

The Yak

Newsletter of the Fraser South Rhododendron Society



Fraser South Rhododendron Society
is a chapter of the
American Rhododendron Society

Meetings are held at 7:30 p.m. on the
third Wednesday of each month at:
United Church Hall
5673 - 200th Street
Langley BC

www.flounder.ca/FraserSouth

Volume 17 Number 7 September 2004

This Month's Meeting : Wednesday, September 15, 2004

Topic: Rhododendrons: Growing More of the Ones You Like

This will be a series of short presentations on topics such as seeding, taking cuttings, grafting, layering, and micro-propagation; with the expertise being provided by our own knowledgeable members, including any or all of Colleen Forster, Harold Fearing, Les Clay, Dalen Bayes, Sue Klapwijk, Don Martyn, Trevor Badminton, and Norma Senn.

Companion Plants: Colleen Forster
Show and Tell: Vern Finley
Plant Sales: Colleen Forster, Les Clay

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Quick Hits



If the Leaves are Starting to Turn

it must be time for the first meeting of our 2004/2005 year. Welcome back to all our members.

Companion Plants

Last time it was Sour Gum, this time it is Sourwood. Check out the latest on what else you can plant in your garden besides rhododendrons, by reading Colleen Forster on page 4.



Toonie Table

Don't forget the Toonie Table. This is a prime time for tidying up and dividing your perennials. Bring in your extra plants to share with others by donating them to the Toonie Table.



From the President

LET'S GET STARTED

Labor Day was always a benchmark in our home. Summer was over. Fall had arrived. For our kids, baseball and boating gave way to books and school friends. The previous week Judy would visit her elementary school classroom readying the desks, files, class lists and lesson plans for the new school year. Keely and Reid gathered school supplies including the “in” clothes of the back-to-school crowd. For me, early September meant initiating new ministries in the church or resuming other activities that had taken a summer hiatus. The fall is a time of new, or at least renewed, beginnings. The joy of learning was about to resume.

Around our home fall was also the time to begin to take rhododendron cuttings. Hot days and cold nights created the right atmosphere for propagation. Cutting material was sufficiently turgid in the new growth to promote root formation from the cambium layer. Keely and Reid assisted from early ages. They learned how to cut, label and bag the cuttings. When they had a hand in the work there were heightened expectations of the entire process. Since they, likely, had attended the spring shows with me, they had their favourites - those they wished to acquire for the garden. The first week in September was our time to get the tools and equipment of propagation prepared for work.

Previous attempts at propagation were statistical failures. From arm loads of cuttings emerged a handful of rooted rhodos. Yet I persisted, seeking answers and encouragement. I poured over journals. I perused gardening books. I camped out in the library. I learned that rhodo propagation in an esoteric pursuit requiring special techniques and timing, along with proper equipment. I did not need to plead ignorance—that was blatantly obvious from my lack of success. I needed help!

My rescuers came from likely sources: acquaintances who would soon become friends. Friendships grew as we shared a love for rhodos and specifically propagation of rhodos. One evening at a meeting of the Vancouver Rhododendron Society I approached an experienced propagator, confessing my failures, and asking about equipment and techniques. The solution according to the propagator was to purchase his personally designed propagation box (not surprisingly at a greatly inflated cost). Dr. Gordon Finley and Vern overheard my questions—it must have been my strident whining and tearful grovelling—and later offered to GIVE me a propagation box. The next day Fin arrived at my home with the propagation box perched in the back of his pick up truck.

It looked like a narrow coffin, which was appropriate considering my propagation failures to that point, with far more burials than resurrections. The box was made from a sheet of half inch plywood. It measured eight feet long, one foot wide and one foot high. You may figure out the metric if you wish. Hardware cloth or screening covered the base, upon which a heating cable was to be attached, and snaked along the bottom of the box. The cable would be controlled by a thermostat. The top of the box was to be covered by a sheet of clear 6 mil poly to allow light, either natural or grow lights on a timer, to stimulate growth. The consensus from books, journals and local propagators was that bottom heat is the key to successful rhodo propagation. Off I went to a greenhouse supplier to secure the thermostat and cable.

