

# 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.

## 6 Jan 2004

Executive meeting will be held at the  
home of **Dave & Marleen Crucq**,  
2302 Seabank Rd., Comox.

## 13 Jan

The annual "Ask the Experts"  
evening will be held, also members'  
slides of gardens - rhodos - etc. If  
you have slides to show and haven't  
got them to **Dick Bonney** yet - phone  
him, then rush the slides to him  
ASAP.

## 10 Feb.

A reminder that there will be a book  
sale. Bring gardening books you are  
willing to donate, and be prepared to  
buy one or some to replace them.  
There will also be a presentation  
"Back to Basics" by more experts -  
**Harry, Paul and Bernie.**

## 9 Dec.

The annual Christmas Party was the  
usual lively and interesting evening,  
with good food, silly games and  
exciting parcels to open and admire.  
Many thanks to everyone who made it  
such a "fun evening".

## MEMBER NOTES

**Harry** is interested in setting up a  
group of would-be hybridizers. 5  
members of MARS have shown an  
interest - who else would like to join  
the group?

Last summer when I was laid up with  
some damaged and aching joints,  
another horrible little creeping  
monster took over several flower beds  
and part of the lawn. How to get rid  
of Creeping Charlie? Well, I found a  
recipe recently that will be used as  
soon as our heavy winter rains cease.  
1/4 cup Borax  
2-3 tsp. Ivory liquid soap  
Mix these in 1 gal. of hot water, and  
use to spray on the plants.

Another pernicious weed we have  
been struggling with is horsetail. We  
all know it is almost impossible to get  
rid of. Here is another recipe which  
sounds as though it might discourage  
the plant.  
Spray with acetic acid, which strips  
the tough outer skin off the stems, and  
eventually the roots will die.  
Ordinary vinegar is 5% acetic acid,  
but we need 20% (buy at the  
drugstore if you don't have access to a  
purveyor of chemical  
materials).

## SORBUS

I have been reading the book "The

Himalayan Garden", by Jim Jermyn,  
Timber Press 2001, which was  
borrowed from our library. Did you  
know that some kinds of Sorbus  
(Rowan or Mountain Ash) breed true  
by producing seeds without  
fertilization taking place? These trees  
are apomicts, unlike most others.

If you have a beautiful little Sorbus  
cashmiriana, with fat white or pink  
berries in large clusters, you can offer  
berries to friends knowing they will  
grow to be trees exactly like their  
parents. These trees also have bright  
autumn leaf colour AND the birds  
don't strip the berries off the way they  
eat Sorbus aucuparia fruit.

If you have the chance at a specialist  
nursery, look for S. 'Harry Smith  
12799', a small tree with reddish  
autumn colour and white fruits, or S.  
'Joseph Rock' which has scarlet fall  
colour and deep golden yellow fruits.  
There are several others, such as S.  
sargentiana, introduced by Ernest  
Wilson in 1908. "Enormous trusses  
of smallish red fruit, large leaves of a  
fine dark red". This tree also has fat,  
sticky buds in winter, rather like  
horse-chestnut buds.

This book is full of descriptions of  
plants from the Himalayas, how and  
where to plant them in the garden.  
Not all are available to us yet, but a  
trip to Heronswood in Wash. state  
would be worthwhile.

This book has many beautiful photos  
showing plants "in situ", which gives  
a clue as to how they should be  
treated in our gardens.



## DID YOU KNOW

"The Royal Horticultural Society was founded in March 1804 at the bookshop of James Hatchard in Piccadilly. John Wedgwood and 6 other gentlemen met to form a new society for the improvement and practise of horticulture.

200 years on, the aims of the RHS remain much the same while broadening to reflect social development and changes in gardening tastes." From the RHS Bicentenary Program of Events. I have further information on hand if any members are planning a trip to Britain this coming year.

## FERTILIZING RHODOS

Last month I included an article on feeding rhodos by Norm Todd of Victoria. I perhaps should have remarked on the vast difference between Victoria and our part of the Island, as far as climate and soil are concerned. It was not long before I received a note from Bernie Guyader, who pointed out some facts we must always keep in mind when reading about "other people's gardens".

