

# The Victoria Rhododendron Society *Newsletter*



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December 2007

Twenty-seventh Year of Publication

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## Christmas Party

**7:30 pm Monday, December 3, 2007**  
Garth Homer Centre, 811 Darwin Street, Victoria BC

**SPEAKER:**

**Carol Dancer on “The Tasmanian Rhododendron  
Conference and Travels down Under”**



*For details of  
party see page 2*

**Thank You, Margaret!**  
by Theresa McMillan

Margaret deWeese took on the mantle of editorship of our Newsletter in the summer of 2006. Since then, she has maintained the high standards set by James and Pat Fuller, and Alec McCarter before them.

The Newsletter looks different, thanks to new technology and Margaret’s interests. We now have coloured pictures of special occasions such as the awarding of trophies at the June picnic. Articles are brightened with photos of rhodos, other plants, and our members.

The gathering of articles and information into 8 or more pages a month is both an obligation and a labour of love for an editor. We really appreciate Margaret’s efforts over the last year and a half.

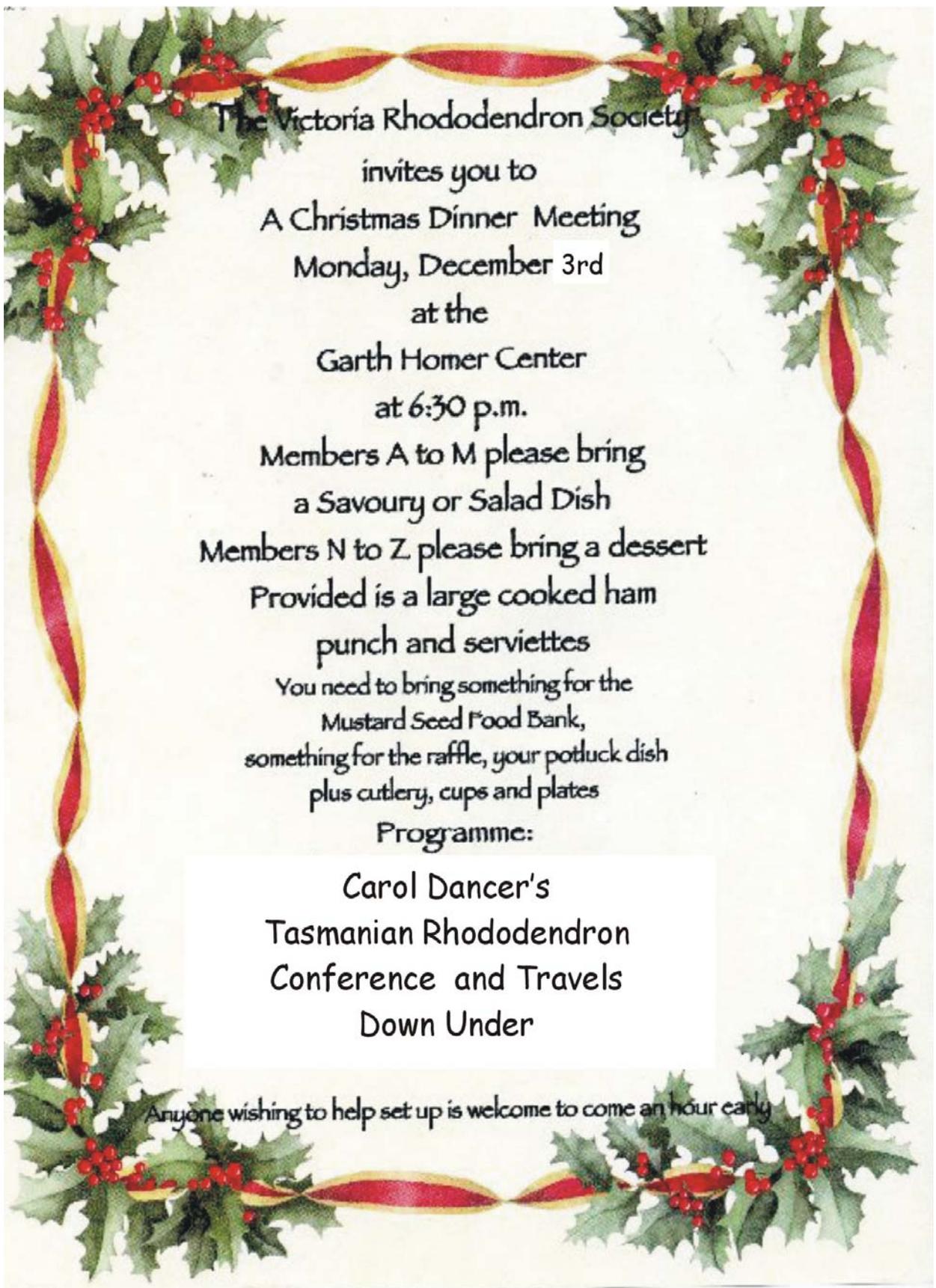
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### The VRS Refreshment Committee