Almost instantly I went from grovelling to growing, from whining to winning. My five percent success rate shot up to 75 percent overnight—well, it really took three months to get root balls formed on the cuttings. Like me, Keely and Reid were ecstatic. They saw potential plants on every rhodo, from every cutting, feverishly attacking our garden with new vigor. Following my emotional melt-downs they soon learned to temper their enthusiasm by discretely removing cutting material without scalping the plants.

Every September, for twenty-five years, we took 400 cuttings for the propagation box. Many of the cuttings were given by Finleys, Johnsons, Darts, Hodgsons and Gene Round. And, every spring we had 300 or more rooted cuttings to plant in the landscape, or to give to friends. Over the years I replaced the heating cable three times. The box was rebuilt once and the poly replaced every five years.

Labor Day is the beginning or renewal of several disciplines. In our home we fondly remember the flurry of activities including taking and “sticking” cuttings. We envisioned the new look to the landscape in the years ahead. We were always enthused about the transitions, while affectionately reflecting on the kindness of our friends.

Bobby Ogdon



From the Editor

This Month:

This month we will be drawing on the extensive expertise of our own members for tips and techniques on rhododendron propagation. Seeding, rooting cuttings, layering, grafting, and micro-propagation are all techniques used by both amateurs and professionals to produce more plants. Short presentations from a variety of speakers should provide us with some valuable information on how to increase our holdings - just like mutual funds, only a lot less risky and a lot more attractive.

Last Meeting:

It wasn't really a meeting, and it certainly wasn't last month, but the June picnic was a most pleasant affair. It was held at Les and Bev Clay's working garden in Langley; the weather was perfect, the food was outstanding, and the company was wonderful. On behalf of all of us who attended I would like to thank Les and Bev for their hospitality, and Sue Klapwijk and Mary-Anne Berg for their tireless energy and great organizational skills. And on behalf of the club as a whole I would like to thank all those who contributed items to, and bid on items from, the auction - was it my imagination, or were they sometimes the same items? The auction at the summer picnic is our second major fund-raiser for the year, and everyone's generosity and good humour go a long way to providing us with the necessary operating funds for the next year. Now if I could only think of what to do with all those small decorative baskets we ended up with.

Next Month:

Next month Ken and Dot Gibson, of Tofino, BC, will give a joint presentation on their travels in Ireland.

Notes:

CREDITS AND KUDOS

Mike Bale sends along the following note: "Many thanks to the following individuals for their willingness to help rejuvenate the Ella Crabb Garden at St. Andrew's Church in June: John Anderson, Colleen Forster, Karen Linton, Alan March, Patti and Natasha Bale. The garden appears to be in good shape and free from vandalism." And, as editor, I would be remiss if I didn't point out that of course Mike himself was there, and that everyone reported feeling wonderful afterwards, replete with good works and good food.

Alan March advises that the June Picnic and Auction raised \$750.00 toward Chapter expenses. Good times and good results!

Colleen Forster reports that the Journal of the American Rhododendron Society has expressed interest a number of the timely and helpful articles on companion plants which she writes for us.

FALL BULB FUND RAISER

Les Clay has generously volunteered to organize a fall bulb purchasing program which could do much to brighten up your spring landscape while providing fund-raising dollars for the chapter. Brochures will be available at the September meeting. **Completed order forms and full payment must be received by the October meeting.** A variety of bulbs are available and the prices compare more than favourably with retail stores or other catalogues I have seen. In addition, the chapter will earn approximately 40% of the total purchase amount. Be sure to have a look at what is available at the September meeting, and contact Les Clay if you have any questions.

THE BUSINESS STUFF

There are three address changes attached to this month's newsletter, for Joan Bengough, Bobby Ogdon, and Cy and Martie Irwin. Those receiving The Yak by email will receive a separate file with the changes.

Brenda MacDonald



COMPANION PLANTS

O is for *Oxydendrum*
of the Heath Family
Family: Ericaceae

Sorrel Tree, Lily-of-the-Valley Tree, Sourwood – none of these names will prepare you for the ever-changing beauty of this plant.

Oxydendrum arboreum, the only species, with no recorded cultivars, has features at every time of the year to please the senses.

