

The Victoria Rhododendron Society *Newsletter*



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

January 2008 Twenty-eighth Year of Publication

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web page – <http://victoriarhodo.ca>

Meeting

7:30 pm Monday, January 7, 2008

Garth Homer Centre, 811 Darwin Street, Victoria BC

SPEAKER: Norma Senn

**“How Plants Changed and Determined our History; 10,000 years
in 40 minutes”**

January Refreshments:

Robert and Barbara Struthers, Renee Sweeney, Martin Sweeny, Norm Thomas, Maureen Thompson and Nancy Thomson are requested to bring wrapped goodies to the meeting on January 7th. Please phone **Nadine Minckler** at 474-1429 to confirm contributions. Help in the kitchen area is always welcome.

Christmas Decorations from the VRS Christmas Party

If you have a Christmas table decoration from our Christmas Pot Luck dinner, would you please return the part supporting the candle? Jacqueline Bradbury at 389-1379 provided this part for the decorations, and would like to get it back.

Bring it to this January's meeting, or when you can. Thank you.



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The VRS Christmas dinner party and Carol Dancer's presentation

By Theresa McMillan

On the evening of December 3rd, we had a great turnout for the VRS Christmas pot-luck dinner, raffle and talk. A number of volunteers helped make it a great success. Jacqui

Bradbury and Karen Morrison were respon-



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sible for the Christmas decorations. Dean and Ann Goard made the delicious spiced apple punch. Moe Massa set up the Christmas raffle. Later, several volunteers cleaned up the hall and kitchen.

There was a considerable amount of canned food for the Mustard Seed Food Bank. The raffle brought in over \$275 dollars, which was donated to the Open Door.

After the dinner and raffle, Carol Dancer spoke about “**The Tasmanian Rhododendron Conference and Travels down under**”, her trip in November of 2006.

Tasmania is the small island separated from the southern part of Australia. Its climate is like ours on southern Vancouver Island, though the winters are milder, as shown by the prevalence of tree ferns.

It is a windy island, buffeted by the “Roaring Forties”, and sometimes by winds from Antarctica, which lead to frost and snow. Part of the island has the Australian eucalyptus vegetation and another has the Southern Oceanic flora.

Carol showed us slides of Cradle Mountain, a World Heritage Site, usually covered in fog. She was extremely lucky to see it under blue skies, and see the special flora there, which looks barren but is consistently wet when touched.

There are areas in Tasmania of the ancient beautiful forests of beeches, myrtles, and pines of the Gondwanaland super-continent.

The rhododendron gardens vary from big-leaved plants to vireyas protected under trees from frost. Because of strong restrictions on importing any plant material to Tasmania, work on hybridizing rhododendrons is done

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from seed. There are many hybrids, but no recent species rhododendrons there.

Carol also had photos of rhodos in full sunlight in the Pukeiti Gardens on Mount Taranaki. The once-called Mt. Egmont is a snow-capped volcanic mountain seldom clearly seen on the South Island of New Zealand.

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On a cold, dark winter night, it was a real pleasure to have Christmas greenery, fine food, and pictures of spring blooms in an exotic land.

Thank you from a bursary student at the Horticultural Center of the Pacific

To the Victoria Rhododendron Society,

Thank you ever so much for the generous bursary that I recently received from your club. Completing the PHC Landscape Horticulture Certificate programme is an important step in a new career for me, and is fulfilling a dream. Your bursary is making it possible.

I plan to use the money for books and tools. In the programme, we have learned much about Rhododendrons, which have always figured large in my appreciation of gardens. The photo, on this card, taken by me, is of the welcoming gates at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh; a place which I visited frequently over the five years we lived there, and a place where my love of Rhododendrons grew.

Thank you again for your kindness.

Yours truly,
Jackie Hiebert
October 30, 2007

Thank you from Valerie Murray of the Abkhazi Garden

On behalf of the Abkhazi Garden, please thank the membership of the Victoria Rhododendron Society for their ongoing support. In the last few years I feel we have turned a corner and our reputation as a good garden to visit by locals and tourists alike is secure.

We could not have reached this point without the backing of community groups like the Rhodo Society has offered. We still struggle financially, of course, and your gift of \$400 will be put to good use this fall as we plan our projects. I invite the group to come on a tour this spring and see the changes for themselves.

Sincerely,
Valerie Murray
Nov. 14, 2007

Early Bloomers

By Norman Todd

I was not an early bloomer but I do remember a few who stood out or sat up in my early schooldays. They sat up because the bright ones were always seated at the top of the class. They were not always the best looking but they certainly were aware of their status. Standing out right now, as I write this in mid-November is the first flower of the vibrant red 'Nobleanum Coccineum'. This champion will have some opened flowers until the end of March or even into April. Blooming all through winter has its drawbacks, as had some of the Grade 2 smarties who were often not very coordinated in the gym. The opened flowers will take - 2°C or even -3°C before going brown. The unopened buds stay patiently waiting for the unwelcomed, discourteous cold snap to go back to Alberta.

