The Yak

Newsletter of the Fraser South Rhododendron Society

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February 2009

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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

This Month's Meeting

Date: Wednesday, February 18, 2009

Topic: "The Application of Chaos Theory to Rock Garden Design"

Speaker: David Sellars

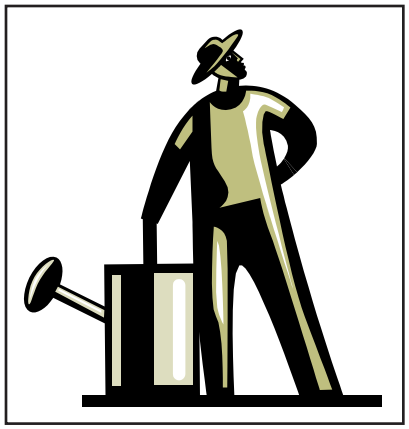
2009 Officers

President:	Harold Fearing	604-857-4136
Vice Pres.:	Bill Bischoff	604-589-6134
Secretary:	Mary-Anne Berg	604-853-5737
Treasurer:	Alan March	604-532-9062
Directors:	Larry Morton	604-888-6564
	Lori Bayes	360-966-4596
	Arlene Darby	604-597-1849
Programme:	Les Clay	604-530-5188
Membership:	Wenonah March	604-532-9062
Newsletter:	Brenda Macdonald	604-990-5353
Website:	Chris Klapwijk	604-581-0925

Quick Hits

Recipes? ...they're here, on page 9

Remember to request (from the generous soul who provided the item) and send (to me) the recipe for any of the other wonderful treats we enjoy during the year, and I will publish them next January, in our AGM/Dessert Extravaganza issue.



From the President

Notes From the Chair

My original intent was to talk about early blooming species this month, but when I toured the garden today (February 2) there really wasn't anything in bloom. *R. sichotense* and *R. ririei* were beginning to show color, but it will be at least two weeks before they are in full bloom. Instead what I saw mainly was winter damage. So, while that is not as interesting a subject, especially for gardeners impatient to see some color, it will have to do.

All plants prepare themselves for winter by 'hardening off'. What this means is that the liquid within the cells becomes more concentrated, with a lower freezing point. If this hasn't happened yet, as in new growth, or if it gets cold enough to freeze the cellular liquid anyway, then the liquid expands as it freezes and bursts the cell walls. Then we get the lettuce effect - like a lettuce leaf caught in the back of a fridge where it freezes - which destroys the leaf.

How well a plant is hardened off determines the absolute low temperature it can stand. This year, unlike a few years ago, the cold came fairly gradually with the worst not until late December or early January. At our place we had a lot of -7 to -10 C., a few nights of -12 or -13 C and maybe one night of -15 C. This is not particularly low, and so I think this was not what caused the damage.

Winter Damage

The other source of winter damage is the drying effect of the winds. When the sun warms the leaves a bit they give off moisture. If the ground is frozen that moisture cannot be easily replaced through the roots. If the wind is blowing, the moisture is carried away more rapidly and the leaves are literally freeze-dried, which kills them. We had lots of wind at our place, with wind chills down to -20 to -25 C, and as a consequence lots of freeze-dried leaves.

Rhodos have some defense mechanisms. Thick fuzzy indumentum produces a layer of dead air near the leaf, which lessens the drying effect. Thick leathery leaves with few pores also are less prone to drying out. Some rhodos have another mechanism. The leaves droop and curl up, which lessens the surface exposed to the wind. A Peter Wharton collection, probably related to *R. auriculatum*, which we have fully exposed in our front yard, really shows this effect. On the coldest days the leaves, which are at least 20 cm. long, were curled as tight as pencils and hanging straight down. The plant looked terrible, but when it warmed up recovered completely and showed no permanent damage.

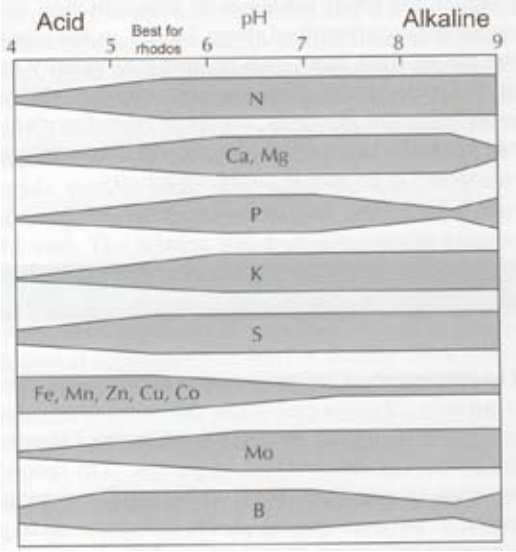
For us the various big leaved rhodos suffered the worst. The leaves of *R. rex* and *R rex* ssp. *fictolacteum* curled up somewhat on the coldest days, and they appear not to be damaged. *R. calophytum* and *R. asterochnoum* also were ok. Our plants of *R. rothschildii* and *R. hodgsonii*, all of which are pretty small and close to the ground, suffered some leaf damage, but not too much. In contrast all plants of *R. macabeanum*, *R. coriaceum*, *R. maximum*, and *R. montroseanum* (except for one montroseanum totally protected from the wind) will end up losing essentially all their leaves. Hopefully the plants will survive.

All but one of the half dozen sub-species of *R. arboreum* were pretty badly damaged as well. *R. niveum* and *R. lanigerum*, both related to *R. arboreum*, will lose at least half of their leaves, although a couple of years ago they lost everything, and recovered just fine. Others damaged were *R. griersonianum* and *R. mallotum*. Many of the tiny leaved species, like *R. impeditum*, seemed to have some leaf damage on the side facing the wind.

At the other end of the scale there were some surprises. *R. stamineum*, which is supposed to be hardy only to 15 F and *R. moulmainense*, which is supposedly only slightly hardier, apparently came through unscathed.

So what does one do with a plant with freeze-dried leaves? For now, I would do nothing. Wait until late May or June and see what happens. Many rhodos can lose all their leaves and recover completely, though there probably won't be any flowers this year. Some can freeze to the ground and then regrow, though that sometimes takes awhile - which is why I would suggest leaving that dead looking rhodo around until you are sure it is dead. I have a plant of which I have had for at least 20 years. Every 5 years or so it freezes to the ground, in the process killing 6 cm diameter main trunks. But, so far at least, it has always regenerated from the roots, and after a couple of years is blooming again. So don't give up hope too soon!

Addendum on fertilizer:



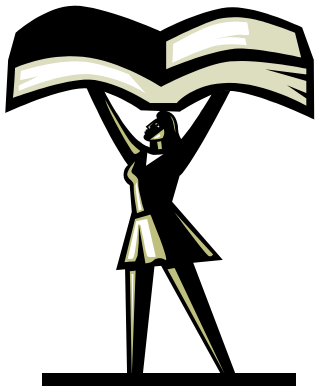
After my article last month on fertilizing rhodos I had a call from Ken Gibson of Tofino who told me some things I didn't know about the history of the development of the Green Valley/Vancouver Rhododendron Society fertilizer. Apparently in the early days Ken started out using 18-6-12 lawn fertilizer on his rhodos, because that was all that was available. That has much more nitrogen than normally used for rhodos. Ken and Les Clay got to talking about this. Harold Johnson and Tom Brown also got involved, and Tom particularly brought his chemical knowledge to bear on the problem. The end result was the 10-8-6 + micronutrient mixture that is still sold. That has higher nitrogen content than was normal then, but Ken said he couldn't get the others to go as high as he had been using.

Ken also called my attention to a graph which helps explain why 'rhodos like acid soil'. A version of that graph is shown in the figure. [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. Ken, who in Tofino gets much more rain than we do in the lower mainland, has found that his soil is too acid and so he uses a bit of dolomite lime on his rhodos. In our garden the pH seems to be around 6, so I have never found that necessary.

Harold Fearing



From the Editor

Last Month:

Last month was our Annual General Meeting and Dessert Extravaganza. Chapter executive elections were minimal this year with the usual stalwarts maintaining their posts, but we are all mighty pleased to welcome Bill Bischoff to the position of Vice President, by acclamation.
The Annual Financial Report, prepared by Treasurer Alan March, and audited this year by Chapter member Joan Bengough, was accepted as presented.
Then we got to do the fun stuff:
Larry Morton was presented with the well-deserved Harold Johnson Memorial Award, which had the following citation:

> "You are a most helpful and generous contributor to our society. You are always ready, willing, and able to set up shows and sales, as well as dismantling them. You have been a gracious host for our annual picnic and your are now serving on our executive as a director. We are pleased to present the Harold Johnson Memorial Award to: LARRY MORTON."

while I was quite literally dumbfounded and amazingly thrilled to receive an FSRS Bronze Medal, with the following citation:

> "You have been a generous contributor to our society as well as a member of our executive for many years
> You expanded your knowledge of the Genus Rhododendron through seminars held at the R.S.F.. This led you on two trips to China. Though your photographs and commentaries the rest of our society were able to share some of your adventures and experiences.
> You volunteered for a very large challenge a number of years ago with enthusiasm and unending energy. In the process you have created an exceptional newsletter for our society.
> For your outstanding contributions, as editor of "The Yak", the Fraser South Rhododendron Society, a chapter of the A.R.S. is honored to bestow our highest award, the Bronze Medal, to: BRENDA MACDONALD"

After the business part of the evening it was all frivolity, as we scarfed down mega-calories of delicious desserts, drank an abundance of tea and coffee, and enjoyed some brief but fascinating visual presentations by Chris Klapwijk, Bill Bischoff, and Dalen Bayes.

This Month:

This month David Sellars will assist us with every gardener's continuing quest to achieve a rockery, which if not verifiably spectacular, is at least one that doesn't resemble an ancient and neglected cemetery or a Bath bun with too many raisins.

Next Month:

Next month Ron Knight, member of the Vancouver Rhododendron Society and Director of ARS District 1 will speak on Photography for the Garden.

Gazanias on display at Larnach Castle.
See Norma's Senn's article on page 6

The Business Stuff:

The Calendar

Wednesday, February 18	**Fraser South Chapter - David Sellars "The Application of Chaos Theory to Rock Garden Design"**
Thursday, February 19	**Vancouver Chapter - Fred Whitney, President ARS "You Grow Rhododendrons for the Blooms?"**
Monday, February 23	**Fraser Valley Chapter - Bill Bischoff "Hardy Cyclamen All Year in Your Garden"**
Wednesday, March 18	**Fraser South Chapter - Ron Knight "Photography in the Garden"**
Thursday, March 19	**Vancouver Chapter - Norma Senn "Walking in the Sasquatch's Footprints"**
Tuesday, March 24	**Peace Arch Chapter - Harold Fearing "Species Rhododendrons"**
Thursday, April 30 to Sunday, May 3	**2009 ARS Rhododendron Rendezvous Convention in Everett, Washington**
Saturday May 2	**Fraser South Plant Sale**

Other Duties as Assigned .....

✹ As promised ... the Tea Brigade for 2009. Please let me know if I have made any errors. Or, please let Cherry Groves know if you have made an error and need to re-schedule.

January 21	Coleen Boyczuk and Carla Bischoff	September 16	Peggy Brenne and Sandra Procter
February 18	Patti Bale and Lori Bayes	October 21	Ginny Fearing and Mary Anne Berg
March 18	Pat Glennie and Arlene Darby	November 18	Joan Bengough and Joan McGiveron
April 15	Brenda Macdonald and Sean Rafferty	Christmas	Cherry Groves
May 20	Carla Bischoff and Karen Linton		

Brenda Macdonald

If there ever was anything so luminously pink as *R.* 'Mrs. G. W. Leak' in the ozone-depleted atmosphere of southern New Zealand, it is hard to know what it might be. Just look at that pink ... good enough to eat with a spoon!
See Norma Senn's article on page 6.

Up the Garden Path

New Zealand December 2008

After attending the New Zealand Rhododendron Society's conference, FSRS members Mary Berg, Nancy Moore and I joined a garden tour organized by Diane Weissman of the ARS DeAnza Chapter. We were part of a group of 14 rhododendron enthusiasts. It was a great opportunity to share knowledge as we represented many different areas of North America and it was fun getting to know other ARS members. We had lots of discussions about favourite plants, gardening techniques and solving gardening problems along the way.

The number of gardens we visited varied from day to day, but we usually visited three a day, so after awhile, it was hard to remember which garden was which. And, for almost every garden, while I was in it, I decided that that garden was my favourite one of all. I'm glad I took lots of pictures to help me remember each garden. So, with this in mind, here are a few comments about three of the largest gardens we visited. Next month, I'll write about some of the smaller ones.

Near Christchurch is Ohinetahi, the garden of Sir Miles Warren who is a world renowned architect. Much of the garden reflects an architect's love of lines, geometry and spatial arrangement. The house and garden date back to 1865, but had been neglected for almost a hundred years when Sir Miles, his sister and her husband began restoration on the property. It became a labour of love for the three, although in recent years Sir Miles has taken sole possession of the garden and made it totally his own.

As you might expect from someone known for his artistic creativity, this is a spectacular garden with great bones, and it has wonderful vistas out to the ocean. The entrance is situated on a large level area at the top of a hill where the visitor first encounters the house and formal gardens. Informal, almost wild, gardens are planted down the sides of the hill in what is essentially a gorge that leads to a fast moving stream at the bottom. This area is part of the original garden planted by the first owner, and it is where most of the rhododendrons are planted, along with some native plants and shade lovers like camellias, ferns and Rodgersia. As you walk down the hillside, the rhododendrons and camellias tower overhead. There is a suspension bridge at the top of the gorge that enables people to get from one side of the gorge to the other quickly, although for the mountain goat types, the pathways cut into the hillside and along the stream are easy underfoot.

In the formal garden areas, Sir Miles has created a series of garden rooms. Close to the house, there is a lovely rose garden, each bed surrounded by a clipped boxwood hedge. While we were there, the roses were still in tight bud, but the plants were vigorous and free of any disease or insect problems. Further from the house is a walled garden, a pleached hedge of hornbeam, brilliant green lawns and an inviting lap pool. Scattered throughout are a numerous pieces of sculpture that provide interesting focal points. Nearby is a small, formal vegetable garden, each bed enclosed by clipped

Above, left, a different Garden Path - the Red Garden at Ohinetahi Below, right, the house and view at Ohinetahi

hedges and in the centre of the vegetable garden, there's a brightly coloured gazebo that makes a comfortable retreat and an attractive centre piece. Just for fun, Sir Miles built a viewing tower on top of his potting shed, so visitors can climb up the turret and see the garden laid out below.

I really liked this garden. First, our host was delightful and spent a good two hours showing us around. But, I also enjoyed the bright colours and combination of formal and informal plantings. It seemed like there was something of interest to enjoy at every turn. It also helped that it was a lovely spring day with brilliant blue sky and warm sun.

We enjoyed another lovely warm spring day at the Trott Garden near Ashburton. This 3 ha garden is well-known and highly respected in New Zealand. Recently, it was designated as a garden of national significance.

Upon entering the garden you are greeted by broad, curving pathways of lawn that lead you on into an area of large shrub beds and strategically placed trees. There were lots of rhododendrons and azaleas planted, and the colours were dazzling. I mentioned in January's article in The Yak that we were all amazed by the colour saturation in New Zealand's plants, and the Trott Garden sparkled with colour. I was interested to see that Mr Trott uses a lot of dwarf barberry, in particular *Berberis thunbergii* 'Crimson Pygmy' as hedging/edging material. It is kept closely clipped and the red foliage makes an effective contrast to the emerald green lawns. A number of birch trees are also planted, and the white bark gleamed in the sun.

The Trott garden is partially a commercial venture, and a small chapel can be rented for weddings and receptions. The historic chapel was moved from the nearby town and reconstructed at the garden. A

huge expanse of nearby lawn offers additional space for outdoor receptions and leads the visitor to formal herbaceous borders and a knot garden, all edged with clipped shrubs. Again, the visitor can climb up a viewing platform to see the formal beds laid out below.

Mr Trott personified what seems to be the standard New Zealand trait of being able to do anything. Members of our tour group had a recurring conversation about how talented and hard-working everyone is. It seemed that the men could do carpentry, wire, build stone walls and fences, dig huge ponds and make waterfalls, the women could do all that as well as shear sheep, spin wool, and knit sweaters, while simultaneously organizing teas for 300 people. When talking about this to some of the locals, they said it was because of New Zealand's historic isolation, and that if you wanted something done, there was no choice but to figure out how to do it yourself. It was all very inspiring, but it did make me feel inadequate.

Above, left, the wonderfully saturated colour of 'Lem's Cameo', Trott Garden

Above, right, *Berberis* 'Crimson Pygmy' edging, Trott Garden.
Below, right, Larnach Castle

Larnach Castle, near Dunedin, is another large garden (approx. 16 ha in all), and also now a commercial venture. Starting in 1967, this property was pulled back from almost complete ruin through the hard work of the Barker family led by Margaret Barker - a woman who has become a local legend. The house was built in the late 19th century by William Larnach, an important financier in colonial New Zealand. Sadly, the Lanarch family suffered one tragedy after another (their story is the stuff of soap operas) and eventually the family fortune was lost and the property was abandoned. However, through Mrs Barker's hard work, the house and property have been restored and it is now one of New Zealand's historical jewels and a must-see if you're in the Dunedin area.

Mary, Nancy and I went to a masked ball held in the Larnach Castle ballroom. We didn't see any of the Larnach family ghosts purported to haunt the castle, but we had lots of fun with the rest of the locals. The next day, our entire group came to the castle to have a tour of the house and garden. We were again very fortunate in having the owner, Mrs Barker, lead us on the garden tour, so we were able to hear lots of interesting tidbits about the work that has been done.

Larnach Castle is built on the hillside overlooking the Otago Peninsula, and the views of the water are spectacular. William Larnach actually had the entire top of the hill removed to provide a level building site for the home and gardens, as well as providing the magnificent views. The garden area planted along the seaward cliff of the property is a hot site, so lots of drought tolerant plants are found. Among them were some very nice Australian plants like Proteas and, of course, many succulents.

Another lovely garden feature is the tree fern walk and a small rockery, both situated near the house. A Laburnum arch has been planted out on the lawn, and it was just starting to bloom when we were there. if we'd been a week later, it would have been in full bloom. On this trip, we didn't have time to walk in the bush, but adjoining the planted grounds is a large area of native plants, so visitors do have the chance to see the native bush as well as the cultivated grounds.

It's hard to pick just three gardens to write about, but each of these three gardens was a treat to visit and a wonderful testimony to the hard work and creativity of the owners. I feel very lucky to have had the chance to see them.

Norma Senn

Above, left, view of Otago peninsula from Larnach Castle
Below, left, Laburnum Arch, Larnach Castle

Above, right, the indigenous *Clianthus puniceus*, a shrubby member of the Fabaceae (Pea) family, is both spectacular and highly endangered.