Many thanks to the four volunteers who will help with the tea, coffee and goodies we have after our monthly meetings. Nadine Minckler will be phoning members to see if they will be able to donate refreshments. Joanna Massa will be setting up the tea and coffee urns, and Heather Dickman will be taking the

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The Victoria Rhododendron Society

invites you to

A Christmas Dinner Meeting

Monday, December 3rd

at the

Garth Homer Center

at 6:30 p.m.

Members A to M please bring  
a Savoury or Salad Dish

Members N to Z please bring a dessert

Provided is a large cooked ham  
punch and serviettes

You need to bring something for the  
Mustard Seed Food Bank,  
something for the raffle, your potluck dish  
plus cutlery, cups and plates

Programme:

Carol Dancer's  
Tasmanian Rhododendron  
Conference and Travels  
Down Under

Anyone wishing to help set up is welcome to come an hour early

## VRS Board

### President:

**Bill McMillan** 478-3515  
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### Past President & Membership:

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**Peggy Pitfield** 592-4261

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### **Website**

**Arthur Ralfs** 479-2629

urns away at the end of the meeting. Diane Felker will be helping out in case of illness or other eventualities.

The sounds and smells of perking coffee, the aroma of tea, and the sight of wrapped goodies on the green-clothed table all add to members and guests enjoyment of our meetings.

There's nothing like refreshment before driving back home, especially in Victoria's dark and rainy winters.

## **Ketty Hughes**

by Margaret deWeese

After a brief illness, Ketty Hughes died suddenly on November 2. She was active in many garden clubs in Greater Victoria, and later on Salt Spring Island. Margaret deWeese writes:

"Occasionally a person comes into your life with whom you have an affinity. That person may well have that effect on many other people as well but to me the person was only one of a handful in my life. And in the twists and turns of enjoying happy visits with discussions of mutual interest and being in awe of that person's command of her garden and finding connections of surprising turns such as a library filled with books from A to Z including every gardening book written.

I was phoned tonight to be told that this warm and knowledgeable person had died suddenly this afternoon. The person was Ketty Hughes. Those of you in the gardening world would know Ketty. She attended many garden clubs in the Greater Victoria area, Salt Spring Island where she lived and points south of the border with the Hardy Plants Society. She was a long time member of the Victoria Rhododendron Society and I had asked her to entertain the idea of a garden visit by our club..

She was more than willing but wanted to wait until next Spring because of her daughter's wedding taking place in the garden this year.

She had just had a wonderful cedar arbor built for the wedding which she was planning to turn it into a bench for contemplation, although I think Ketty would have used it to plan new plant grouping. In four short years of making a new garden in an old seaside orchard, Ketty made a showpiece. Our thoughts go out to Phil, her husband, her daughter, Dianne, and her son-in-law Mike, sister Margit Kristiansen and Bill Krebs( VRS members), mother Margrethe, and to Lorna Cammaert, Ketty's best friend and gardening ally.

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## Xeriscaping with Rhododendrons

by M.J. Harvey

It is unfortunate that Rhododendrons in Victoria have come to be associated with intensive watering. This is partly due to the enterprise of our local landscapers and equipment suppliers. Imaginary conversation: Gardener, "Does my garden need an automated system?" Landscaper, "It is the best thing you could possibly have, we will install one next week." There is a wise saying, never ask a barber whether you need a haircut. The answer is always yes.