'Nobleanum Coccineum' has a pink sister with another (now disallowed) pretentiously, specific sounding name. 'Nobleanum Venusium'. Both are hybrids from mid -1800s, when there were no nomenclature police to prohibit hybrids sounding like species. 'Lee's Scarlet' always blooms for Christmas and it too lasts for at least three months. We call it the "Ho, Ho, Ho, plant". 'Heatherside

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Beauty' - white with a pink spotted throat - is the most backward of this group. not blooming until February. They are probably all *causicum*, *arboreum* crosses. I have a plant called 'Jacksonii' that has, to my eyes, the same flower as 'Rosamundi' but I think over almost 200 years some plants could have been mislabeled or mixed up and one must be somewhat suspicious of what is on the tag. For example, the plant called 'Christmas Cheer', in my garden anyway, doesn't bloom until the end of March. I have read that it was so named because in the mid- nineteenth century only the wealthy were growing rhododendrons and this plant could be brought into their stove houses and forced into bloom over Christmas. It is often confused with 'Rosamundi'.

The first species rhododendron to bloom for us is *rireii*. This is a big plant now placed in the Argyrophylla Subsection. Most years it blooms for New Year's Day. Last year with our earlier bitter November it decided it was not salubrious enough to risk showing its crowning glory until the 1st of February. This was a wise decision because its flowers are very frost tender. The blossoms are lilac-purple with very large dark nectarines. From these flow copious streams of nectar, like the tears from a grief stricken widow. I never see any insects tapping this bounty but perhaps with the Anna's humming birds now being resident all winter their hyperactive metabolism could benefit from utilizing it. I will be watching for them. There is an early blooming plant with a deeper flower colour at the University with the *rireii* name on it but it has no trace of indumentum. This makes the name doubtful. It could be a hybrid but with what? Perhaps someone knows the provenance of this plant.

In this short piece I define 'early' as 'starting

to bloom before the end of February'. There are a number of the smaller leaf lepidotes that will meet this criterion. Thirty- five years ago when the Abkhazis were still gardening their Fairfield property there was a good dark, January blooming, purple form of *dauricum*. I'm not sure if it's still there. I propagated it and had a plant for quite a few years but it too is no longer. I certainly would like to replace it. *Dauricum's* deciduous cousin *mucronulatum* will give a great show in February. I claim that the 'Cornell Pink' form is better than any cherry, although, of course, much smaller. 'Praecox', a *mucronulatum* hybrid gives a rewarding show, as does 'Olive'. Both are old veterans.

There are two plants that I love - most of the time. When 'Airy Fairy' blooms I think it is the best plant in the garden. It's not too bad in October/November when many of the old leaves are bright red and orange but for the rest of the year it can only be described as non-descript. It is a cross of *lutescens* and *mucronulatum* and the yellow of the *lutescens* melds artfully with the clear pink of *mucronulatum*. There is a newer plant with the same parents called 'Coral Glow'. It is more deciduous than 'Airy Fairy' and in the fall months looks really scruffy. But when it blooms in February it is stunning (roses, too, look awful in winter). 'Coral Glow', although I have not grown it long enough to be on statistically solid ground has, over the last few years, bloomed for at least two months. It is a tall, narrow plant growing about 50 cm a year. It does not need much acreage and thus is good for the small garden where some height can be pleasing. *Lutescens*, the first of the Triflora to bloom is a great plant. The end of February usually sees that impressive sunny mass lighting up the still short days.

There are two other end-of-February bloom-

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ers that are among the hard working infantry of our rhododendron army and must be mentioned in dispatches. No garden should be without them. They are not very large so there is room for them in every landscape. Place them side by side with at least two of one and one of the other. 'Cilpinense' has *ciliatum* and *moupinense* as parents, whereas 'Snow Lady' substitutes *leucaspis* for *moupinense*. 'Snow Lady' has fairly open pure white flowers with contrasting chocolate anthers. It has fuzzy, hairy foliage. 'Cilpinense's' leaves are shinier. Both are broader than tall and need good exposure to keep a tight shape. 'Cilpinense' (often mislabeled *moupinense*) has pink rims to the white centers. The pink bleeds into the white like a watercolour painting.

Earliness of bloom gives those who possess it a memory-jolting advantage over the thousands that start their blooming career in March when they are competing with so many challenging and bright good -lookers. The late bloomers lose out somewhat too, because there are so many other summer-blooming rivals in the landscape.

Our local climate is really quite favourable for the earliest. Sure, they might get their nose frost-bitten once in a while but they always manage to give some show. Besides, we can play the victim when some blossoms are browned and seek commiseration from our fellow gardeners. We all love to play "Ain't it awful". It is nice, too, to tell your eastern friends and family what's blooming its head off in January.



Frosted 'Lee's Scarlet'

Xeriscaping with Rhododendrons Part II (article continued from Xeriscaping Part I in the December 2007 VRS Newsletter)

By M.J. Harvey

I'm interested in the species of Rhododendrons, how they are adapted to their particular climate and how this adaptation influences how they and their hybrids perform in our gardens. It is a topic rarely touched on in gardening books.

In Xeriscaping Part I, I mentioned that certain hybrids, derived from indumented species with native summer-dry climates, were surprisingly drought proof. This to the extent of surviving some dry Victoria summers with hot sun and wind exposure but, despite this, growing and flowering attractively.

But all the species I used were indumented. This was not an accident since the main hybrids I had made for some 30 years were indumented. This was because I thought silvery-hairy leaves looked attractive.

To level the playing field I should be fair and point out that there are drought-resistant species that are glabrous, i.e. hairless. Furthermore their hybrids are among us, do well and, as a Rhododendron society, we almost completely ignore them and rarely have them in our annual show. Why the shunning?

To understand, we have to go back two or three centuries to the beginning of plant exploration and the early hybridizers. First is *R. ponticum* named for the Pontus, the region of Asia Minor bordering the Black Sea and west of ancient Colchis.

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Cox and Cox have *ponticum* introduced to Britain from 1763 and we don't really know whether it came from the main Turkish region or the smaller outlying colonies in Spain and Portugal. But as everyone knows, "the rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain", which together with the mountains and Turkey itself get pretty hot and dry in the summer. So the hairless *ponticum* is a genetically drought-resistant species.

Nowadays we don't think anything of *R. ponticum* and in Victoria it occurs in the variegated form or as grown-out rootstock as at Hatley Park or planted alongside the rocky area in Playfair Park.

But anciently it was regarded as a garden marvel and albino and darker forms were selected.

Next we have two N. American species sent to Britain by early colonists. First was *R. maximum* also acquitted 1763, followed by *R. catawbiense* some forty years later. These come from the Appalachians and are heat and drought resistant.

Now I mentioned *R. maximum* in the previous article and it does have a slight indumentum which you can scrape off with a fingernail. Interestingly, when *maximum* is crossed with an indumented species the hybrids have indumentum, but when crossed with hairless ones, the hybrids are hairless. The latter is what happened in the eighteenth century.

So by the early 1800's the only Rhododendrons available in nurseries were *ponticum*, *maximum* and *catawbiense*. I can imagine modern enthusiast's lips curling with disgust at the very thought of such slim pickings. But cast your mind back to the times—these new species were really big news, everyone

wanted in on the action and the nurseries geared up to turn out plants. Eminent among these nurseries was the Waterer family which continued a multigenerational tradition until the twentieth century. It was Michael Waterer who first crossed *maximum* with *catawbiense* to start the craze which eventually led to the creation of our society. There is a suspicion that the *ponticum* which now infests much of the hilly regions of the British Isles (it has been declared a national pest) has been "improved" by an early crossing with Michael Waterer's hybrids.

The first *R. catawbiense* to flower in the UK did so in 1809. We have these dates because these events were keenly followed by the public.

After that initial set of introductions and habitations, *R. caucasicum* was introduced and 'Cunningham's White' named in 1830. It is *caucasicum* X *ponticum album* and it is relatively dwarf because *.caucasicum* is short. We still have 'Cunningham's White' sold commercially and in our gardens as are the related pink 'Rosamundi' and the blush white 'Christmas Cheer' which both do cheer us up in the winter.

In 1826 the scarlet form of the Himalayan *R. arboreum* bloomed in England for the first time. People really wanted a red Rhododendron so it was crossed with some of the early *catawbiense* X *ponticum* hybrids giving 'Altaclarensis' (Latin for the garden at High Clere) brought out in 1831. This marked the start of the reds and the enormous range of hybrids which came out during the rest of the nineteenth century and continuing ever since.

So what is there about these early hybrids? First they have beautifully shaped full trusses

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Vancouver Rhododendron Species Workshops

At UBC Botanical Garden – Spring 2008

Instructor: D. Justice; Coordinator: R. Knight

THERE MAY STILL BE SPACE

Dates:

March 8 (**note change**) – rhododendron anatomy; environmental needs; classification

March 22 – lepidotes and azaleas

April 5 – lepidotes

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

Registration forms may be obtained online at: www.rhodos.ca;

More information:

Contact Ron Knight at 604-883-9807 or 604-929-5670 or by email: rcknight@telus.net

Rhododendron Species Workshops Vancouver Island

Our proposed study program for Vancouver Island is rapidly coming together. We now have Steve Hootman, Joe Harvey, Norman Todd, and Glen Jamieson on our presenter's list. We are looking for one more presenter.

