

# The Victoria Rhododendron Society

## *Newsletter*



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

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**MEETING 7:30**

**MONDAY, February 13, 2012**

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

**Speaker: Shane Ford “A Naturalist's Tour of *R. macrophyllum* populations in BC & Washington”**

**Shane Ford** has worked for the province of BC for 14 years in various natural resource ministries. He has a long-standing interest in BC's rhododendrons and completed an MSc at UVic on the genetic variability, ecology, and population biology of Rhododendron macrophyllum populations in BC and Washington in 1998.

### **REFRESHMENTS**

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

**Jacqueline Bradbury, Peter Bradley, Stephen and Marjorie Brice, Archie and Norah Brown, and Bert and Norma Buckley**

Please wrap your cookies or snacks. Coffee and tea are supplied. Assistance in setting out the food, and helping Betty in the kitchen cleanup is really appreciated.

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### **January's Talk**

Gord Hutchings' talk on native pollinizers began with a history of ancient plants, like mosses and liverworts, which were not pollinated by insects, but by water or wind. Ninety percent of our native pollinizers nest in the ground. They rely on the richness of native plants, including the leaves and needles which cover the ground in the fall.

Under them, in fairly deep holes, the bees wait for the spring to crawl out and begin fertilizing flowers.

They do not do well under a garden's thick cedar mulch because it is too difficult to get

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out of in the spring.

Gord had several pictures of native bees. Some looked more like beetles than bees, and several were black and white. There is a variety of native bees, like the well-known (for gardeners admiring rhododendron blooms) bumblebees, leaf cutting bees, and parasitic bees, who lay their eggs in other bees' nests.

At the side of the room, Gord had several excellent condos for mason or orchard bees, leaf-cutting bees, and others. These condos are for sale. See Gord's website below at the end of Agnes's note.



Gord's picture of a bumblebee on a native flower.

### NOTE FROM AGNES LYNN

At the meeting, I mentioned an excellent web site which contained many images of bugs, all correctly named. This nature site ( <http://www.dereilanatureinn.ca/map.htm> ) is superb and contains not only bugs but wild-flowers, birds, fungi, marine life and more. Check the sitemap to see the amazing extent of this site. You may wish to sign up for the monthly on-line newsletter full of interesting snippets of nature. Derrick Ditchburn is the photographer and works with his son to put the website and the newsletter together.

Agnes Lynn

And

<http://www.dereilanatureinn.ca/map.htm>

**Gord Hutchings website:** <http://sites.google.com/site/hutchingsbeeservice/home>

## Rhodies 101: On fertilizing rhododendrons

Harold W. Fearing, November, 2009

Reprinted with permission from <http://www.fearing.ca/>

When writing about a particular rhododendron, it is always possible to consult the experts and the various books to get fairly definitive information. When it comes to fertilizing however, consulting two rhododendron experts will lead to at least three contradictory bits of advice. What is on the Internet is also not so useful as it is often tailored to specific climates and soil conditions. I am going to try to distill my experience and things I have learned from other local rhododendron growers, where 'local' refers primarily to the lower mainland, i.e. Vancouver area, of British Columbia, though most of this should apply to the Pacific Northwest which has a similar climate. However I am certainly not an expert, so what follows should be taken with a very large grain of salt ...er, fertilizer.

Like any plant, rhododendrons need a steady supply of nutrients, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, the N-P-K of fertilizer mixtures, as well as calcium, iron, sulfur, and other micronutrients. The nitrogen promotes vegetative growth. Phosphorus is important for root development and flower production, and potassium improves vigor and disease resistance. Some fertilizer mixtures include something to make the soil acid, but that normally isn't really necessary in this area since with all the rain we get most soils are naturally acid.

The question is whether one needs to use chemical fertilizers to provide these nutrients. The world is divided into 'those who don't' and 'those who do', with a significant group of us categorized as 'those who intend to, but sometimes don't get around to it'.