"On reading the article in the December newsletter referring to an article in the Spring 2003 issue of Gardenwise, by Norm Todd on feeding rhodos. I am not disagreeing with Norm, but I think further amplification is needed. Consideration has to be given to the conditions in which we are growing our plants. Norm is growing his rhodos in a fir forest, my garden consists of glacial till with some forest duff mixed in, Harry has four feet of alluvial soil. Therefore the nutrients that are available may be quite varied.

I think you have heard me say, (most people are saying, yes, many times) that your plants will tell you when they need nourishment. Yellowing

of the leaves is one sign, remembering that some hybrids always seem to have a yellowish tint to their leaves. I still believe the starting point should be a soil test. Why waste money on a rock phosphate fertilizer if there is plenty of phosphate in your soil. Once we find out what nutrients are available, with our soil test, then we should check for the pH level. We have been told that rhodos require a pH of approximately 5.5. At this level, the nutrients required by rhodos, if they are present in the soil, are readily available to the plants. Once the pH has been corrected, we can then supply the necessary food.

Some gardeners believe that lime should be sprinkled around the base of the plants, because with all our rain, our soil tends to get very acid, thus the lime raises the pH to a higher level, and if we use dolomite lime it will also increase the amount of available magnesium.

In conclusion, remember what each part of the fertilizer formula, NPK, does for our plants.

"N" Nitrogen for green growth, but applied too late in the year could force new tender growth which could be wiped out by the first frost. (That is why we are warned to not fertilize rhodos after 1 July. Ed Note)

"P" Phosphorus, assists in good blossom, fruit production and root formation.

"K" Potassium is required for strong stems.

You can hardly go wrong if you stick to the accepted, fertilizing before and after blossoming, always remembering to ensure the soil is well soaked before fertilizing and watered well afterwards. And above all, don't forget that most dwarf rhodos are very sensitive to high nitrogen fertilizer".

## LOOK TO THE ROOTS

Now we understand something about fertilizer it is time to study the article in a recent issue of Organic Gardening which tells us "Feed the soil and the soil will feed the plant. This is one of the mantras of organic gardening, but what exactly does it mean? When you apply compost and other organic matter to your garden, you offer nourishment to the many millions of bacteria and fungi that live in an intimate relationship with plants, particularly within the rhizosphere, that zone of soil that directly surrounds a plant's roots. If you were to pull up a plant and shake off the excess soil, the soil clinging to the roots would be the rhizosphere soil.

Almost all plants receive numerous benefits from microorganisms that live within this special environment. These microorganisms function much like those that inhabit your digestive tract, helping to break down nutrients from food sources. Basic organic gardening practises benefit the soil biology in your garden by increasing the number and diversity of these beneficial soil organisms, thereby improving the overall health of your garden plants."

This is exactly why many gardeners prefer organic to chemical fertilizing material for their rhodos. In fact, rhodos cannot live without the symbiotic fungi that surround them in healthy soil. Also, many rhodos (dwarf types) cannot abide chemical fertilizers, especially if they are grown in rock gardens, pots, or are trained as bonsai.

Continued next month.....

## SNIPPETS FROM SAYWARD

**Rose-Marie** keeps us supplied with interesting observations on the gardening scene:

This fall has provided a highlight in my ongoing romance with the oak tree. I have a number of oaks, mostly English oak (*Quercus robur*) and this



year, the oldest one produced its first crop of acorns. Perhaps I will sound a bit like a doting grandparent, but I must say that these acorns reminded me yet again of how exquisitely beautiful this seed is, indeed a masterwork of design. I have been glorying over the acorns, admiring them each day, and delightedly anticipating my "Sayward strain" of English oak, which would be naturally adapted to this location. They're gone. That bright blue nemesis, the Steller's jay, has demonstrated yet another reason for me to resent its presence. My hope now is that somewhere within range of my daily walks a dropped acorn will germinate, or that next year, there will be too many acorns for the jays to get them all. Gardeners must surely be the most hopeful of human beings...