There will be 4 sessions: two in Victoria (March 15th and 16th) and 2 in Qualicum (April 5th and 6th). Space will be limited to 30 registrants (6 from each of the Vancouver Island chapters). We expect that cost will be \$120 for the 4 sessions and, if you wish them, catered lunches will be available at a cost of \$10.00 per person for each session.

Registration forms will be available soon.

but with flowers only about 2” across—
shock, horror! In an era of “bigger is better”
they don’t get the approval of experts or
prizes at shows. Secondly they flower later
in May or June after our local show has had
time to get the trophies engraved and handed
out at the summer pot-luck. They get the
lateness genes from their ancestral base spe-
cies, especially *maximum*. Thirdly they are
extremely drought tolerant, a feature which
they also get from their ancestral genes.
Fourthly they are cold-hardy, also inherited.

Drive around the city a month or more after
our annual show. There are many large
plants in gardens in the older subdivisions.
These plants are maybe up to 100 years old.
They don’t get watered. They are beautiful
but the names have been lost with the passing

of the generations. Know your history.
Know the species—they teach us a lot. Oh,
and stop drowning them.

Serving Spoon Lost at the June Picnic

Heather Dickman lost a serving spoon, part
of a set, at the picnic last June at the home of
Ann and Tom Widdowson. Her serving
spoon is smallish, plain on the handle and the
spoon part is slotted and shaped to form a
decoration. The spoon she picked up from
her bowl has a decorated handle and a
smooth spoon part.

Please phone Heather at 478-9725 if you find
the spoon, and she’ll gladly trade

**Species: *Rhododendron sulfureum*
Franch**

The following is a modified excerpt from a profile of *Rhododendron sulfureum* Franch by Steve Hootman in the Fall 2007 Rhododendron Species Foundation Newsletter. For more information see their website at www.rhodygarden.org.

Rhododendron sulfureum (“sulfur-colored”) was first found by western plant hunters in 1886 when it was collected by the French Missionary Abbé Delavay in the Cangshan, a famous range of mountains located in northern Yunnan, China. In 1910, while botanizing in the same range of mountains, George Forrest also located and collected *R. sulfureum* and introduced it as seed into cultivation (F#6777). Since that time, this species has been collected many times from a wide variety of habitats but it is generally found in fairly open positions with extremely sharp drainage such as cliffs and boulders or even as an epiphyte. It occurs at elevations of 7,000 to 13,000 feet from W Yunnan to N Burma and SE Tibet.

Rhododendron sulfureum is a member of subsection *Boothia*, one of the smaller and less widely known lepidote (scale-bearing) groups. The members of this subsection are small, often epiphytic shrubs. They share similar morphological features and many come from relatively low altitudes. They are generally grown outdoors only in milder regions. Other cultivated species within this subsection are *boothii*, *dekatanum*, *leptocarpum*, *leucaspis*, *megeratum* and *chrysodoron*.

R. sulfureum itself is quite variable, ranging in habit from low, almost prostrate forms to upright- growing forms three or four feet in height (up to six feet in the wild). The foliage is also incredibly variable, with leaves from one to four inches in length and up to two inches in width that range in shape from elliptic to ovate, obovate, and oblong. The upper surface is shiny dark green with hairs on the leaf margin and a typically glaucous and densely scaly lower surface. In early to mid-spring the flowers appear in clusters of three to eight per inflorescence. The brightly-colored blossoms are bell shaped with flared lobes and generally about one inch in length. They range in color from greenish yellow to deep or bright yellow

Although seldom seen outside of rhododendron collections, *Rhododendron sulfureum* can be a fine addition to the rhododendron or woodland garden. This attractive dwarf species deserves wider attention with its brilliant yellow flowers, deep brown smooth and glossy, exfoliating bark, and dark, shiny green foliage. In cultivation, *R. sulfureum* prefers a fairly open location with excellent drainage although it does quite well in a woodland setting provided the shade is not too deep. It is rated by Peter Cox as being hardy to temperatures as low as +5 or even 0° F depending on the clone. This species is grown outside at the RSBG and blooms for us quite early in the spring. It was killed in 1990 when we recorded 4°F in November. *R. sulfureum* has been little used as a parent in hybridizing programs, if at all. A clone with sulfur yellow flowers received the Award of Merit when shown by the Earl of Stair as *R. commodum* in 1937.

Reminder: if you have not paid yet, 2008 membership renewals are now due. Please either mail a cheque to Dan Goard at the Club postal box (see page 1) , or give it to him at the next meeting