The above was going on when many western cities in the USA were running short of water and were actively promoting xeriscaping. They wanted to persuade homeowners to give up their water-sucking lawns and flower beds and install rock-mulch and drought-resistant plants. The case for Xeriscaping never got a fair hearing in Victoria – no one could see a profit in it.

In the wild, Rhododendron species grow in a wide range of climatic conditions. The great centre of species diversity in the Himalayas has a monsoonal climate where rain sheets down in the summer, but with cooler dryer winters. Away from this region there are fewer Rhododendron species but they are adapted to various climate most with a greater or lesser degree of summer drought. A local example here on Vancouver Island is *R. macropyllum* distributed from BC to CA perfectly adapted to survive a long summer drought. (I have found it difficult to grow. Don't water young plants and they die, water them too much and they die).

By happenstance I conducted a long-term experiment on drought resistance in Rhododendron hybrids. I had no intention of doing

such a thing, it just happened. Let me explain what happened.

When I came to Victoria, actually Sooke, in 1990 I brought many hundreds of seedling resulting from hybrids I had made during the previous few years in Nova Scotia. These seedlings were planted out in rows in a large, flat field with the intention of eventually picking out the best.

For the next few years I would put sprinklers on the field during dry spells but as the seedling area grew larger and pressure from other work (on grasses) mounted I stopped watering, allowing the exposed field to dry out completely in the summer.

The soil is a deep fine sand, low in clay components and with little water-storage capacity. In some summers with only a few millimeters of rain June to September the capacity of the plants to survive drought in full sun was severely tested.

The results? Most of my seedlings died. Considering the magnitude of the water stress and years of sheer neglect this was not surprising. What is interesting is in what survived. Looking at the parentage of the remaining plants it became apparent that the nature of their parental genes had a strong influence on which survived.

The survivors:

*Smirnowii X pachysanthum*

*Pseudochrysanthum X yakushmanum*

*Maximum X ungerii*

N.B. I had not used *R. macropyllum* in my crosses but I suspect that its hybrids would have been among the survivors had I done so.

What is interesting about the above list is where the parents come from and the climates

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in which they grow. Not one is from the monsoonal centre of Rhododendron diversity. They are all from peripheral regions with some degree of summer drought.

*R. smirnowii* and *ungernii* are both from the slopes of the southern Caucasus Mountains and both were discovered in 1885 by Baron Franz Ungern-Sternberg (1808-1885), a Baltic-German botanist and physician. One of the species was named for the Baron and one for a friend. I might mention that Linda and I have visited the Georgian Republic (when it was part of the USSR) and seen the substorey of *R. ungerii* in the foothills growing under an open canopy of magnificent Carpathian beech with towering straight trunks. The southern Caucasus have a fairly mild climate with some summer drought periods.

*R. pachysanthum* and *pseudochrysanthum* are both from Taiwan, not the frost-free subtropical margins of the island but at certain zones in the mountains where it can freeze in winter and yet get quite warm and dry in the summer. *R. yakushimanum* is not too far away on the island of Yaku at the southern tip of the Japanese chain. It grows exposed to sun and wind on the mountaintop and is part of the Japanese complex of species.

The remaining species, *maximum*, is from yet another continent. It occurs along the Appalachians in eastern USA where it can get summer storm rain but otherwise where it can get stinking hot and dry as I have experienced. The particular cultivar used to make the hybrid was the Mt Mitchell red-leaved form although this does not show in the offspring, or not yet.

So, in summary, all the surviving hybrids in the field have parents with some degree of natural drought resistance. This seems to have combined in various ways to produce

exceptionally drought-tolerant offspring. As I said earlier it was not my intention to re-search drought tolerance but the results are so striking that I thought it worth bringing to your attention.

#### OFFER of PLANTS:

The field is now largely sown to grass and the property is up for sale. There is the original row of *smirnowii* X *pachysanthum* seedlings needing a home. There are maybe a couple of dozen plants varying in height from one to five feet. They are compact, open-grown specimens. (Plants from the original seed distribution were also grown by Diane Whitehead and were distributed a few years ago. They have done well I am told). The plants are well budded-up, the flowers are a good pink and the foliage is tough, weevil-bite free, handsome and indumented. Plants are free to anyone. The only catch is you have to dig them up yourself. We supply shovels. Phone 642-7274.

### Hunting for species PAEONIES in China

by Margaret deWeese

Paige wrote: "Your club is filled with charming plantaholics; thank you for the opportunity to see old friends and make new ones. I had a wonderful time."

We enjoyed Paige's presentation on 'Hunting for Species Paeonies in China'. Because of our previous presentations by our rhododendron adventurers, some of the journey seemed *deja vu*. Although the hunt was on for paeonies, many of the cultural experiences were similar. The shock of seeing the deforestation, the plastic litter, the pollution and high rises of former mountain villages into mountain cities and the iconization of peonies in garish design compared to the delicate single pale yellow petals of *P. ludlowii* which

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are also used for Chinese medicine and therefore threatened, the wine reds of *P. delavayi*, the papery whites of singles of and the lavender-pink shades of a new introduction, *P. mairei*.

The mountain road travel by bus made me queasy but if you go on these plant expeditions, you need to be careful to follow the rules such as taking high altitude medication for traveling on the roof of the world comes with altitude sickness. Part of the thrill of Paige's presentation were the companion plants of the Paeonies. I would have liked more time to view her slides on the unusual *Podophyllums*, the *Arisaemas*, *Gentiana*, *Primulas*, and *Lilium*. Paige showed us pictures of several minority peoples who have such precarious work lives and although the housing has improved because of the opportunities offered through increased tourism, their lives look incredibly hard. One can hardly blame a poor woman from digging up a rare paeony to stick in her garden to bring a little beauty into a yard which doubles as a pig enclosure.

On Paige's website

<http://www.hillkeep.ca/ts%20paeonia.htm>  
there are great descriptions of the unusual paeonies listed. Paige writes:

" One consequence of these stimulating tours is that we now usually follow the peony nomenclature of Hong Deyuan, the prominent Chinese botanist who has been studying peonies around the world for years. Hong and his allies have shown that several supposedly distinct species are actually just selections from a mass of intergrading forms. These "species" are now described as complexes, for clarity: the *Paeonia anomala* complex, the *Paeonia daurica* complex, the *Paeonia delavayi* complex, and so on. Botanically, this makes sense. Since gardeners cherish some of the variations formerly called species, however, we mention the old labels with the new.

Another consequence of our study-tours is that we have fallen in love with Ziban mudan ~ *Paeonia rockii* cultivars. We will soon be offering you the cream of the cream of these purple-hearted peonies, the pride of Gansu province for centuries."

Thank you very much, Don and Joyce Whittle, for hosting Paige. It was a good evening!

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## Sudden Oak Death

Reported by Bill McMillan

In view of the discovery of *Phytophthora ramorum* in five British Columbia nurseries, including at least two in Victoria, information is presented here on other susceptible plants and symptoms of the disease. To put it in perspective, very few infected plants have been found.

The following is extracted from University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Publication 7498, Published 4/02.

Oak mortality is caused by a new pathogen, *Phytophthora ramorum*, which causes Sudden Oak Death. Sudden Oak Death was first reported in 1995 in central coastal California. The pathogen also infects rhododendrons (*Rhododendron spp.*), huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*), bay laurel (*Umbellularia californica*), California buckeye (*Aesculus californica*), and other tree and shrub species, but usually causes only leaf spots and twig dieback on these hosts. The host list is expected to expand as Dr. David Rizzo, University of California at Davis, and Dr. Matteo Garbelotto, University of California at Berkeley, continue their investigations of affected ecosystems.

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# Rhododendron Species Workshops

At UBC Botanical Garden – Spring 2008

Instructor: D. Justice

Coordinator: R. Knight

## Have you registered yet?

(over 50% of the spaces are already filled.)

### Dates:

March 1 – rhododendron anatomy; environmental needs; classification

March 22 – lepidotes and azaleas

April 5 – lepidotes

April 26 – photography; pests, diseases, and other problems

### Register before January 31:

Maximum class size is 25 and registration priority will be given to rhododendron club members until January 31, when the workshops will be advertised to other groups.

Priority (and a discount of \$20 off the regular price of \$140) will also be given to people who register (by January 31) for all 4 sessions. Registration forms may be obtained from your club president, or online at: [www.rhodos.ca](http://www.rhodos.ca)

### More information:

Contact Ron Knight at 604-883-9807 or 604-929-5670 or by email: [rcknightf@telus.net](mailto:rcknightf@telus.net)

Other species are known to be infected by *Phytophthora ramorum* and characteristic symptoms are:

ERICACEAE

*Rhododendron* spp. Leaf spots and necrotic (dead) areas, twig and stem cankers.

*Vaccinium ovatum* (California huckleberry)

Leaves exhibit necrotic patches, both twigs and whole plants may die.

*Arctostaphylos* spp. (manzanita) Leaf spots and necrotic areas, twig cankers and dieback.



Ooze bleeds from a canker on an infected oak.

*Arbutus menziesii* (madrone) Leaf spots and necrotic areas, twig cankers and dieback.

CAPRIFOLIACEAE

*Lonicera hispidula* (California honeysuckle)  
Necrotic lesions on leaves.

*Viburnum x bodnantense* Leaf wilting, infection on stem develops up from base.

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## HIPPOCASTANACEAE

*Aesculus californica* (California buckeye)  
Leaf spots and lesions on petioles.

## ACERACEAE

*Acer macrophyllum* (Big-leaf maple) Leaf spots and necrosis on leaf margins.

## LAURACEAE

*Umbellularia californica* (California bay laurel) Leaves have necrotic lesions.

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### **Sunday in a Garden**

By Alec McCarter

Carved into the wood of one of the arbours in Finnerty Gardens are the words of the familiar verse that ends with, "One is nearer to God in a garden, than anywhere else on Earth."

I have been wondering if gardening has anything to do with religion. When I was a child, the Sabbath was a day on which one did "no manner of work." But I observed that after morning service, our family would sometimes spend the rest of the day in the garden. Mind you, only light chores like weeding, or watering plants were undertaken – not heavy digging. I noted that regular church-goers sometimes excused themselves from going to church by going to the garden instead.

So, perhaps gardening is an activity that, in part at least, can substitute for religious observance.

There is something about the sunshine, the soil, the growing green plants, the smell of the earth and the scents of flowers that brings one closer to the universe and makes one forget about the work-a-day world of getting and spending at which we do, indeed, lay waste our powers. Going to the beach or for a long walk in forest or field – in fact, just getting

out into the country – gives one much the same sort of revelation and sense of being a part of something infinite and glorious. But gardening is special. It is so very basic. It is nourishing to the body and spirit. It is GOOD. It is infinitely satisfying and warms the spirit of beginner and expert alike.

Pets – like dogs and cats and other animals too – are perhaps closer to us than plants, in that the mobile ones are aware of being alive, perhaps not introspective, but of giving and receiving relationships with others. There is no evidence, I think, that plants can do that. Yet, they respond to our feeding and watering, of giving them good soil in which to put down their roots, of siting them where they will get light and warmth sufficient to their needs.

While scientists are searching for life on other worlds, we gardeners are intensely aware of the uniqueness and immediacy of *this* world upon which life exists. We know that the physical conditions which must obtain for life to develop as we know it are so stringent and so very unlikely to be met, that the chances are extremely small that there is other life in the universe. One cannot be dogmatic about saying so because life has happened at least once – here, on this hospitable ball traveling in now-visited, indifferent, limitless space. And the miraculous results seem unreal.

Here in the sunshine, with our hands in the very soil of the earthy earth, and with the vast blue sky overhead, we break apart the clump of plants and place them where they will live and grow. It is real, real, real.

We muse about these things even while we dig and trowel, observe and marvel, prune and harvest.

*Reprinted from the Finnerty Garden newsletter July 2002*