NANAIMO RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

March 2007

March 2007

FROM THE PRESIDENT

I want to thank everyone for helping to make our February auction such a successful event.

Paul Lawry and I will be attending the District 1 President's meeting at Milner Gardens on Sunday, March 4th. One of the topics on the agenda is how to organize a Species Study workshop in BC.

I have received several requests for plants from the Rhododendron Species Foundation spring sale. If you are interested to put in an order, let me know ASAP. I will be placing the order on March 9th, right after our March meeting.

Joyce & I are planning to attend the ARS Conference in San Franciso in April. They have planned several interesting garden tours in the area.

I am encouraged to see the garden coming alive again with snowdrops, crocus & cyclamen in bloom. Happy Spring!

Craig

EXECUTIVE

President	Craig Clarke	390-4090
Vice President	Paul Lawry	390-2370
Secretary	Kathryn Grant	245-7879
Treasurer	Linda Lawry	390-2370
Directors	Valerie Harvey	754-6659
	Debbie Gaboury	758-1204
	Glenda Barr	390-2822
	Ann Beamish	758-2574
	Mike Miller	758-2879
	Chris Southwick	758-0993
	John Deniseger	390-3605

COMMITTEES

Advertising	Mike Miller	758-2879
Library	Ann Beamish	758-2574
	Helene Sullivan	758-7023
Newsletter	Kathryn Grant	245-7879
Program	Chris Southwick	758-0993
Raffle	Ann Davey & Val Harvey	
Social	Pat Schulson	245-3369
Dollar Table	Reinhold Gorgosilich	758-6533

Nanaimo Rhododendron Society
Box 241, #1 – 5765 Turner Road
Nanaimo, BC V9T 6M4

Website: nanaimo.rhodos.ca
email: nanaimo@rhodos.ca

NEXT MEETING

MARCH 8, 2007 BEBAN PARK 7:30 PM

GLEN JAMIESON

"PLANT HUNTING IN YUNNAN, CHINA: FROM GEORGE FORREST TO THE PRESENT"

NANAIMO RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

TWIGS AND STEMS

Goodies for March meeting:
Reinhold Gorgosilich
Anne Tennant
Chris Southwick

AUCTION A RESOUNDING SUCCESS!

The proceeds from our Valentine's Auction were over $1400.00! Thanks to all members who contributed items for sale, and to those who generously purchased items (some at well over market value!). Our usual 10% donation has been given to the Salvation Army. Hope you had a good time. Thanks everyone.

MAY IS AGM MONTH!

The Nanaimo Rhododendron Society Annual General Meeting will be held at our regular meeting on May 10, 2007. Now is the time to think about taking a position on the Board of Directors.

NATIVE PLANT GARDENING WORKSHOP
TOFINO BOTANICAL GARDENS
1084 Pacific Rim Hw, Tofino
March 23 – 25th
Join native plant workshop facilitator Pat Johnson and Tofino Botanical Gardens founder George Patterson for a weekend exploring the use of native plants in your garden.
www.tbgf.org/programs/native-gardening.php

NANAIMO BOTANICAL GARDEN SOCIETY SPRING FESTIVAL
12TH ANNUAL CELEBRATION OF ISLAND GARDENING
Beban Park
March 9, 10, 11
www.cvibgs.org

The **Rhododendron Species Foundation** Spring sale catalogue of seeds and plants is available online. You can it at:
www.rsf.citymax.com/f/2007SpringPlantDistributionWEBSITE.pdf

If there is interest, Craig will put together an order for our club members. The plants will be delivered to UBC during the week of April 9 - 13

R. augustinii

March Speaker

Dr. Glen Jamieson has a B.Sc. in Agriculture, McGill University, but obtained his Doctorate at UBC and has been a research scientist with Fisheries and Oceans Canada for the past 30 years. He is a keen gardener with an extensive one acre garden, and has traveled extensively in both Central and South America and Asia. His interest in plants focused on orchids from 1980-1995, but since then, has switched to rhodos and temperate trees and shrubs in general. Since 1999, he has established what is likely Canada's largest tropical rhododendron (vireya) collection and now is a strong advocate of these beautiful plants. Glen frequently gives garden talks, and has talked at most of the rhodo clubs in British Columbia, focusing on the winter garden, vireyas, and in the past year, botanizing in Yunnan, China. His new talk is about the history of exploring for plants in China, and the changes that have happened in rural China over the past 100 years.

NANAIMO RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

N.R.S. Bus Tour 2007
Saturday, April 28th, 2007

This year, we'll be visiting some great gardens and nurseries in the Cowichan Valley. We've even included a vineyard tour and wine tasting at Cherry Point Vineyards.

Cost: $35 (to be confirmed at March meeting)

Where do we meet? Northfield/Parkway parking lot – the bus will be leaving at 7:30 am.

Bring a picnic lunch – we'll have lunch at Cherry Point.

Sign up will start at the March meeting. Bring a friend…

Details to follow at the March meeting.

Behold the Lovely Rhododendron – and Beware its Maddening Toxins
By Ron Sullivan

In 401 B.C., Xenephon of Athens, one of Socrates' students, marched off to back the wrong contender in a Persian civil war and had to lead a retreat through hostile territory. He wrote a best seller about it, the "Anabasis." (You can find the translation, quoted below, by H.G. Dakyns online, courtesy of Project Gutenberg, at www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/xenephon-anabasis.html#Project%20Gutenberg.)[1] One prominent adventure was not a battle, but the commandeering of a village from which their opponents had fled.

"Here, generally speaking, there was nothing to excite their wonderment, but the numbers of bee-hives were indeed astonishing, and so were certain properties of the honey. The effect upon the soldiers who tasted the combs was, that they all went for the nonce quite off their heads, and suffered from vomiting and diarrhoea, with a total inability to stand steady on their legs. A small dose produced a condition not unlike violent drunkenness; a large one an attack very like a fit of madness; and some dropped down, apparently at death's door. So they lay, hundreds of them, as if there had been a great defeat, a prey to cruellest despondency. But the next day, none had died; and almost at the same hour of the day at which they had eaten they recovered their senses, and on the third or fourth day got on the legs again like convalescents after a severe course of medical treatment."

Centuries later, in the same region, the army of Pompey the Great of Rome was ambushed by the forces of Mithridates VI of Pontus, to worse effect. After helping themselves to honeycombs left along their route, a troop of Pompey's soldiers succumbed to similar symptoms and were massacred while helplessly intoxicated. Pompey went on to win that conflict eventually, nevertheless.

Mithridates himself had a reputation as a ruthless killer and poisoner, but his claim to fame lay in his method of immunizing himself against poison; gradually increasing doses of every poison known to the time. (One has to wonder about this, as some poisons are cumulative.) The poison in the honeycombs that laid Pompey's and Xenephon's soldiers low is known today, one of the all-natural products of what A.E. Housman, in his poem on the subject, calls "the many-venomed earth."

It is known as "mad honey": *deli bal* in Turkey, *mile fou* in Western Europe. Tiny doses of it in milk or spirits are taken in the region around the Black Sea as a tonic – something to make one reflect on the elasticity of that term. And the reason it's toxic in larger amounts is its raw material. Bees make it from nectar of *Rhododenrom ponticum*, the large pale-purple-flowered species native there.

More recent cases of "mad honey disease" are known from the region and as far east as Nepal, and from Europe, where a rash of them was traced to souvenir honey from Turkey. It's still unusual because it's rare that bees get only rhodie flowers to make honey from, so the poison is diluted enough to make it harmless. Other rhodie and related species are known to contain the active ingredient, grayanotoxin, formerly called andromedotoxin or rhodotoxin. Our local native azalea and rhodie species, *R. occidentale* and *R. macrophyllum*, contain it, and so does *Kalmia latifolia*, the mountain laurel of the Appalachians.

You can still get a dose if you're dumb and determined enough to eat any part of a rhododendron. I guess some merry soul might misguidedly festoon a salad with flowers, but the leaves are decidedly leathery and unpalatable. The pollen and sap (used as arrow poison once upon a time) contain the toxin too – don't sip and don't sniff! And while I'm scolding: Don't use the twigs to roast marshmallows, and don't make rhododendron tea, either.

[1] *Editor's note: I tried the link given and it did not take me to the article, but it might be interesting to explore the Fordham University website, nonetheless.*

Most honey intoxication cases, absent hostile armies, resolve themselves, but a few have resulted in death from cardiac effects and drastically lowered blood pressure. Aside from that, the gastric effects, convulsions and paralysis don't strike me as a pleasant way to get high, and the hallucinations some have experienced are described as uniformly unpleasant.

One group that's probably already familiar with rhodie poisoning is livestock handlers, including veterinarians. A sheep, goat or cow that is hungry enough to eat those tough leaves will stagger, drool, have serious gastrointestinal troubles, and, like us, may have cardiac problems and convulsions. It's hard to guess whether a cow is seeing visions or garbling her speech, unless it's Clo making a bad pun. Still, it can't be pleasant, and it can be fatal.

R. ponticum's troublemaking doesn't end in the stock pen. It was a popular import to the British Isles in Victorian times, planted for screening and big effects on estates, and as cover for game birds. Now it's thrived enough, and spread far and fast enough, to imperil the ecosystems it was supposed to "improve".

It propagates via large amounts of tiny scattered seeds and runners from its lateral branches. It spreads those branches to shade out any understorey plants and create an effective monoculture, and, remember those toxins? They work against grazers, so restorationists can't use those to clear the thickets; and they work against smaller animals and, evidently, insects, so the rogue rhodies don't get eaten by anything. They're about as biologically useful as plastic flamingos.

There are reports of British honeybees seemingly suffering from neurotoxic effects; evidently, unlike bees in the plant's home range, they haven't adapted to its toxins. There's an interesting chemical warfare "arms race" that happens as plants and animals coevolve, and while Turkey's bees have figured out a way to turn grayanotoxin to their advantage in making their honey less susceptible to raids by large animals, other insects remain vulnerable to it themselves.

Restorationists also report that the mulch of fallen leaves under a rhodie thicket remains toxic enough that the humus has to be peeled up and removed before new plantings can take hold. The plant, in smothering out several layers of understorey and preventing new tree seedlings from growing, has even been part or why the dormouse, of all things, is endangered. Alas, Alice, it's no tea party these days in the British woods.

Reprinted from the Feb 9, 2005 edition of the San Francisco Examiner. Ron Sullivan is associate editor at Terrain (www.ecologycenter.org/terrain/terrain.html), where she writes "A Sense of Humus," and garden editor of Faultline Magazine (www.faultline.org). She's a former pro gardener and arborist.

Rhododendron ponticum

Photo by Sally and John Perkins

NANAIMO RHODODENDRON SOCIETY

Companion Plants

A is for Acer
of the Maple family
Family: Aceraceae

Much has been written expounding the virtues of Japanese Maples specifically and in general, but it still remains that to my mind, there is no finer group of small trees to give contrast and definition to our rhododendron gardens. Although many species originate in Japan, only two, *A. palmatum* and *A. japonicum*, with its offshoot *A. shirasawanum* 'Aureum', are commonly called Japanese Maples, and a mind-numbing number of cultivars have been developed from them. These vary both minutely and greatly in regards to plant habit, leaf shape, foliage colour (spring, summer and fall), and bark features, and all of these factors should influence your choice. Doing a bit of research will reveal that recent work among plant breeders has made great strides in selecting superior forms of ones thought to be the standards of type, such as 'Bloodgood', 'Burgundy Lace', and 'Inaba Shidare'. If you are unsure, it's probably best to observe them at various times of the year – a dormant stick in a pot will not give much of an indication of subsequent glory. (P.S. – garden tours are a great way to see mature specimens in wonderful settings, and the hosts are a veritable font of information.) But some older varieties are hard to improve upon. I'll not even try to cover a fraction of the available forms, but rather showcase a few that I think are worthy of more exposure.

A. japonicum 'Aconitifolium' (Dancing Peacock) is one that I particularly like. Slow to start with a rather open low-branched habit, it has large round leaves very deeply cut into lobes. Dappled shade comes with summer leaves of a matt green with bronzy tints, and then STAND BACK! – it explodes in fall to gold, orange, scarlet and burgundy, every leaf a different blend. Fabulous, and very aptly named! I have one in a large pot and the colour lasts a good long time.

A. japonicum 'Aconitifolium' showing outstanding fall colouring

A. palmatum
a linearilobum type, showing the difference in leaf shape between the current growth (red) and previous growth (green).

A. palmatum 'Red Pygmy' is another choice I would make for a very versatile plant. This linearilobum type emerges in spring with dark scarlet red ribbon-lobed leaves that turn a deep bronze in summer. This is a vase shaped shrub only to 5 feet or so, and lives very happily in pots or planters as well as among the smaller rhodos. A note to remember – as in all linearilobums, the current season growth will produce leaves that are much wider lobed, more palmate than leaves on older wood, and this is perfectly natural. Don't be alarmed that it's reverting to some ordinary old thing.

A.
B.

And lastly, *A. palmatum* 'Aureum', the Golden Japanese Maple (not to be confused with *A. shirasawanum* 'Aureum', the Golden Full Moon Maple) is a little known beauty. From quite red twigs, the red buds open to a fairly small deep gold palmate leaf that mellows to chartreuse in summer, and then to deep red-gold in fall. This one is more vigorous - low branched and twiggy to perhaps 12 feet of so - prefers full sun to retain the gold colour, but should not be left to dry out, as the leaves can burn. It also fares well in a large pot or barrel for many years.

A hard choice to make, but all of these fit nicely into even a small garden such as mine, and never rule out growing any variety but the most vigorous ones in a nice big pot. They can give many years of pleasure and are easily moved to prominence as the seasons change. Happy Planting! *Colleen Forster*