different time;

or  
(d) that was very much more free-flowering than anything already existing.

Those rules certainly sound sensible, and in light of the hundreds - thousands - of rhodos that have been bred in the ensuing 50 years, I wonder how many of them fit these criteria.

I think this is a worthwhile book to have, and well worth the price quoted of \$15. I note the original price was 30 Shillings. I paid £4 in 1991.

#### **SNIPPET from SAYWARD**

At last, even Sayward is experiencing a warm, sunny summer. Three rainy weekends in a row have kept us reasonably calm about water shortages and fire hazards, and able to enjoy all the delights of fine weather. Even "the August border", often touted as the nemesis of gardeners, is looking rather splendid. The remarkably reliable Frikart's aster (Monch) is at the heart of this success and those trendy lavateras, 'Barnsley', 'Pink Barnsley' and 'Baby Barnsley' plus my personal favourite, 'Bredon Spring', seem to bloom forever. The hibiscus syriacus shrubs are blooming several weeks earlier than they have for years. And the petunias! Wet summers being the norm for Sayward, I grow petunias only in containers that can be moved out of the rain. This year I have dared move some into the garden. I prefer the old-fashioned ones with their range of subtle and interesting colours. Unlike the ground cover types that have taken over the market, my old 'Celebrity' does not need deadheading. I treasure it, especially in the morning. The garden is cool and sweetly scented. With coffee mug in one hand and garden scissors in the other, this gardener is perfectly content.

