The Victoria Rhododendron Society *Newsletter*

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

February 2010 Twenty-ninth Year of Publication

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MEETING 7:30
MONDAY, February 1, 2010
GARTH HOMER CENTRE, 811 DARWIN STREET, VICTORIA, B. C.

Speaker: Leslie Drew, "The Enduring Gardens of the Stokers and the Simpsons in Marble Bay of Cowichan Lake".

Leslie Drew is a former journalist, city editor of the Colonist before its merger with the Times. She has been researching B.C. historical subjects for many years. Leslie began delving into the Marble Bay garden on Cowichan Lake, which is now more than 100 years old, and the two extraordinary couples who made it. She wrote the garden up for an ARS Journal article in advance of the 1989 convention in Victoria. The article was reprinted in Alec McCarter's *Rhododendrons on a Western Shore*.

She acknowledges incredible help from people like Susan Mouat and Jim Greig, the children of Ted and Mary Greig, who bought the Simpson's nursery of rare and alpine plants in 1934, starting the senior Greigs on their career as the first rhodo specialists here; Roger Wiles, the caretaker for the University of Victoria for nearly 30 years and an environmentalist who knows the property better than anyone else; and the Buchanan Simpson and Stoker family members.

In This Issue

REFRESHMENTS

Coffee and tea are provided by the Rhododendron Society after the meeting. A cookie or a bar or crackers and cheese are always a welcome treat. Would the following members please provide wrapped refreshments for February's meeting? Thank you in advance.
Frank Bosworth, Jacqueline Bradbury, Peter Bradley, Archie and Norah Brown, Bert and Norma Buckley, and Alan and Sandy Campbell.
Joanna Massa would appreciate help in setting up the table, serving and cleaning up after. Please phone her at 250-642-5491 to confirm, or leave your regrets that you will not be able to attend the meeting.

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VICTORIA RHODODENDRON SOCIETY BOARD

JANUARY'S TALK - "Kiwi Magic"

By Theresa McMillan

Norma Senn's talk on the New Zealand Rhododendron Conference in Geraldine, N.Z. in November 2008 was an expanded version of the report on the Conference published in our VRS Newsletter in April 2009.

After the Conference, Norma and friends from the Fraser South Rhododendron Society traveled around the South Island to see many more beautiful gardens. One such garden is the Dunedin Botanical Garden with its colourful azaleas and large fragrant rhododendrons, like Edgeworthii. The Rose Garden in the Wellington Botanical garden provided beds full of perfect, glowing roses, a real wonder.

Other gardens, like EFILDOOG (GOODLIFE spelled backwards) featured striking garden sculptures.

If protected from the strong cold winds from Antarctica, practically any plant can grow in New Zealand. Cardiocrinums, (tall Peruvian lilies) flourish in the mountains and calla lilies, even meconopsis (blue Himalayan poppies) spread along ditches.

Added to the pleasure of the gardens were trips to ecological reserves like the Yellow-Eyed Penguins or a visit to snowy mountains in Milford Sound and the Southern NZ Alps.

When our members left the Hall, many were thinking of visiting or re-visiting New Zealand to see for themselves this remarkable country.

R. "Kiwi Magic"

WHY I LIKE GARDENING IN VICTORIA

OR… THINGS COULD BE WORSE

BY ELIZABETH HYDE

Elizabeth Hyde is a former VIRAGS (Vancouver Island Rock and Alpine Garden Society) president. This article first appeared in the September 1996 edition of the former VIRAGS publication, CALYPSO.

SOME PEOPLE complain about gardening conditions in Victoria: the weeds grow all year round; the slugs attain an intimidating size; too much rain falls in the winter and not enough in the summer. Such people must be native to the place and unacquainted with what other parts of the continent can do to the unsuspecting gardener who goes to live in them. Just for starters, some parts of the country have armoured slugs.

My first gardening experience in North America, after a youth spent in what I now recognize to have been Paradise but thought at the time was merely England, was in Minnesota. The snow lay till April but when it finally melted I went out with my little seed packets (easy annuals) and prepared to have a colourful summer.

THE SEEDS duly sprouted, indeed grew at a surprising rate; so did the weeds. Time to do a little weeding: I stretched a bare arm into the jungle—and disturbed a battalion, an army corps of starving mosquitoes. I had always believed that mosquitoes came out only in the evening, near the water. These mosquitoes lived everywhere and they never slept. The weeds grew on undisturbed. How many mosquitoes have you seen in Victoria this year?

