

The Victoria Rhododendron Society

Newsletter



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

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Thirty-First Year of Publication

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MEETING 7:30

MONDAY, March 7, 2011

GARTH HOMER CENTRE, 811 DARWIN STREET, VICTORIA, B. C.

Speaker: Harold Fearing, “Species Rhododendrons for the Garden” and the Annual General Meeting for the Victoria Rhododendron Society

Harold Fearing owns a small nursery, Fearing Farm, in Abbotsford. He specializes in rare and exotic rhododendrons and azaleas, mostly species.

Most are grown from seed, which we get from the American Rhododendron Society seed exchange, from the Rhododendron Species Foundation, or from the Royal Horticultural Society seed list.

REFRESHMENTS

Please let Betty Gordon at 250-479-0210 know if you are coming to the meeting and bringing goodies:

Alison Nicholson, Mark and Patty Nixon, Patricia Owen, David and Joyce Parker and Calvin Parsons.

Please wrap your cookies or snacks.

Coffee and tea are supplied.

Assistance in setting out the food, milk and sugar, napkins and helping Betty in the kitchen cleanup is really appreciated.

In This Issue

- **February’s talks** pg. 1
- **Norman Todd** pg. 4
- **The Blizzard of 1996** pg. 5
- **Plant Portrait, R. Praevernum** pg. 6
- **Our Show and Sale** pg. 8
- **Coming Events** pg. 9

A REVIEW OF DAVID MACKAS’ FEBRUARY TALK ON “MARIE SELBY GARDENS IN FLORIDA”

by Theresa McMillan

David Mackas’ talk showed us a very fine garden, situated by Sarasota Bay, on the sheltered western side of the peninsula of Florida. The garden’s position is much like our local Butchart’s Gardens, which faces the sheltered Saanich Inlet. But the strong sun of Florida makes a tremendous difference.

The very popular gardens are meticulously groomed, with even the mangrove trees and

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(Continued from page 1)

tall bamboo kept in their places.

One of the main points of interest in the Selby Gardens is its wonderful and varied collection of orchids. The gardens are subject to frost, so the only the hardier orchids are outside. The rest are in greenhouses.

The shapes of the colourful flowers were extraordinary, because they had evolved to fit the shapes of the heads of insects such as moths, bees, flies or the bills of birds that pollinate them.

The Marie Selby Gardens will have been added to many of our members' lists of "Gardens that Must be Seen".



Brassavola nodosa Orchid

A Review of Phillip MacDougall's talk on "Temperate Flora of Taiwan" in February

by Theresa McMillan

Phillip MacDougall is so enthralled by Taiwan that he has visited it four times. In fact, he plans to visit the country again, in spring, so he will be able to see the rhododendrons and several other plants in bloom.

There are 20 rhododendron species in Taiwan. Their genetic relationships are described in the

website <http://cat.inist.fr/>?
Modele+afficheN&cpsidt+14599642.

We learned a lot about the island country, which is about the same size as Vancouver Island, but has a population of 25 million. Taiwan is off the southern tip of China.

It has many of China's priceless antiquities brought to the island from the mainland by Chiang Kai-Shek as his army fled from the communist army led by Mao Tse-Tung. The antiquities from China remain in Taiwan's museums. Phillip had a few pictures of these works of art.

Phillip's pictures also included ones of a burial ground composed of little houses, some of the Taiwanese doing their morning exercises in the soft light of dawn, tiny trains being used to take tourists along the incredibly steep mountains to see the views, and the "sea of clouds" effect in the mountains in the middle of the afternoon. As well as cultural aspects of Taiwan, Phillip treated us to many pictures of the lush plant life of the country's mountains. The mountains are very high, extensive, and scarcely populated, wonderful sites for temperate flora.

Phillip's pictures showed varieties of different kinds of choice plants, endemic to Taiwan. They grow nowhere else, even though the island nation is close to China. Perhaps some of these plants could be suitable for our gardens, like the red-flowered fall blooming rhododendron with fine foliage and good growth habit.

Phillip detailed the multiyear saga of trekking the mountains to find where *R. pachysanthum* was discovered in 1971. It is one of the finest of all species of rhododendron. This plant has outstanding foliage with brown indumentum on the lower surface and silvery covering (tomentum) on the upper surface of the leaves, which persists all summer. It has a very compact habit. (Note from the editor: Joe Harvey and Lloyd Gilmore from our Club, the VRS, have used *R. Pachysanthum* in their hybridizing programs).