Whether you plan to use chemical fertilizers or not you should start as though you were not going to. That means you should regularly add a layer of mulch to your rhododendrons, an inch or two thick, out past the drip line. Bark mulch, well-rotted compost, pine needles, or other coarse organic materials are good. Peat moss, sawdust, and green grass cuttings are not good, as they shed water. Manure is not good as it tends to be alkaline. The late Frank Dorsey of the Vancouver Rhododendron Society used shredded oak leaves, which he said, with his usual wry sense of humor, he pirated from a secret location in the middle of the night. One caution though - fresh organic material, e.g. fresh bark mulch, absorbs a lot of nitrogen when it first starts to decompose. This nitrogen is later released and slowly made available to the plant as the decomposition proceeds. However such fresh materials can lead to an initial nitrogen deficiency and so if you use them you should add some high nitrogen chemical fertilizer at the same time.

So you have done everything right so far. Do you need to use additional chemical fertilizers as well? It is probably not really necessary in most lower mainland gardens, at least once the plants are well established. However I do, as do most others with large collections with whom I have talked. I missed a year a few years ago and I thought the plants suffered. They didn't die, but the next year when I got back to my usual schedule of fertilizing, I thought they grew better, were healthier, and bloomed better.

What most people seem to do is to fertilize twice a year, the first time in February/March before the plants really start growing and the second time in June, right at the end of flowering season. For the first application I usually use Green Valley 10-8-6 Rhododendron and Azalea fertilizer. This was developed for our

climate 20 or 30 years ago by a number of members of the local rhododendron societies, working with the Green Valley people. It is reasonably high in nitrogen, some of which is delayed release, and contains the needed micronutrients. It should be broadcast under the plant out to the drip line. I use a carefully measured amount for each plant - a small handful for small plants and a large handful for large plants! This seems to be less available in garden shops than it used to be, but can still be obtained (at least it could last year) from the Green Valley plant in Abbotsford. For the June feeding I use this same fertilizer or any of the other brands of specifically rhododendron fertilizer which are available in garden shops. These tend to have relatively less nitrogen and may be more appropriate for later season application, as they may be less likely to stimulate new growth so late in the season that it doesn't have time to harden off before winter.

There is another approach, espoused by some, which advocates fertilizing in the late fall or early winter. The theory is that in our climate where the ground (usually!) isn't frozen over most of the winter the roots continue to develop through the winter and early spring. Thus a winter feeding stimulates root growth and leads to a healthier plant. I have never tried this, but it does sound logical. However, one would have to time the application so the fertilizer reached the root zone, which is very shallow for rhododendrons, in the very early spring as the ground started to warm up. If applied too early I would think the winter rains would wash a lot down below the root zone before it could be used.

Finally, one reads that some rhodos 'don't like fertilizer'. This is supposed to be true particularly of the small leaved varieties

and of some specific hybrids. I have never seen any evidence of this. I do match the amount of fertilizer to the size of the plant, but I have never seen any obvious fertilizer burn for plants in the ground. For plants in pots it is a different story, and I have over fertilized and burned a number of them.

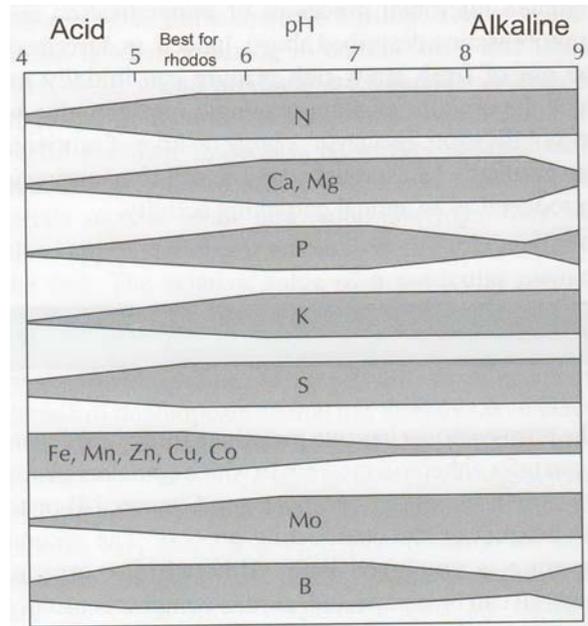
I am sure there is formal research about fertilizing practices applicable to controlled situations in commercial greenhouses, but for the wide variety of conditions we experience in home gardens, our knowledge comes mainly as word of mouth from local growers. So perhaps the best approach is to talk with experienced growers in your own local area.