In winter, the reddish new twigs give way with age to thick, squarely segmented 'alligator hide' bark, on a trunk that, interestingly enough, is oval, not round as trunks generally are! In spring, the glossy deep green leaves up to 8 inches in length emerge from drooping branches. These have an acid taste, and were once used in tonics. In late summer, all the branch tips are wonderfully decorated with panicles of small creamy, somewhat fragrant flowers that swoop out five to ten inches. These are very reminiscent of Pieris or the Bell Heathers, and honey produced from them is well sought after. Autumn descends and the leaves blaze into colors of red, orange and purple, often before the blooms have finished and turned to spikes of grey-green seed capsules. What a medley of interest to tuck amongst moderate growing rhodos, and grace the seasons !

The Sorrel Tree is native to south-eastern U.S.A, and grows slowly to 20 or 30 feet tall, with an irregular crown and a peculiar tendency to lean a bit. It will spread 10 to 15 feet in a generally pyramidal shape, but also can sucker and be more shrubby. It is hardy to Zone 5 and is adaptable to many exposures and soils, but prefers acidic well-drained humus in a mixed border or woodland. Choose a site carefully as they resent being dug up and moved. Seed germinates well without any special treatment, but cuttings are not reliably successful. It has no serious pests, and pruning is rarely required. The wood is heavy and dense, and though currently it has



The somewhat glossy ovoid leaves give brilliant fall colour.

little value as timber, it remains popular for turnery and was once used as sleigh runners. Not available in every plant center, but I recommend you ask them to search one out for you, especially at this time of year when it wears its prettiest frock!

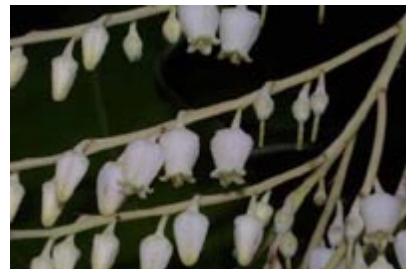
Happy planting!



The swooping panicles of pieris-like blossoms accentuate *Oxydendrum's* graceful habit.



The deeply-fissured bark of a mature tree



The individual blossoms, like upside down urns and typical of the Ericaceae, are held for an extended period in the spring.

Colleen Forster



Up the Garden Path with Norma Senn

Because their ultimate size can be well in excess of 100 feet, Douglas Firs are best suited to large gardens. They prefer moist, well-drained soils and because summer water supplies are becoming increasingly scarce in parts of B.C., mulching the soil surface around young trees at planting time may help them become established.

Conifers September 2004

As the end of the growing season nears, our appreciation of conifers increases because of the interest and color they add to the winter landscape. We are fortunate in having a good selection of large, North American conifers that are winter hardy and tolerant of local growing conditions.

The beautiful Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) is justifiably famous throughout northern temperate climates as a tree of choice wherever a large, handsome conifer is wanted. There are selections of Douglas Fir that are hardy to Zone 3, and among our native stands, there is wide tolerance to a variety of soils. Ideally, the plants offered for sale in a given locality were grown from locally collected seed. The native range of a tree is known as its provenance, and when a tree's provenance is matched to the local area, the tree should be reliably hardy and adapt well to local soil conditions. Garden centre staff should be able to help you select plants for your area.

Like most conifers, Douglas Firs are sold as container-grown or balled and burlapped plants in the spring. Douglas Firs are also popular as living Christmas trees, so they are often available around the Christmas season as container-grown plants. Sometimes seedlings are given away at local charity events and if you don't mind starting small, these seedlings can be fun to grow. Douglas Firs grow rapidly when young, so within 10 years, seedlings will be large enough to add definite interest to the landscape. While usually propagated from seed, there are some named varieties that have been selected for unusual foliage color or growing habit. Such varieties are propagated by grafting desired tops or scions onto seedling rootstocks.