Gore Patterson garden *R. pachysanthum*



Tomentum on *R. pachysanthum*



Rhododendron Species Garden, *R. pachysanthum* in bloom



Joe Harvey's R. pachysanthum x R. yak hybrid in bloom



Lloyd Gilmore's R. "Jeda" x R. pachysanthum

With Thanks to Norman Todd

For years, Norman Todd has been the expert who stood by the table, picked up one plant after the other, and described the qualities of the great variety of rhododendrons in the raffle. It's time for Norm to take a well-deserved rest from the chore. Now, the Board has had the formidable job of trying to fill Norm's big shoes. At February's meeting, it took four members to do it. Peter made up the list of plants donated for the raffle, and gave it to Calvin. Two others, Bill and Dean, divided

the list and looked up the rhodos in *Greer's Guide to Rhododendrons*. As each plant was picked up and described, Calvin called up photos of the plant on his computer from the Hirsutum Website. On the screen before us, we saw printed descriptions and pictures of the foliage, leaves, and generally the blooms of the rhodos.

All the VRS members thank Norm for his years beside the raffle table, dispensing his vast knowledge of rhododendrons and encouraging us to buy more tickets to win so many prize plants. This increased the number of rhododendrons that were able to escape their pots and grow in our gardens. The raffle provides financial support for the Society.

La Nina of 2010-11 and the Blizzard of 96

In the fall of 2010, there were signs in the Pacific Ocean of strong La Nina currents and many predictions that the winter of 2010-11 would be far colder and snowier than usual. Some said the winter would rival the winter of 1996, culminating in the famous blizzard of December 1996.

So far, this winter, we've had an unusually early cold snap in November, which wreaked havoc on many flourishing rhododendrons, especially large-leaved ones.

We're in the midst of another cold spell, and today, February 23, it is snowing heavily and has been for hours. Probably, temperature and snow records will be broken for this time of year. But whether another blizzard of 96 could happen is unlikely.

I decided to check our archives for Norman Todd's article, "Blizzard 1996". That was fifteen years ago. Several of our members have moved to Victoria since that date, so I'm reprinting the article to tell them and remind us old timers what a really serious winter here is like.

BLIZZARD 1996,
By NORMAN TODD

This is a subject I really do not want to write about. I think I am fairly philosophical about the things that fate throws my way, and in terms of most tragedies where life and limb are involved, what happened here on the 29th and 30th of December 1996 is of no great consequence - but it hurt.

As I write this, nearly three weeks after the storm, there is still a lot of snow on the ground, and the full extent of the damage is still to be determined, but enough can be seen to assess that damage as major. Examples:- We had a group of *Rhododendron augustinii* - about eight of them. They were more than 20 years old and were ten, maybe twelve feet tall. These have all been broken off at the main trunk about 2 feet above the ground I am pretty sure they'll regenerate - probably quite vigorously - but that great sheet of blue that graced our Aprils will take years to reestablish. *Styrax japonica*, the snowdrop tree, has had the branches ripped off one side leaving long torn gashes to a depth of half the trunk. *Magnolia 'Susan'* whom we had watched grow from a young lively four year old to a mature and graceful lady, is a polyplegic. *Acer griseum* not only was barking up the wrong tree but has hardly any of her cinnamon bark left at all. *Rhododendron taliense*, not a common plant in any garden, which grows in Yunnan at 12,000 feet where one would expect that the living is not all that easy, does not appear to have one branch left on the trunk. Two of our native dogwoods, at least twenty feet tall, were flattened and smashed. As I was sawing them up I was fully aware that I needed a permit from Saanich to make this butchering legal. I was also probably breaking a Provincial statute, but my teeth, and not just the ones in my mouth, were ready for any challenge from officialdom.

I think my favorite tree is the arbutus. Not just because it is a first cousin of the rhododendron and one of the biggest of the heather family, but because it is such an in-

dividualist. It grows every which way, twisting and contrary and straining for light The main trunk is often skewed far from the vertical. It paid for its idiosyncrasy. That snow that fell on the 29th was so cohesive the flakes stuck to each other like herring at spawning time and it piled up on the branches of the firs and cedars and all things with branches - straight up it went - with a perpendicular angle of repose- great blades of white potency ready to fall like the Bastille guillotine. Nanaimo recorded a greater amount of snowfall but got nowhere near the damage we got. A friend was describing his experiences and got quite spiritual and lyrical when he told of the divine wind that blew every quarter of an hour or so to dislodge the dreaded build-up. On Bear Hill ten-inch arbutus were torn and fell with impunity. And a strange observation is that the dead limbs which arbutus are prone to have, stood up to the onslaught better than the live branches.