#### **Addendum:**

Rhododendrons in general are said to like acid soil. The reason for this is that acidity of the soil affects the availability to the plants of specific nutrients in the soil or in the fertilizer which is added. Take a look at the graph on the next page. [Taken with modifications from 'Science and the Garden - The Scientific Basis of Horticultural Practice', 2nd edition, ed. by D.S.Ingram, D. Vince-Prue and P.J. Gregory, page 102, published by Blackwell for the Royal Horticultural Society.] The figure shows the relative availability of various plant nutrients as a function of the pH of the soil. Neutral is pH 7. Lower numbers correspond to acidic and higher numbers to alkaline soils. Most rhodos are said to prefer a pH of 5-6, which is slightly on the acid side.

At the preferred pH the main nutrients N (nitrogen), P (phosphorus), K (potassium) and also S (sulfur) are available. Also Fe (iron) and some of the other micro nutrients are available. Not shown is the fact that as the pH becomes much more acidic, aluminum, which is toxic to plants, becomes more available, so one doesn't want the soil too acid.

As the pH rises (soil becoming more alkaline, or sweeter) two things happen. First iron becomes unavailable. In rhodos this leads to chlorotic leaves with yellow veins. Secondly Ca (calcium) becomes more available. That is bad for rhodos which need some calcium, but not too much, though there is still scientific debate as to whether it is the calcium or the carbonate which goes with it that causes the damage. That is why one should never use regular lime on rhodos, as it is mainly calcium carbonate. Instead, if the soil needs sweetening, use dolomite lime, which is slower acting, but contains a lot of Mg (magnesium) in place of the calcium, and thus does less damage. Normal pure rainwater has a pH of 5.6, but the pH can be much lower in polluted areas (acid rain). Some of this acid is neutralized by elements in the soil, depending on the soil type. But the end result is that in our rainy climate the soil tends to be naturally acid, part of the reason we can grow rhodos so well. In extremely rainy areas the soil may get too acid and so some people in such areas use a bit of dolomite lime on their rhodos. In our garden the pH seems to be around 6, so I have never found



**Graph showing the availability of nutrients to rhododendrons, depending on the pH of the soil.**



A rhodo with chlorosis due to iron deficiency.



A rhododendron with healthy leaves.

## Harry Wright's Garden Compilation Project

### **FROM THE BOARD: Share Your Rhodo Garden Through Photos By Calvin Parsons**

At our monthly executive meeting we discussed the idea of members taking photos of their gardens to share with the membership. Photos could be sent through e-mail and we would put them into a PowerPoint. The PowerPoint presentations would be shown at meetings for a 10-minute portion of our agenda. For those who are not comfortable speaking in public, we would add music to their presentations. The photomontages will start in September and will be on our agenda meetings throughout the year.

The photos would include views of the garden, particular plants, individual trusses and of course, pictures of the members whose garden it is. In this way VRS members can share their gardens with others throughout the year. Along with the open gardens in the spring, this would be another way to share what our members both love and appreciate.

If you do not have a camera or e-mail, we have members who are willing to come to each garden and take photos. We will start collecting photos this spring. Please inform Lois or Calvin if you need assistance with this project. You may start sending photos whenever you are ready to Calvin at [waterlily@shaw.ca](mailto:waterlily@shaw.ca).

