

The Victoria Rhododendron Society

Newsletter



Box 5562 Postal Station B, Victoria BC Canada V8R 6S4

September 2009 Twenty-ninth Year of Publication

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web page – <http://victoriarhodo.ca>

**MEETING 7:30 P.M.
MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2009
GARTH HOMER CENTRE, 811 DARWIN STREET, VICTORIA, B. C.**

**Speaker: Carol Dancer
“The Gardens at Government House”**

Carol Dancer has been a member of ARS (American Rhododendron Society) for 30 years. She has also been the horticultural adviser for the Friends of Government House Gardens for several years.

REFRESHMENTS

Ruth Shorting, Roger and Margaret Slaby, Dr. R. Clayton, Pat and Helen Steele, Martin Sweny, Norm Thomas and Nancy Thomson are asked to bring wrapped refreshments to September's meeting. Please phone Nadine Minckler at 250-474-1429 or Joanna Massa at 250-642-5491 to confirm.

Help for Joanna and Heather Dickman is always welcome.

Thank you for making our coffee and tea break more enjoyable!

Don't forget the ARS Western Regional meeting September 17 to 19 in Federal Way, Washington State. Details are in the latest ARS journal

In This Issue

- “Apples can kill you”, Oddthoughts 4 article begins on pg. 2
- Notes from the Board pg. 3
- Pictures of the June picnic pg. 5
- Notices pg. 7
- 2010 Membership form pg. 8

RENEWAL of your Victoria Rhododendron Society Membership for 2010.

This year, we placed the form for 2010 Membership renewal at the end of the newsletter, pg. 8.

Members can cut off the form, fill it in, and mail it along with a cheque or money order to our Postal Address (given at the top of this page, or at the beginning of the form) or bring it to the next meeting.

APPLES CAN KILL YOU

Oddthoughts 4

M.J. Harvey

I have a confession to make: when I was at school I just loved chemistry, still do, some 64 years later. Early influences stay with you. So it was with delight that I seized on an attractive book that came into the Victoria Horticultural Society library a few years ago. Since most people are unlikely to read it I thought a slightly extended review might be in order.

The book is Poisonous Plants by Froehne and Pfander, two Germans working in the emergency department at Freiburg Hospital. The beauty of the book is the ease of use. It is laid out alphabetically by plant family and each family has one or more large, clear, photographs of a flowering shoot. There is no problem looking up a particular plant; that part is easy.

Where the book may give indigestion is in its use of technical terms. You soon hit words like 'fumanocoumarins' (more later) and indeed the book is a 'handbook for Doctors, Pharmacists, Toxicologists, and Veterinarians', so the Germanic obsession with detail can be excused. But gardeners can find that reading around the technical terms can be quite rewarding. Let me give a few examples.

In the classical writings there is an ancient tradition that the honey which bees have made from Rhododendron flowers is poisonous. Reports by Pliny and Xenophon detail sickness in soldiers invading what is now northeastern Turkey following their consumption of local honey. Subsequently their army was defeated. Is this myth? Is Turkish honey still poisonous?

Honey from Turkey can still be a problem since the simultaneous flowering of many hectares of the fragrant, yellow azalea *R. luteum* can result in bees collecting almost pure Rhododendron

(Continued on page 3)

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Thank you for the Newsletter Distribution

Peggy and Dick Pitfield have been instrumental in distributing our newsletter in emailed and mailed form for several years. We thank them for their valuable contributions.

Calvin Parsons, new to the VRS Board this year, has volunteered to distribute the newsletter. Thank you, Calvin

NOTES from the VRS BOARD By Theresa McMillan

Our picnic on June 28 at Ann and Tom Widowson's garden on West Saanich Road was a big success. As you can see from the photos, the weather cooperated after a threatening cloudy morning. We had over 60 members attending, and there was enough barbequed steelhead fish for everyone. The Pot Luck foods that people brought tended to delicious salads and savories, and we finished off with desserts featuring ever-popular fruits, cakes and chocolate.

Many many plants were donated for the raffle, and many gardeners checked them out for their first choices.

At the end of the picnic, the awards, trophies and plates, were given to the winners at our Show and Sale in April.

(Continued from page 2)
nectar.

Toxic effects include drooling, dizziness, vomiting and unconsciousness. After receiving many names the compounds responsible are now called grayanotoxins. Molecules of these attach to channels in cell membranes allowing sodium ions to leak out and calcium ions in. This has

nerve and cardiac consequences, possibly fatal.