Pseudotsuga menziesii in snow, showing the straight shoots and symmetrical branching that give a formal appearance



Hemlocks are graceful conifers that make beautiful additions to the garden. The two most commonly planted species are Western Hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*), native to coastal areas in B.C., and the Eastern Hemlock (*T. canadensis*) an attractive plant that is native to eastern Canada. There are other nice species, but they are harder to find in the trade. The Eastern Hemlock is the hardier of the two species, with some selections able to grow in Zone 3. All hemlocks need moist soils, and young plants grow best when provided with some overhead shade during the hottest part of the day. They become more tolerant of higher light levels with age. If you have the space, hemlocks can be grown as individual specimen trees although they ultimately get very large. Both species can also be used as clipped hedges. For hedges, young seedlings are planted close together and sheared regularly to create a dense, fine-textured hedge. In some cases, once hedges are established, they are sheared in alternate years. This practice leads to a formal looking hedge one year, and a more informal appearance in the second year since the foliage in the second year grows out in a soft, feathery manner. However, it is important to shear at least every

continued on page 6

second year, as plants in the hedge will try to revert to tree-like patterns of growth if left too long.



The Danish cultivar *Thuja* 'Smaragd', ready for hedging

Arborvitae belong to the genus *Thuja*. In B.C., we commonly grow two species

in our gardens, Western Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata*) and Eastern Arborvitae (*T. occidentalis*). Western Red Cedar is a beautiful, large tree (200 feet) noted for its pendulous branches of bright green foliage. It is our provincial tree, native throughout the entire coastal forest range, and along with Western Hemlock and Douglas Fir, it plays an important role in our forest industry. Because of its size, Western Red Cedar is best suited to large gardens and parks. It can be sheared to keep it smaller, but this requires a long-term commitment and a lot of work, since the plant grows quickly and really does want to be a forest giant. Eastern Arborvitae is more commonly used for hedges, and the varieties 'Smaragd', 'Emerald Arborvitae' and 'Pyramidalis' are well-known and readily available hedging varieties. These selections have an upright columnar habit that make excellent, low-care hedges. There are several small, globose varieties like 'Hetz Midget' and 'Little Gem' that form short, dense balls which are useful for planting around house foundations. Golden foliage selections are also available for those want more colorful foliage. The arborvitae need full sun and even soil moisture for best growth.



The attractive blue needles and decorative cones of *Picea engelmannii*

Most gardeners are familiar with spruce trees as they are easy to grow and tolerant of garden

conditions. While it is not native to B.C., the Colorado Blue Spruce (*Picea pungens* 'Glauca') is one of our most popular garden trees because it is very hardy (Zone 2) and has attractive, silvery blue needles. As long as it has reasonable moisture, Colorado Blue Spruce is tolerant of most garden soils. Many Blue Spruce are grown from seeds, and approximately 10% of seedlings have naturally

blue needles, the rest are green. By observing the foliage within a batch of seedlings, growers simply pick the bluest plants to grow on and sell as Blue Spruce. However, to ensure that really good forms with the bluest needles are propagated, selected, named varieties of Blue Spruce are grafted onto seedling rootstocks. Examples are 'Koster's' or 'Moerheim Blue Spruce', both of which have very fine blue needle color. Choosing a named cultivar ensures that you will have a really good blue form. Many other species of spruce are available as well, for example, White Spruce (*P. glauca*), Norway Spruce (*P. abies*) or Engelmann Spruce (*P. engelmannii*). All three species are very hardy, with some selections able to grow into Zone 2. They can also be grown in the milder areas of the province. Most spruce become large in time, so give them lots of room.



A venerable *Pinus ponderosa*, larger than most suburban gardens could accommodate, showing the results of acorn caching by generations of woodpeckers

There are a number of pines that are grown

throughout the province. For those who garden in the Interior, the best known pine is, of course, our native Western Yellow or Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*). The growing habit is upright and open, and this can become a large tree, reaching over 100 feet in height in time. There are some smaller selected varieties that are occasionally available that are more suited to the average garden.

The Beach or Shore Pine (*P. contorta*) is a nice native conifer that is particularly useful for those gardening along the coast. Shore Pines tolerate wind, salt spray and poor soils and they respond to difficult growing environments by developing a picturesque, wind-swept growth habit. Where hardy (Zone 7), the Shore Pine can be a good garden tree as it has rich, green foliage and is relatively small, reaching only 30 feet in height in good growing conditions.

Conifers are generally easy care plants that offer excellent year-round landscape interest, so if you're thinking of adding an evergreen to your garden, now is a good time to look around your communities for examples of conifers that grow well in your area.