Ed. Note: But, Rose- Marie, you have to admit that jays are the most resourceful of birds. They recognized immediately that here was food on a tree that had never produced it before!

### **LIQUIDAMBAR**

2003 began to be a spectacular year for fall colour. Then 10 days or bright but cold weather cut short the show here, and many of the normally colourful leaf displays turned to crisp, brown examples of natural freeze-drying. One tree had begun its performance six weeks before the cold, and continued to parade its glory until mid-November.

Liquidambar styraciflua is famous for its autumn colour, and rightfully so. My little specimen is only 6 feet tall, growing somewhat slowly in the open location I have given it. But by the beginning of September, it is already drawing every eye to its changing leaf colours. The leaves stay on through the first autumn storms, outlasting oaks and maples and remaining bright. In the 6 years it has grown here, it has consistently held its coloured leaves for at least 2

months. Eventually it will become a large shade tree, but in the meantime it makes up in autumn impact what it lacks in stature.

### **NOW FOR SOMETHING A LITTLE DIFFERENT**

Lately I have received many copies of Amateur Gardening, held up here and there for a month or more by the less than efficient postal service. I have picked out various gems that might help us with our gardening chores in the next few months.

**LAYERING** is an easy way to propagate plants. Just be patient. First, select a branch of a rhodo or other shrub that will easily reach the ground, with a few inches to spare. Wound the underneath of the stem by cutting a slit in the bark or removing a small section, or a sharp twist of a rhodo branch will damage the tissue enough to make it form roots. Dig a hole where the stem touches the ground and add some compost and sharp sand. Peg with a forked stick, cover with soil, then with a large stone. Leave it for up to 2 years, then cut the plant from the "mother" and pot up.

For climbers such as clematis or wisteria, lay a long stem on the ground after preparing the soil with compost. Use wire staples (can you find some old-fashioned hair-pins?), and push them in at each leaf-joint. A bit more soil, regular watering in dry weather, and roots should form at each joint, when you can cut the little plants apart and pot them up.

Does anyone have an **IRIS unguicularis** (also called *I. stylosa*) which they would be willing to share with friends (me, for instance). I have wished for one of these for years, since I saw one in bloom (in January, imagine), but have never found one in a nursery. They have beautiful mauve or purple flowers and a heavenly perfume.

This iris needs poor soil, in a spot that is warm and sunny so they can bake in summer. The plant should be divided in March, after flowering, and when growth has commenced. Cut it into big chunks as small bits will probably not make it.

The flowers have very short stems, so you need to cut the tattered leaves back in December and protect the plant from our sudden December downpours of rain. Because the leaves never look very decorative, it might be wise to give it a companion such as an Artemisia.

If anyone knows where to buy one of these little irises, please let me know.

**APRICOTS** do not do very well in our climate, but a firm in Britain has introduced a new variety called "Flavourcot" which should do well here (when/if we can find one).

Talking of **DRY SUMMERS**, Britain had the driest August/Sept. in 130 years, and the absence of autumn rainfall has caused worry about **WINTER DROUGHT** in the country. Authorities are now asking people to be careful in the use of water this winter. Water trees at the base, don't splash water all over leaves and soil. Let lawn grass grow longer. Mulch shrubs in fall, and use a water butt (a big plastic barrel) to catch winter rains.

**TRANSPLANTING** a large rhodo can be a heavy job. Do it in the fall, so that roots can get settled down before there is any heavy frost, and be sure to ask someone to help you. Tie the branches up out of the way, dig a trench all around the plant, then tilt the plant back and work sacking or plastic under the rootball. Tilt it the other way and get the sacking completely under the plant, then pull the edges up all around and tie the sacking firmly at the top. Lash a



stout stick to the main stem and have your helper carry one end as you move the rhodo to its new home. You have, of course, dug a hole larger than the rootball and added compost. Untie the sacking, (which could be left to rot if it is not plastic) remove all plastic and the stick, and remember to water well for some time if the rains don't come. A stake might be wise also, to prevent rocking in the wind.