Before Harry Wright's untimely death, last November, he had started to update his RHO-DODENDRON VARIETIES & LOCATIONS WITHIN BRITISH COLUMBIA for the September 2012 ARS Western Regional Conference in Nanaimo. Now Bob Wright has agreed to attempt to complete the update.

Harry began collecting Rhododendron names and their location in BC gardens many years ago. The 4th edition in 2005 listed 125 gardens with an inventory of over 4000 varieties.

It is requested that those who sent Harry their inventory update it, and those who have not sent an inventory please consider submitting one. Please act as quickly as possible so Bob can complete the task in time to have the 5th edition ready for the meeting.

The information can be mailed to:  
Bob Wright, Box 266, Lions Bay, BC V0N 2E0  
Or Emailed to: [rjwright74@gmail.com](mailto:rjwright74@gmail.com)



Harry Wright's hybrid, "Courtenay Princess"

From The Yak, Feb. 2003,

**An article, “Rootstalk” by Indumentum, on men and women gardeners....**

There is a marvelous book called "Cuttings from a Rock Garden" that describes the development of the famous rhododendron and alpine garden at Millstream in Connecticut. The relationship between Linc and Timmy, also known as H. Lincoln Foster and Laura Louise Foster is fascinating. At one point, Timmy comments "Linc calls me a compulsive weeder. He can walk past a bed full of gigantic weeds and apparently never see them, whereas if I see a weed, I have to bend over and dig it out. This drives Linc crazy on the few occasions when we walk through the garden on a sightseeing tour together."

Sounds exactly like the wife and I.

The differences between men and women when it comes to landscape development and upkeep can power a dynamic gardening team. Complementary skills and interests are much more effective in achieving harmony and results than if you both like doing the same things. Men like to dig, move rocks and stand around in the rain, just to get out of the house.

Women are interested in colour combinations, aesthetic balance and general tidiness. But I have to admit that a neat garden, weeded and edged, is much more satisfying to be in than a messy one. As Harold Johnson was fond of saying, "Never develop a garden bigger than your wife can maintain".



An elaborate collection of succulents in containers, Mrs. Hewett's garden near Gore in New Zealand



An entirely MAN-made waterfall in Compton Acres garden in Cornwall, England

**Upcoming Events**

<b>2012</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Place</b>	<b>Fee</b>
April 21	VRS Show and Sale	Westshore Centre, 2945 Jacklin Rd., Lang- ford, BC	Free
May 26	VRS Show and Sale	Tillicum Centre, 3170 Tillicum Rd., Victoria, BC	Free
Friday – Monday, May 4 – May 7	ARS-ASA International Convention Info <u>Contact and registration:</u> <a href="http://www.rhododendron.org/2012convention.pdf">http://www.rhododendron.org/2012convention.pdf</a>	Asheville, North Carolina	~\$515 US
Saturday, May 12	'Rhodoholics' Sale Aka 'Plantaholics' Sale	Abkhazi Garden 1964 Fairfield Rd., Victoria, BC	Free Garden Entry
Monday – Sunday, May 23 – June 2	Nine Night Hosted Deluxe English Garden Tour – contact <a href="http://www.cruiseplus.ca">www.cruiseplus.ca</a> or call Liz:  Cruiseplus Management Ltd, Lantzville, BC 250-390-0220 or 1-800 854-9664 e-mail: <a href="mailto:info@cruiseplus.ca">info@cruiseplus.ca</a>	London and Cornwall, UK	\$3299.00 CAD per person
June 22 - 23	BC Blooms Show and Sale	Government House	
Sunday, June 24	VRS Picnic	TBA	
September 21 - 23	ARS Western Conference – Rhododendrons in Paradise: Destination Vancouver Island	Nanaimo, Coast Bastion Inn	
Monday, November 12	People's Choice Rhododendron Photography Evening	VRS Regular Monthly Meeting Garth Homer Centre	



R. "Jock" from Glendale gardens of the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific