

The Victoria Rhododendron Society

Newsletter



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October 2009 Twenty-ninth Year of Publication

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**MEETING 7:30
MONDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2009
GARTH HOMER CENTRE, 811 DARWIN STREET, VICTORIA, B. C.**

**Speaker: Charlie Sale
“Gardens of Cornwall”**

Charlie Sale works at the U.B.C. Botanical Garden, and is a very active member of the Vancouver Rhododendron Society.

REFRESHMENTS

Coffee and tea are provided after the meetings by the Rhododendron Society. A cookie or a bar is always a nice treat.

Would the following members provide wrapped refreshments to October's meeting?

Herb and Iris Thornton, Norm and Jean Todd, Teresa and Bernard Turgeon, M. R. and Anne Tyler, Evert Van Eerden and Tong Qi Wang, Ken and Madeleine Webb.

Please phone Joanna Massa at 250-642-5491 to confirm or leave a message. Thank you.

A Review of September's Talk

By Theresa McMillan

Carol Dancer's talk and picture show of the Gardens at Government House was full of

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new information for me. Government House gardens were built in 1911 in the formal English Garden style. The property has grown, and is now 36 acres, 17 of which are Gary Oak meadows and wildflowers. In the 60s and 70s, there were up to 17 gardeners working there, but over the years the number declined to one, and in spite of contractors working on the main beds, the gardens deteriorated.

In 1991, the Lieutenant Governor, David Lam, initiated the Garden Volunteer Program to improve the Gardens and open them to the public.

Behind Government House, a wilderness of ivy, broom, blackberries, cotoneaster, and

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pyrocanthus was cleared. It was wonderful to see struggling plants and wildflowers brought back to light and life.

In spring, the view down the slope is spectacular. In the foreground are the meadows in bloom, then parts of the city of Victoria, then the ocean and the snowy Olympic Mountains in the distance.

The old English Garden style summerhouse, made of wood, was replaced by one in the same style, but made of more durable metal and glass.

The two Rose gardens were dug up, fertilized with horse manure, and planted with ever-blooming roses, rather than the old-fashioned ones that bloomed only once a year.

The gardens are very popular. Hundreds of tourists visit, there are several weddings each year, and many local people use the gardens for their daily walks. Vandalism is at a minimum, with only three plants missing in the last few years. The ever-growing deer population has damaged the gardens; a few years ago there were no winter pansies or tulips to be seen. The deer had eaten them all. The vulnerable plants are now being sprayed with blood meal, which keeps the strictly vegetarian deer away.

Feeding the ducks in the ponds led to a larger number of rats, which were not appreciated. After talking to us about the history of the Gardens, Carol showed us many pictures showing their beauty. There are many pink-blooming trees, reflecting the taste of a previous Lieutenant Governor, many tones in the fall foliage, borders reflecting summer colours in the hot sun and others borders reflecting the cool shade.

As Iono Campagnolo, the Lieutenant Governor who prided herself on her rock garden said, gardens provide her (and all of us) some "down time".

Oddthoughts 5

By M.J. Harvey

Viola 'labradorica' - Imposter!

This story starts with David H. Valentine who became my thesis supervisor in 1958. After WW2 he did research on the British dog violets (dog violets: term used in Europe to contrast the various scentless species with the delightfully perfumed sweet violet). A couple of the violets that Valentine worked on are common across Europe. They are wood violets viola reichenbachiana and v. riviniana. Their names honour the German scientists/herbalists Reichenbach, and Rivinianus. I shall go into the relationships between these two species later, but my own work was to extend this research to other Eurasian and North American species in the same group. Then in 1963 I emigrated to Halifax, Nova Scotia and eventually got involved with the local gardening groups especially Dick Steele and the Rhododendron Society. Going round various gardens I noticed a familiar violet, one I recognised as the European wood violet, Viola riviniana. But my friends and the nurseries called it something else: Viola labradorica. Was this a clear case of everyone else being wrong



Viola riviniana or viola labradorica....

and myself right? This can be a difficult position to take. People like that tend to get locked up. I hesitated to speak out, never have, until now that is.

Let me go into a few technical details. The two violets are an example of a close biological pair. Visually they can scarcely be distinguished one from the other. At the time scientific research had a concentration on chromosomes and these plants were good experimental material since reichenbachiana has 20 chromosomes per cell and riviniana usually has 40. They can be referred to as diploid and tetraploid respectively.

Furthermore the two species occasionally produce hybrids where their habitats overlap and, joy, the hybrid has 30 chromosomes per cell (triploid). So Valentine analysed this situation and published the results.

Hybrid plants with triploid chromosome numbers like this are usually sterile or nearly so. An occasional pollen grain or egg cell is formed with sufficient chromosomes to function and a pollen grain transported to a riviniana flower by a bee can result in offspring with a few extra chromosomes - from 41 to 46.

OK, very theoretical but what does it mean? A peculiar quirk of the plants with extra chromosomes is that they produce root sprouts. Root sprouts are aerial shoots that push up from underground roots. You may have noticed it in certain trees such as aspen or cherries. The shoots may become a nuisance in lawns or flower beds.

In the case of the wood violet the root-sprouts enable the plant to form ever-expanding clumps that, over a number of years, can extend over large areas, maybe the whole garden. After planting one in my parents' Yorkshire garden I felt it was necessary to leave for Australia, or Canada, or.... anywhere. Am I saying this plant is a weed? Maybe. It is a modest and charming plant that comes in

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blue or pink flowers and purple or green leaves. Easy to cultivate, it doesn't get more than a few inches high. But pull one out and the roots remaining sprout up new stems. It is like the mythical Hydra: cut off one head and two more regenerate immediately. When it reaches a barrier, say a concrete path, it brings out its big guns, literally. As the fruiting capsule dries, the sides contract and squeeze the hard seeds until they shoot out explosively to a distance of maybe two metres. The seeds germinate and the onward march continues.

It is of course possible to get the the pure, original wood violet, the one with only 20 chromosomes. It stays as a demure little plant and while it will shoot out seeds, it never becomes a nuisance.

But introduce a fragment of the one with extra chromosomes, then the original becomes overwhelmed. This is a case of genetic modification, that is the transfer of genetic material from one species to another with a resulting change in behaviour of the modified organism.

Back to the 'correct' name and my embarrassment at being the only person who authoritatively knows what it is. Yes, it really is *Viola riviniana*, the European wood violet.

When I tell someone that the usual reaction is: "Would you spell that out please?" and, "How is it pronounced?" Contrast this with the wildly incorrect name *Viola labradorica* - now that has everything: ease of spelling, rolls off the tongue smoothly and what is more, sounds patriotic.

It reminds me of an article I once wrote about the western skunk cabbage and its relative the white one from Kamchatka. "Skunk cabbage", such an ugly name, why not change to "marsh lanterns"? Any takers? Nah, no one.

As a species, humans do not like change; we cling to group concepts be they religious or political and stay with the old and familiar. Accuracy and logic have no currency. I think *V. 'labradorica'* is here to stay.



Viola reichenbachiana

The summer of 2009 brought a flood of complaints about deer from irate gardeners around Victoria.

The following article by Norm Todd is a classic complaint , so we are re-printing it from an earlier VRS Newsletter— Theresa McMillan:

OH DEER, DEER DEER

by Norman Todd March 2004

For browsing animals the palatability of plant tissues is learnt and not instinctive. Once bitten twice shy is the way fawns learn. Young inexperienced deer are far more numerous now than they were when we first lived here. My guess is that we have about triple the number of savouring deer than we were punished with 27 years ago.

Charles Darwin made an interesting observation in his dairy 'The Voyage of the Beagle'. He writes... "...Cervus campestrus... is exceedingly abundant, often in small herds, throughout the countries bordering the Plata and in Northern Patagonia. If a person crawling close along the ground, slowly advances towards a herd, the deer fre-

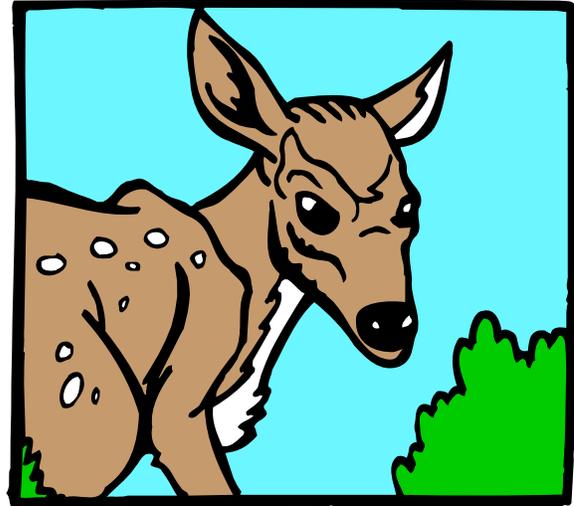
quently, out of curiosity, approach to reconnoiter him. I have by this means, killed from one spot, three out of the same herd. Although so tame and inquisitive, yet when approached on horseback, they are exceedingly wary. In this country nobody goes on foot, and the deer knows man as its enemy only when he is mounted and armed with the bolas.” Darwin subsequently concludes that it takes only a few generations to adapt instinctively to potentially dangerous situations.

Twenty-seven years ago we were not really punished too badly by deer. We even had an unfenced vegetable garden and for a couple of years we managed to get a few feeds of peas and beans. The deer quickly learned there was good foraging where the vegetables were and soon started harvesting as soon as green shoots appeared. Nowadays, the young, poorly brought-up fawns browse on all growies including our rhododendrons until they get an ache in one of their four stomachs. Currently we hear and read a lot of commentary on how serious the problem of obesity is in western society. A consoling thought is to theorize on how much worse it would be if we had four stomachs.

It is pretty evident that deer do not like rhododendrons as they only browse along paths and driveways where they don't need to get their feet dirty by wandering from the beaten path. Evergreen azaleas have always been deer caviar and occasionally the deciduous azaleas would be nibbled when pushing out new growth but the big thick leathery indumented varieties were never touched. I think that mother knew that they would need a shot of antacid if they ate andromedatoxin-laden rhododendron leaves and would pass them by and the young would follow. These days, with their population explosion, the competition for food is so great that mother's preoccupation is to fill her own stomachs first and

she pays less attention to her offspring.

My wife claims that our Blacktail Deer are first cousins of the kangaroo. We often see



them bouncing around on their hind hooves to reach precious branches higher up. Last year I planted out in a new bed a magnolia 'Galaxy' that I had grown from a cutting and a sorbus hupehensis grown from a seed. Both were about two and a half meters high and were well protected by a circle of chicken wire. Both were snapped off at about half height by rear-bipeded deer bouncing around like kangaroos.

Talking of bouncing, anyone with a Scottish background will know the word 'stot'. To 'stot a ba' is to bounce a ball and to be 'stotting drunk' is to be seriously over the 0.08. I had not realized until recently that this is the correct word to describe a deer's bounding gait. In open country, deer just run but in rough plant-covered terrain they stot. They can change direction much more adroitly than their only real predators – cougars and wolves – and are thus often able to escape.

Readers may be thinking that the solution to deer being the predators of our plants,

which have no ability to stot, is to build a fence. I have gone as far as costing out installing a fence. The US of A may be able to run a half trillion-dollar deficit. I, unfortunately, am not in a similar position.

Still, I cannot expect any sympathy. The deer were here first and clearly they like cohabiting with us very much. They are, however, taking an awfully large chunk out of my paycheque. They are as expensive to keep as our own adult offspring. I recall a conversation with an extremely irate lady resident of the Queenswood area of our Saanich municipality. Her exquisite garden had been largely digested by deer. She told me she was petitioning our municipal leaders to have the deer trapped and moved out to the north end of the municipality. She probably did not know that we live right on the boundary.

The lady did have a point. Reports are that the deer population at the northern end of Vancouver Island has diminished significantly, much to the chagrin of local hunters. I would think that with good organization the northern hunters could arrange to trap our Saanich deer and move them to Port Hardy. Let's encourage them.

UPCOMING LECTURE

The Victoria Hardy Plant Group's 2009 *Elizabeth England Memorial Lecture* will be by **John Massey**. His topic is *Seasons in the Garden at (the famous) Ashwood Nurseries in the UK*

DATE: Tuesday November 17, 2009

TIME: 7 PM

VENUE: Salvation Army Citadel (4030 Douglas just north of Mackenzie Ave.)

COST: \$15.00—Tickets available through all Dig This stores in the Greater Victoria area, and VHS and Hardy Plant Group meetings

MORE DETAILS WILL BE IN THE NOVEMBER.NEWSLETTER

INTRODUCING SOME NEW MEMBERS

PETER BARRISCALE

Hello, My name is Peter Barriscale and I am a relatively new member of the Rhododendron Club. I attended Vancouver College for grade school and later attended U.B.C. for 4 years. I worked at Alcan in Kitimat for 35 years initially in production and then many years in various capacities in Human Resources.

I am married to Susan and we have two grown children. We moved to Victoria 8 years ago and my interest in rhodos was sparked by three large Red Wallopers on the property. This was my start. The Red Wallopers were hybridized by Halfdan Lem. I went on to read about Lem who turned out to be a very interesting character. I live on a large city lot in the Hopesmore Subdivision and have about 60 rhodos (sometimes much to my wife's chagrin).

LORRAINE HOY

Hi Theresa,

I am making up a "few words" for you/the newsletter.

OK I live on a little farm with gardens throughout, with everything just on the edge of chaos but not quite. Every time I go to the Rhodo show in the late Spring I am always impressed by the range of colour and types of Rhodos and the friendliness and enthusiasm of the club. Rhodos appear to be quiet plants, calmly sitting in their spot, awaiting the birth of their blossoms. They don't ramble about or take up huge swaths of space; they are very polite and thoroughly cherished in my garden. My friend and I look forward to the meetings.