The presence of toxins in nectar is variable in the species of *Rhododendron*, being present in some, absent in others. Currently (2009) the American *Rhododendron* Society has given a grant to a researcher in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne to investigate the distribution of grayanotoxins and any connections this might have to the pollinators.

Readers will be delighted to hear that the other genera in *Ericaceae*, particularly *Vaccinium*, are toxin free, thus cranberries and blueberries may be indulged in freely. However, personally I would not touch tea made from the leaves of Labrador tea. Its old name was *Ledum* but it is now transferred to *Rhododendron* and something in those leaves has to stop hungry moose from touching it.

Another example is the opium poppy *Papaver somniferum*. This produces opium, a complex mixture of maybe forty or so alkaloids. Opium is a schedule 1 drug and the cultivation of the poppy and the production of opium is prohibited. The problem here is that most gardens in most cities in the temperate world have buried seeds of the opium poppy, mostly as the double garden variety. You dig the soil, light strikes the seed, they grow; you are a criminal. I was once assured that the police do not patrol gardens looking for the odd ornamental poppy - but that was before 9/11.

Poppy seeds contain negligible amounts of alkaloids, so poppy seed cake will not give you a high. On the other hand the test for opioids is so sensitive that they can be detected for a few days after a person has eaten only a couple of poppy seed bagels. This could cause problems.

So what do we grow that is really poison-

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

ous? High on the list are monkshood (Aconitum), castor oil plant (Ricinus), Colchicum, Daphne and the spurges (Euphorbia). The book discusses very sensibly whether we should rip out all dangerous plants, and concludes that this is not necessary. Most poisonous plants are not dangerous because they taste really bad. After all these substances are animal repellents variously aimed at different levels of the animal kingdom from deer to slugs to aphids and weevils inside seeds. There are some particular dangers; for example, three Daphne mezereum berries could kill a toddler and when kids are young - the terrible twos - everything goes into the mouth, and the red berries of daphne look pretty. We have solved this problem since children are now monitored 24/7. They are shepherded from air-conditioned home to air-conditioned mall to ultra-safe playgrounds with no grass or trees. Richard Louv of Last Child in the Woods has termed this the 'nature deficit'. When we were trying to sell our Sooke acreage I was showing off the orchard, picking apples to hand to open-house visitors and was shocked to find that one girl had no idea that apples grew on trees.

The most common cases of poisoning among gardeners involve getting sap of Euphorbias in the eye. Extremely small traces cause severe eye inflammation. Gardeners who prune dead flower heads off the large Euphorbs, especially E. carassias, get abundant amounts of the milky sap on their hands and should be acutely conscious to avoid touching the face. Do not merely wash the hands afterward but scrub them. I have myself been affected and it is nasty.

I love it when people tell me "I never use chemicals". Everything is made of chemicals and the natural world has more chemicals, many very nasty, than all the hundreds of thousands that man has made. Certain crops are cultivated for their unusual chemical content: we love caffeine in coffee, capsaicin in chillis and

allyl isothiocyanate in mustard.

Sometimes we get caught as with the previously mentioned furanocoumarins in grapefruit. This class of substances slows down a mechanism in the liver that breaks down and eliminates some groups of chemicals. One example is digoxin (from foxglove, Digitalis) taken for certain heart problems. Eating grapefruit while taking this drug may cause it to accumulate in the bloodstream, causing an overdose. Ask your pharmacist about your medications.

It has become popular to mistrust science. People want to use only "natural" cures for complaints, rather than the "synthetic" drugs that scientists are "foisting" on them. This is a complete misreading of the situation. While you can trust most herbalists and naturopaths to prescribe harmless remedies, going out yourself and picking your own herbs can result in disaster. Plants can be anything but harmless.

So, can apples kill you? Yes. One person managed it. He loved chewing on the crunchy seeds, so having saved up three quarters of a cupful, he decided to chew them one evening and was found dead the next day. Why? Cyanide poisoning. Apples are a complex fruit; I could give a whole lecture on their structure and chemistry. From the apple's point of view the ultimate product is the seed, and all the rest is marketing. So the seeds are protected by a tough core, unattractive colour and, inside, a substance which releases cyanide when eaten.

Should we ban apples because they can be deadly? No. My purpose in writing this is not to inculcate fear but to impart knowledge about subjects you may not have thought about. With knowledge comes

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

confidence. Enjoy an apple, and a few seeds swallowed will not harm you; your liver protects you.