Norma Senn



Welcome

to the FSRS (The New and the Old)

Last winter, with high hopes, I called new members of the FSRS, intending to print a paragraph or two to welcome and introduce them, along with a similar one about one of our long-time members. Reality soon intruded - my only computer is at work, but when I'm free to come in to use it, the school is closed.

So here at last, the week before school starts, I can finally get going, and the computer says, "YOU ARE LOCKED OUT - PLEASE SEE YOUR ADMINISTRATOR". No administrator in sight, of course.

Reduced to desperation, I recall an historical mode of communication and pick up a pen...

GAETON MYRE was a pleasure to welcome to the club.

He works for Hydro and says that he has always loved flowers. As a boy he rose at 4:00 am to weed for a Dutch family's farm. His high school, in a farming community in Ontario, had all students work on one of the school fields. He also enjoyed his neighbour's dahlias and lily of the valley. Today, (well, last year) he continues the idea of teaching the young to garden by selling flower baskets with his niece for 4H.

Gaeton came to the FSRS the same way many have, by meeting Les Clay - in this case at the Rotary Club. He now has a large yard with a number of rhodos, and keeps busy with fixing both house and garden.

Gaeton has an additional interesting hobby: he's a beekeeper. Since rhododendron honey is not the best (it causes reactions in some people), he has added heather and lavender to his property, and surrounds it with a wild rose hedge. He also welcomes dandelions for his bees. (I intend to get full mileage out of that excuse with my lawn!)

Gaeton - we're delighted to have you with us.

MEG BROWN joined us as an associate member from Vancouver. She said, modestly, that she would already be familiar to many in the club, and there wasn't much to tell, so the rest of us will just have to get to know her one at a time!

Meg did say that she has no particular favourites among rhododendrons, but is mostly interested in species.

Welcome, Meg - you can probably teach many of us a good deal about our sensitive species rhodos.

MIKE KENDERES says that where he came from, in Hungary, everybody grew vegetables, and it was Mike's job as a boy to carry the garden water - a two-kilometer trek. Our discussion then digressed over to Hungary's many kinds of paprika - from mild to hot.

continued on page 8



When you meet Mike, be sure to ask him about them.

Back to rhodos – he said there were none in Hungary, but he left at 15 for Austria, then England, and then Scotland, where he first saw the glorious shrubs. He continued on to Ireland, then Edmonton, and finally “wandered this way.”

Mike has only a little garden now – no rhodos of his own – but he helps Mary Murphy with hers. He says, with a smile, of Mary’s rhodos, “They’re all favourites, but Mary thinks I’ll kill them.”

Well, Mike, it’s good to have you, and I bet Mary’s plants will do just fine with your help.

CLIFF ANDERSON is our long-time member profile this time. He was always quietly friendly at the Langley Garden Club meetings I attended, even before I found him again at the FSRS when I joined.

His first gardening experience was around age 10, growing radishes and carrots in his yard in a small Saskatchewan town. Young as he was, he admired the fabulous vegetables grown by the Chinese laundryman across the street, and appreciated the bountiful manure supplied by the local livery stable.

Cliff “met” rhododendrons when he and Phyllis bought their first home in North Vancouver. “A neighbour gave us a rhodo which we planted under our bedroom window. It grew bigger, and bigger, and bigger, so we moved it to the front of our yard – where it grew bigger, and bigger, and bigger again!”

Today, Cliff and Phyllis’ garden is large and lovely (I’ve seen it!) with many rhodos. Cliff says it’s easier to name the few he doesn’t like than try to name a favourite. Their gardening goal has been to have something in bloom all year long.

Cliff has just come through a battle with cancer, and reflected on how much our gardens are places that help us feel better in life’s harder times. After our conversation I went out to feel my own garden’s healing comfort. Cliff is a wise man.

Dixie Mueller

Rhododendron hirsutum

A twiggy, spreading, open shrub whose leaf edges are bristly (hirsute) and whose white, pink or nearly scarlet blossoms are tubular with flaring lobes. Native to the European alps.

An illustration from the 1885 volume
Flora von Deutschland Österreich und der Schweiz