There are several ways to save **FUCHSIAS**, the slightly tender ones which are often labelled hardy. *F. magellanica* seems to be very hardy in this area. Though it might be cut to the ground in severe weather it will usually come back from the roots in spring. But many others must have some protection.

A thick layer of straw around the roots helps. If you are unsure, dig it and pot it up, leaving it in a frost-free garage or workshop. Or dig a hole, line it about 1 ft. deep with straw, and place the plant in after cutting the stems down to 4". Leave the tips of the stems exposed, and watch for new growth in spring. Then dig it and pot it up. Just be careful of our freeze and thaw springs. Keep it in a frost free place until you feel danger of frost is past.

Every year I rave about my **MAHONIA** x *media* "Winter Sun", whose long racemes of bright yellow flowers start to open in October, and bloom all winter. The plant is huge (as usual, planted in the wrong place), so that branches sometimes are broken by a fall of heavy wet snow. These have to be trimmed back, but the plant keeps right on blooming anyway.

There are several other fine varieties, "Lionel Fortescue", "Buckland", "Underway", "Arthur Menzies", "Faith", "Charity" and "Charity's Sister". (No "Hope").

There are several other cultivars,

including a newcomer, *M. confusa*, collected in China in 1980 by Roy Lancaster. They are all handsome plants, with long stems of prickly leaves and striking trunks. Most are much larger plants than our native mahonias. Most have the same kind of yellow flowers, though a few (one from Mexico) have red, purple or pink flowers. Several need a sheltered position but most are tough and grow to large, tall plants.

**BAMBOOS** are another family of garden stalwarts which look green year-round, though they lose some leaves in the fall.

Just be sure when you buy them that you know whether they are invaders or clump-forming. The invaders need to be restricted by walls, in a deep hole, a heavy material like discarded lino or sheets of a heavy stiff plastic. Let it stick up above the ground for 3" to prevent rhizomes from climbing out. *Sasa Veichii* is the worst spreader, but is beloved for its large green leaves which develop wide white edges in winter to brighten up the garden. Of course they can always be contained in pots. Remember to water them in dry weather.

Clumpers take many years to spread a foot or so, but they are so decorative, with vari-coloured stems and leaves, that they are always welcome, especially if you want a Japanese-style garden. In general they are very undemanding, and don't seem to mind our dry summers. Some of the leaves curl up (like rhodo leaves) in frosty weather, but open out again as soon as it rains or warms up.

**JASMINES** are tempting plants - they are dainty climbers with pretty pink or white flowers and wonderful perfume. Tempting because you may find they are not, in general, hardy here. *Jasminum nudiflorum*, our yellow-flowered winter jasmine, is fully hardy and brightens the winter.

But any one of the white-flowered plants might do well for a few years, then succumb to a vicious north-east wind in March.

Several varieties are half-hardy (safe to 32F (O-C) with slight protection. Look for *J. fruticans* (yellow flowers) or *J. angulare*. *J. beesianum*, pink flowers, supposedly frost hardy, may survive in a sheltered spot. *J. polyanthum* is fine in a heated greenhouse or the house, in winter, with a summer holiday in the garden. If you feel brave, try one, but watch for the sudden cold snap we get occasionally.

If you are a **PARSLEY** lover, look in among the Thompson & Morgan seeds for a new one "Big Mountain". This parsley stays green longer, is winter-hardy, with finely-curved leaves and long stems, and can be grown year-round. Sow outdoors from March to September, or under glass from October to February. It is classed as a hardy biennial.

#### **GOOD ADVICE FROM "OLD TIMERS"**

From a carpenter "Think it out thrice, measure up twice, and do it once - properly".

From a father - "There's no point in getting older if you don't get any wiser" - and "There are times it is best to keep your mouth closed and be thought a fool than open it and remove all doubt".

Ed. note: This last one is the story of my life in the garden. "O yes, that one is perfectly hardy". "No, the deer never eat that plant". "Slugs? No, never had a slug in that veggie patch".