For further reading, Joe Schwarcz has written several very readable books on the chemistry of foods and everyday life; one book includes an apple on the cover.

VRS Annual Picnic



The picnic site



The raffle—choices, choices!



Winners of the 2009 Abkhazi Award
Johanna and Moe Massa



Mary Henderson Memorial Trophy
winners Madeleine and Ken Webb

NEXT YEAR'S SHOW AND SALE

We changed the date of our show and sale to May next year, Saturday, May 8, 2010 at the Cadboro Bay United Church.

We hope that the later date will enable members to bring rhododendron trusses from mid season and add more variety to our show.

Lois Blackmore and Madeleine Webb will be organizing the Show.



The **Gibson's Memorial Trophy** won by Johanna and Moe Massa



Winner of the **Herman and Hella Vaartnou Plate**, Evelyn Weesjes



Winners of the **de Rothschild Challenge Trophy**, Tony and Carolyn Marquardt



Winner of the **Alec McCarter Bowl**, Bill McMillan

THE ULTIMATE RHODODENDRON CONFERENCE

For all gardeners who would like
to learn more about rhododendrons



April 9 – 11, 2010

At Canada's premier rhododendron garden:
The University of British Columbia Botanical Garden
and Centre for Plant Research
Vancouver, BC

The teachers are: Douglas Justice and Ron Knight

CHOOSE FROM 2 LEARNING LEVELS

For details see the website

www.rhodos.ca

**REGISTER
NOW**



**Everyone who registers in 2009 receives a discount and the fee
is \$130.**

Registration is on a first-come-first-served basis and is limited to 100 gardeners. It's easy: Simply print a registration form at www.rhodos.ca and mail it with your Canadian or US cheque (**made out to Ron Knight**) to: Ultimate Rhododendron Conference, 2710 Walpole Crescent, North Vancouver, B.C., V7H 1K8, Canada. (The United States registration fee is for the same dollar amount as the Canadian fee to allow us to recover banking costs associated with foreign currency and checks.)

Editor's Note: registration form will be available soon but is not on the website as of August 23, 2009

The VRS Executive Needs Help

- **The VRS needs a First Vice President for the Board. For details, contact Jacq Bradbury, our President at 250-389-1379 or jacqbradbury@shaw.ca.**
- **One of the directors of District One of the ARS has resigned. If you are interested in the position, contact Jacq as above.**



**THE
VICTORIA
RHODODENDRON
SOCIETY**

Website:
<http://www.victoriarhodo.ca/>

All meetings of the society are open to the public and visitors are always welcome.

Of particular interest to gardeners is our Annual Show and Sale, held in April or May. The show has spectacular displays of flowers, and there are a great variety of Rhododendrons and other plants for sale.

Monthly meetings generally are held on the first Monday of the month at 7:30 pm (except June, July and August).

**The usual meeting place is the
Garth Homer Centre**

**811 Darwin Street
Victoria, B.C.**

Visits to superb local gardens are an annual Club spring activity.

OUR AIMS

The aims of the Victoria Rhododendron Society are to promote the cultivation, propagation and breeding of Rhododendrons, and also to foster knowledge, fellowship, friendship and enthusiasm concerning Rhododendrons and allied plants.

While the focus is on Rhododendrons, the interests of members as a group are wide. Talks on other shrubs, trees and herbs suitable for over- or under-planting are included, as are landscaping techniques.

MEMBERSHIP

Full membership includes membership in the VRS and the American Rhododendron Society of which we are an affiliated Chapter. This brings the ARS quarterly journal with expert articles and colour photographs. Also included is the right to participate in the ARS annual conventions, and the ARS seed exchange and pollen bank. Members also receive the Newsletter of the VRS.

Local Membership includes the Newsletter and participation in local events, but does not include membership in the ARS.

Associate Membership enables members of other Chapters to participate in the activities of the Victoria Chapter.

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Mail to: The Victoria Rhododendron Society, P.O. Box 5562 Station B, Victoria, B.C., V8R 6S4

Mr. Mrs. Mr. & Mrs. Dr.

I wish to received my Newsletter by E-mail Agree to be on the circulated club membership list

Last Name: _____

First Name: _____

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E-mail Address: _____

Circle one of the following: Regular Member \$50 Local: \$25 Associate \$10

If Associate, which chapter do you belong to? _____

Amount Paid by Cash _____ or Cheque _____