We had a big sprawling unkempt *pyracantha* in a stone planter. I knew something should be done with it. In a moment of fantasy I thought it should be clipped and trained to be a square-rigged three master. Then I was inspired by Bill Reid's sculptural masterpiece - "The Spirit of Haida-Gwaii" in the Canadian Embassy in Washington, and in the new terminal at Vancouver airport. Impressive. Well the *pyracantha's* been dismasted and decapitated, and I can devote more dreaming time to tonsures with topiary with a much less cumbersome subject.

Of course the second greenhouse (301 x 16') collapsed. There were some treasures in there and most may be recoverable but the insurance company now says - after all the estimates are in and the paper work done - that it was not covered by our policy. I can understand their reluctance to pay for rebuilding this structure once more as they paid to do so six years ago when a tree demolished it, but they are now saying that it wasn't even covered then - they made an error - and they won't make another one. While we debate I don't want to touch it and the fate of tile trapped plants worsens.

How so much damage was done to plants in

containers is a mystery. The mechanics of the breakage is not obvious. Side limbs and leaders seem to have suffered equally. Compact mound shaped plants fared just about as badly. *R yakushmanum* has evolved to its bun shape form because of constant buffeting from the elements. But these million of years of conditioning and selection were no defense against Blizzard '96. I don't own a chipper, but I could give the whole place a significant mulch of rhododendron chippings if I did. The surprises were those that came through relatively unscathed. The best flowering cherry we have is one called 'Pandora'. She looks as if she had just come from the hairdressers - not a hair out of place. Rhododendron *arboreum* -twenty-something years old - lost only one or two small branches and *auriculatum*, that hoary veteran that took 26 years to produce a flower, found its protection under the smothering cover of a cedar tree that had I been less indolent would have been trimmed last summer. I was worried about the recently grafted plants but the unions seem intact. Colin Millar was not so lucky. His prized *roxieanum oreonastes* was snapped off right at the graft.

So many plants have long sheared splits where branches fork. One can splint and tape up these wounds and I am doing this in some cases, but it is generally not good practice. The bark/cambium may join, as in a graft; but if the branch has any caliper the strength of the inner fibres is gone and the fork will split again with even more modest loading. If the branch is much more than one centimeter in diameter it is best to grit your teeth and amputate. You can take some anesthetic afterwards.

I think I have become a melancholist - one who counts losses. In a year or so maybe that will change. But I still appreciate sympathy and the best I got from my 18 month old granddaughter. As I was carrying her through the deep snow when they were leaving to go back to Vancouver after the "holiday" she said, "Damn snow. Grumpy. Damn snow".

From the FEBRUARY 2011, AtlanticRhodo Newsletter.

By Anitra Laycock

Note: The following article shows the contrast between weather extremes on the Pacific Coast to the typical variations of winter-spring weather in Nova Scotia.

Plant Portrait

Rhododendron praeevernum

It was E. H. (Chinese) Wilson who, in 1900 on his first trip to China, discovered *R. praeevernum*, growing in forests at 5,000-8,000 ft., and introduced the plant to western gardens. From a particularly fine form of the plant growing at Brodick Castle on the Isle of Arran came the selection of *R. praeevernum* grown and distributed by the Rhododendron Species Foundation (RSF) in Washington State. The RSF Botanical Garden (www.rhodygarden.org) is home to a magnificent collection of choice forms of more than 500 rhododendron species, a must visit if you are in the region.

Twenty years ago now I took possession of my first shipment of small rhododendrons from the RSF. Among this group of plants, and others that later followed, there were several rhododendron species that have gone on to be beautiful mature specimens. But a particular favourite for me over the years has been *R. praeevernum*, which should, I think, be more widely grown here.

While many of the rhododendron species closely related to *R. praeevernum*, members of Fortunei group of rhododendrons, are not uncommon in cultivation in Nova Scotia and other cold-climate growing regions, *praeever-*

num itself is much less frequently to be found.

At twenty years old, my plant of *praevernium* is a compact umbrella-shaped, basally branched shrub of around of 6 ft. in height, well-clothed with oblong, lance-like leaves up to seven inches in length. Sitting on a small westwards facing bank on the edge of the woods, and overlooking an inlet of the sea some 30 ft. below, the plant remains serenely immune to the potential ravages of sun, wind, snow, ice, salt-spray, or predation. On 22nd December 2008 it faced its sternest test to date when hurricane force winds toppled a raft of 30 foot spruce trees on top of the rhododendron bed. With one stem splinted up, the result of a direct hit from a tree trunk, *praevernium* emerged un-bowed, scarcely a leaf out of place.

One of the great beauties of this plant in our Nova Scotia environment, and what sets it apart from other fine rhododendron plants that keep it company in the garden, is that it flowers very early, very reliably and prolifically, covering the plant with showy, open trusses of pinkish-white flowers, each with its distinctive rich purple basal blotch. Indeed, the name *praevernium* means “before Spring”.

In my garden, which is usually a couple of weeks behind Halifax, *praevernium* flowers normally in the last week of April, at the same time as *Daphne mezereum*, the February daphne, and a week before those recognized early blooming rhododendrons, *dauricum* and *mucronulatum* hybrids like ‘Mahogany Red’, ‘April Gem’, ‘April Rose’ and ‘Isola Bella’.

Last year, the unusually early Spring found the flowers of *praevernium* open in the middle of April, and for the first time ever in all the many years it has been flowering for



R. praevernium [Photos by the Author, Anitra Laycock]

me, the flowers were destroyed by the heavy frost that hit us so cruelly at that time. Hopefully, this is not going to be a regular consequence of global warming!

OUR SHOW AND SALE by Lois Blackmore

The Show— April 30th Hillside Shopping Mall, 9:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Because our show is in a shopping center this year, all trusses must be “show ready” when they arrive at the mall. At the March meeting, Moe and Johanna Massa and Ken Webb will demonstrate how they prepare their trusses and transport them to the show. One of the main purposes of the show this year is to expand the public’s knowledge and appreciation of rhododendrons. We very much encourage all members to bring in as many trusses to the show as they can.

We can bring our trusses to the mall in the early evening of Friday, April 29th. The mall administration is setting out tables for us to store our plants until we are able to place them in show position. The main display is in the center of the mall between the Sears’ and Zellers’ wings. The storage tables will be in the hallway next to the mall entrance of Sears. There is an outside entrance to that storage area around the back of the mall. It is where one picks up large items. Short term parking is available when dropping off your trusses. The mall arranges all our tables and provides the “manpower” of doing so.

We will need several volunteers to help place the trusses in show position when the mall closes at 9 p.m. We will be able to start placing them “unofficially” before the closing of the mall, but we must respect the mall’s wishes that we do not interfere with the shopping public.

We will also need several volunteers to be “ambassadors of rhododendrons” during the hours at the mall. This entails a one to two hour shift engaging in conversation with the public and encouraging them to become involved with our club. We also need volunteers to help take down our displays. The mall closes at 6 p.m. and we need to remove all traces of our displays.

The Sale— May 7 Abkhazi Gardens 9 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Our sale this year is at Abkhazi Gardens. We are able to have our sale there with a donation of 10% of our sales going to the Gardens. We are advertising our sale as a fund raiser for the VRS and Abkhazi Gardens. The sellers will be able to set up the previous evening, thus everything will be in place when the sale opens at 9 a.m.

We will need several volunteers on Friday afternoon, May 6th to help organize tents, tables and plants. Volunteer sheets will be passed around at the April meeting, or if you are able to help with any of the jobs required to put on our show and sale, please e-mail Lois Blackmore at loisb@shaw.ca Carol Dancer at w.dancer@telus.net or Madeleine Webb at ken-webb@shaw.ca to tell us with which jobs you are willing to help.

Coming Events

Date	Event	Place
Friday, February 25 – Sunday, February 27	VIRAGS Western Winter Study Weekend	Mary Winspear Centre, 2243 Beacon Ave., Sidney, BC
Thursday, March 3 – Friday, March 4	Victoria Orchid Society Show and Sale	Student Union Building, UVIC, Victoria, BC
Wednesday, April 20	UBC Botanical Garden, Collectors Plant Auction	UBC Botanical Garden, 6804 SW Marine Drive, Van., BC
Saturday, April 23	Fraser South Rhododendron Society, Annual Plant Sale	Langley United Church, 5673 – 200 th St., Langley, BC
Saturday, April 23	Plant Sale and Garden Open	Evelyn Weesjes, 10629 Derrick Rd, Saanich, BC
Saturday, April 30	Victoria Rhododendron Society Show	Hillside Mall, 1644 Hillside Ave., Victoria, BC
Saturday, May 7	Victoria Rhododendron Society Sale	Abkhazi Gardens, 1964 Fairfield Rd., Victoria, BC
Sunday, May 8	Plant Sale and Garden Open	Carmen Varcoe & Friends, 545- Old West Saanich Rd., Saanich, BC
Wednesday, May 11 – Sunday, May 15	65 th Annual ARS Spring Convention	Heathman Lodge, Vancouver, Washington, USA
Sunday, May 22	Plant a Holics Sale	Abkhazi Gardens, 1964 Fairfield Rd., Victoria, BC
Sunday, June 26	VRS Picnic	TBA