My next attempt at gardening was in West Virginia, where my neighbour confused me completely by remarking that if it were his place he would “take out all that yard and put in a garden.” Eventually it became clear that this indicated not an intention to develop a future Sissinghurst but merely that he would grow vegetables instead of grass and flowers.

I also learned there that crocuses do not necessarily flower in late January and that it can rain hard enough to wash the seed right out of the ground.

The next stop was Washington DC. It was my first interaction with an acid soil and I planted azaleas with enthusiasm. Alas, although the summer was humid enough to grow mould on the shoes in an upstairs closet it did not provide the quantities of moisture needed by azaleas -- and neither, exhausted by the heat and the humidity, did I. The azaleas died, but the weeds did not. Each fall one had to clear the jungle all over again, including a fine stand of Rhus toxicodendron. (Poison ivy, now there’s an old friend I haven’t seen for a while.)

Nashville, Tenn., was even hotter, though perhaps not quite so humid. It was also colder, much colder, in fact; we came in for one of the coldest winters on record; 12-foot privet hedges died —and no doubt choicer shrubs also -- but it is the privet I remember, because it had been widely planted and in the spring the chippers worked day and night for six weeks, disposing of the corpses.

LOCAL FLORA was also affected by factors other than climate. The town was infested with grey squirrels, which ate up all the tulip bulbs. The daffodils were spectacular, and bloomed early enough to please even me, but I missed the tulips. The irises, the State flower, were also spectacular, but once they finished blooming the gardens seemed to lose heart as the summer got hotter and hotter and went on and on and on.

In Tennessee there used to be a special classification of fabric called 'dark cottons', for wear between Labour Day and the moment, usually toward the end of October, when it finally became cool enough to think of fall clothes. Long before this happy time the flower gardens had either dried up or been washed out by a thunderstorm. Tomatoes, however, ripened splendidly.

ON TO WINNIPEG. At first I thought my neighbours had no gardens to speak of because they all spent the summer "at the Lake" (any lake) but later it transpired that it was the other way about: discouraged by decades of summers in which the gardening season lasted, in a good year, from late May to early September, they fled each summer from the city rather than struggle any longer with yards which were first frozen, then flooded, then parched, then drowned. (Don't let anyone tell you flash floods happen only in the South-West; any good thunderstorm descending on the dead flatness of the Red River Valley can put a foot of water in the streets before you can say "Back-up valve".)

There are plants which will grow in these conditions. All hail to peonies, irises, oriental poppies and delphiniums! And, of course, shasta daisies. I, however, thought that a climate with six months of snow cover should be just the ticket for alpine plants, even if we were only 350 metres above sea level. So I started a rock garden.

But where to get plants? There was an existing plant of *Iberis sempervirens*, and some hen and chickens; I took cuttings. An enterprising nursery a mere 200 miles away on the western border of Manitoba provided a Bergenia — and valiantly it struggled to flower under the snow in February. *Alyssum saxatile* I grew from seed, but when the leaves appeared in the spring so did a horde of leaf hoppers and ate them down to the stalks. The 'Mixed Alpine Dianthus' did better and patches of D. *deltoides* survived at least one winter. Crocuses and *Iris reticulata* put on a shaky performance but *Scilla siberica* bloomed and spread with enthusiasm.

Daffodils did not survive outdoors, and the early scarlet tulips, flowering in early May were usually either frozen or scorched within a couple of days.

And the roses, it is possible to grow roses in Winnipeg, shrub roses with small wizened flowers in nasty shades of magenta and puce — all right, *Rosa hugonis* is lovely, while it lasts — but anyone who wants hybrid tea roses in that unforgiving climate must be prepared to cut them down in the fall, fortify them with mouse bait and mulch them right over the top of the canes, all of which has to be removed at just the right moment in the spring.

IT WAS ALL too much for me. I moved to Victoria. And here I found: roses as big as soup plates, a gentle and deliberate spring, a summer of very moderate heat and very little humidity, an autumn without the pressure of an approaching ice age, a mild winter and the possibility of growing plants I had not seen for years

Rosa hugonis

as well as growers who can supply them. When I left Winnipeg I was given as a keepsake, one of those charming china posies that can be used as a table centrepiece when there is nothing to pick in the garden; I have never had to use it here. Need I say more?

Rhododendron Care This Month

With all the leaching rain we have had, now would be a good time for a light application of fertilizer. I use 10-8-6 with micronutrients but other options are fine. A handful around the drip line for 1.5 m plants should do the trick. Warning: this does not apply to the alpines. They resent fertilizer and do better with just leaf mulch. Enjoy; if this weather keeps up, we should have a glorious flower display this spring.

VRS ANNUAL SHOW and PLANT SALE

Saturday, May 8th 2010
(Set-up Friday, May 7th)

SHOW CHAIR LOIS BLACKMORE WILL CIRCULATE VOLUNTEERS SIGN –UP SHEETS AT THE FEBRUARY 1, MEETING

SUGAR-COATED SEEDS Oddthoughts 8

By M. J. Harvey

Some people watch paint dry, others watch grass grow. Myself, I enjoy both of these but I think my greatest pleasure comes from waiting for seeds to germinate. The reason for this is that as a geneticist much of my life has been spent making hybrids – plant hybrids. I should add that I am also an amateur painter and an agrologist.

I occasionally sell hellebore plants grown from my hand-pollinated seed and I have subsequently been complimented on the really nice Cyclamen that have sprouted in the pots. This comes about because, after keeping pots containing Cyclamen seeds for a few years, I recycle the soil into general compost and seeds not then germinated sometimes proceed to do so. So this article contains hints about certain seeds that either take their time or require special conditions before they will germinate.

These plants include some of the more desirable woodland species: *Trillium, Paris, Podophyllum, Epimedium, Cyclamen, hellebores,* peonies and Japanese maples. If you are able to grow your own, you can obtain larger numbers of plants and save a stash of money in the process.

When you think about the nearly simultaneous germination of crop and annual flower seeds you realize that this is an artificial situation, the result of unconscious selection over the years by the simple act of cultivation. Seeds that fail to germinate with the majority do not produce seeds for the next crop and so do not pass on their genes to the next generation. Darwin, 150 years ago, called this artificial selection but,

unlike his examples of the breeds of dogs and pigeons, it does not require any thought on the part of the grower – it just happens automatically. New plant introductions to our gardens have not had a long history of cultivation so you should not expect an easy ride. They come up on their own timetable and usually anything but simultaneously.

The torrent of new and unfamiliar species coming into our gardens, largely as a result of the relaxation of conditions in China, has resulted in the greatest Golden Age horticulture has yet experienced. These plants are often in short supply and propagating your own can be advantageous. Following are instructions to give you a greater chance of success – but no guarantees.

Stratification

This is a germination technique developed in European nurseries in the 19th century for awkward seeds. In a cold frame or outdoors a layers of sand would be sprinkled with seeds followed by more sand, then seeds and so on until all were sown. The analogy with the layers in sedimentary rocks – strata – inspired the name. This procedure was started in the fall and the pile left to weather until germination started in the spring.

Today we use the same process but with things such as plastic bags containing slightly dampened peat or Perlite with the seeds in the fridge. My favorite method (actually dictated by my wife, something to do with dirt in the fridge) is to sow the seeds in pots as soon as they are ripe (or available) in a peat-Perlite mixture topped with sand. I put the pots into plastic bags and keep them outside in a cold frame or an unheated shed.

Stratification mimics what occurs in nature. It takes 4-6 months and sometimes two or more winters. I have heard advice such as "Throw the seed packet into the fridge (or freezer) for a week or two". This is false advice; if it works those seeds did not require stratification.

Hellebores

These have endospermous seeds, that is, the seeds are shed from the parent before the embryo inside has developed. Thus 'post-shedding ripening' is required. Endosperm is a nutritive tissue which the embryo has to absorb before it can germinate.

In non-endospermic seeds such as peanuts and beans the embryo has completed this process by the time the seed is shed and one can see the cotyledons when the seed is split open. In contrast in endospermous seeds the cotyledons develop from very small to nearly filling the seed during the time the seeds are in the soil.

In the case of hellebore seed sow it as soon as it is shed from the plant, or at least within a few weeks. This gives the embryo time to grow to full size inside the seed over the summer and fall. When I stick to this timetable they all germinate by December. If however sowing is delayed just keep the pots for a couple of years; the seeds usually germinate after the second winter. Strictly speaking hellebores do not require stratification, but treat them as if they did.

Cyclamen

In all species of *Cyclamen* except the florist's cyclamen *C. persicum*, the fruiting capsules are brought down to soil level after flowering by the coiling of the pedicel (hence presumably the name cyclamen).

Whether they flower in fall or spring all species ripen in summer when ants are at the busiest. As the capsules crack open ants eagerly gather the sugar-coated seeds and take them to their nest. (So no, breakfast cereal manufacturers did not invent sugar-coated food.) The ants do not consume the seeds but only clean off the coating and abandon them either in the nest or at a distance.

Fresh Cyclamen seed should be soaked in water for a day or two and sown fairly deeply in a sterile mix. I once came across some deeply buried seeds with eight-inch long first leaves pushing through the soil like delicate threads. Some growers advocate keeping the pots in the dark but opinion is out on the need for this. Old seed can be extremely irregular in its germination. Soak the seeds in water and keep the pots for at least two years.

Trillium

Collect the fruits as they start to ripen in summer, break them up into a container of water and allow to ferment for a week or so. Sieve out the seeds under running water and sow immediately. It is best never to dry *Trillium* seed.

Treated this way our West Coast *T. ovatum* may, emphasize may, germinate in the first spring, but it usually takes two winters, as do almost all the other species. In 2009 my neighbour promised me the seeds off his clump but I was too late; wasps had carried off the seeds. Another case, I suspect, of a sweet tooth.

Paeonies

These have probably the most complicated germination mechanism known. The seeds are endospermous and germinate in two stages over two years. In the first winter the radicle (root) emerges and as the temperature warms up for the first spring the embryo starts to grow but does not make an appearance. During the second winter the embryo itself stratifies and as the temperature rises at the end of the second winter the first true leaf appears although the cotyledons themselves usually remain trapped in the seed case, their job of absorbing the endosperm being complete. In the case of the big-seeded yellow tree peony *P. ludlowii (lutea)* it will occasionally germinate in its first spring.

Postscript

My grandfather came to live with the family when I must have been about 4 years old. He looked after the garden. He bought packets of lettuce, radish and flower seeds for his little grandson – French Breakfast radishes and Tom Thumb lettuce – the names are embedded in my memory. I must have been 4 or 5 years old when I sowed my first seed under this tutelage. Let me see – that means that I have been growing seeds for about 70 years. Parents, beware what your youngsters learn early; it can have a long-lasting influence. A pity my granddad did not play guitar, but then of course I wouldn't have written this.

PROPOSED CHANGE IN THE VRS SOCIETY BYLAWS

The Board recommends approval to modify and simplify Section 20 of the Constitution and Bylaws. A vote will be held at the AGM in March.

Presently Section 20 reads:

20. REVIEW OF ACCOUNTS

20.1 The members shall at each Annual General Meeting appoint an Accountant to hold office until the next Annual General Meeting.
20.2 If an appointment of an Accountant is not made at an Annual General Meeting or the Annual General Meeting is not held, the Directors may appoint an Accountant of the Society for the current fiscal year, and fix the remuneration to be paid to him/her by the society for his/her services.
20.3 The Directors may fill any casual vacancy in the office of the Accountant, but while any vacancy continues the surviving or continuing Accountant (if any) may act.
20.4 The remuneration of the Accountant of the Society shall be fixed by resolution of the members, or, if the members so resolved, by the Directors.
20.5 The Accountant shall make a report to the members and Directors on the account reviewed by him/her and on every balance sheet and statement of income and expenditure laid before the Society, at any Annual General Meeting during his/her tenure of office, and the report shall state:
20.5.1 Whether or not he/she has reviewed the balance sheet of the Society as at December 31st, and the statements of income and expenditure and changes in equity for the year then ending.
20.5.2 Whether or not based on his/her review nothing has come to his/her attention that caused him/her to believe that these financial statements are not in all material respects, in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles.
20.5.3 Every Accountant of the Society shall have a right of access at all times to all records, documents, books, accounts and vouchers of the Society, and is entitled to receive from the Directors and officers of the Society such information and explanations as may be necessary for the performance of the duties of the Accountant.
20.5.4 The Accountant of the Society is entitled to attend any meetings of members of the Society at which any accounts that have been examined or reported on by him/her are to be laid before the members for the purpose of making any statements or explanations they desire with respect to the accounts.
20.6 The rights and duties of an Accountant of the Society shall extend back to the date up to which the last review of the Society's books and vouchers was made, or where no review has been made, to the date on which the Society was incorporated.

The proposed revised version is as follows:

20. EXAMINATION OF ACCOUNTS

20.1 The books of the Society shall be looked at annually by an impartial source who will report back to the Board.