



NEWSLETTER

Volume 17, Number 2


EDITOR: LESLIE DREW

February 2006

Ian Efford Steps Up

Ian Efford was named Acting Vice-President of the Cowichan Valley Rhododendron Society by directors meeting January 18th. He replaces **Judy Gloster** who resigned the post earlier.

The Chapter's bylaws require officers to have served at least one year on the directorate and Ian is starting his first year, so the "acting" designation was chosen. He is already convening the annual spring plant sale on May 6th.


He will be in the chair at the next general meeting on February 1st in the absence of the president **Ingeborg Woodsworth**, who is to undergo surgery for a hip replacement. She hopes to be back in action for the March meeting. 

Bursary Awarded

Patrick Summers is the recipient of the Cowichan Valley Rhododendron Society's bursary leading to a career in horticulture.

Patrick started a year-long horticulture technician course at Nanaimo's Malaspina University College in January. When he receives his certification, he hopes to gain experience working in a nursery or with a landscaping company.

Born in Duncan, Patrick attended Lake Cowichan Senior Secondary for grades 11 and 12. Since graduation, he has worked at various jobs tending toward plant care, which he liked, with the result that he applied for the bursary.

Patrick will receive part of his tuition fees in the sum of \$500. Last year there were no applicants for the bursary, and the money was given instead to the Milner Gardens at Qualicum. 

What's Coming Up

February Meeting: February 1 at St. John's Anglican Church Hall, 486 Jubilee Street, Duncan. Set-up 7 PM, meeting starts 7:30.

Main Speaker: **Harry Wright**, well-known nurseryman and member of the North Island Rhododendron Society, will give an illustrated talk titled "Learn by Looking." Topics will include the proper care of rhodos after they are removed from their pots, shaping of young plants for trouble-free growth in years ahead, and planting in the right place.

Short Talk: **Daphne Jackson** will again present her fascinating account of how to make a successful wormery.

Display: Please bring a flower or spray of any rhododendron in blossom in your garden. This helps us to become acquainted with and to identify the hybrids and species growing in Cowichan Valley gardens.

Plant Table: Please bring your spare plants, whatever you're raising for the new season. This is one of our moneymakers.

Tea and Goodies: **Sharon Pettersson**, co-ordinator (743-0787), **Judy Gloster** (746-5643), **Mona Kaiser** and **Tom Rimmer** (715-1814).

Directors' Meeting: February 15 at the home of **Ingeborg Woodsworth**, 6596 McLean Road [off Highway 18 at Skutz Falls Road, turn left on Cowichan Lake Road, right onto Mayo Road, and then left onto McLean]. Phone: 749-6291.

Garden Tours: April and May. Schedule in March Newsletter.

Spring Show and Sale: May 6 in St. John's Anglican Church Hall, 10 AM to 2 PM.

Annual Picnic: June 3.

ARS Western Regional Conference: Harrison Hot Springs September 22-24, 2006.

*Meetings are held the first Wednesday of the month
in St. John's Anglican Church Hall,
486 Jubilee Street, Duncan.
Set-up at 7:00 PM, start at 7:30 PM*

The Cowichan Valley Rhododendron Society

A Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society
PO Box 904, Duncan, BC V9L 3Y2 <http://cowichan.rhodos.ca>



A Never-ending Curiosity

by Alan Campbell

When Sandy and I joined the Cowichan Valley Rhododendron Society in January of 1994, I came to understand the Greek philosopher Socrates slightly better. Socrates is known to have remarked at one time in his life, “All I know is that I know nothing.” This brief, all-encompassing observation epitomizes the epiphany I experienced on that evening in the Duncan Legion Hall. Listening to the program presenter that evening, a fella by the name of Norman Todd, I began to glimpse the vast reach and depth of information given for the genus *Rhododendron*.

In the 12 years of being a member of the ARS, I have searched out and gravitated towards people whose acute interest in rhododendrons matches my own. Eavesdropping on the conversations of the rhodo gurus of various Chapters, sitting in on presentations, and reading the many books covering the varied rhododendron topics proved, to me, the depth of my chosen field of interest.

Anyone who has attended an ARS convention or conference will have noted that the last day of these annual events is taken up by the Hybridizer’s Round Table. This round table is a rather informal discussion among a panel of recognized rhododendron hybridizers, a participating audience, and a moderator who fields questions from the audience to the panel members. Now, I have regularly attended these round table discussions, but have yet to contribute: (a) because I am not as yet a hybridizer; and (b) generally speaking, I ain’t learnin’ much if my lips are movin’. As I mentioned, panel members are noted hybridizers. What also becomes apparent is that the panel is usually composed of nurserymen as well. Being nurserymen as well as hybridizers, they are primarily concerned with the commercial viability of available plant material. I can appreciate this concern . . . to a point. Placing economic success in the hands of a fickle public is a risk at the best of times, but betting on what Joe Public will find desirable three or four years down the road is chancy in the extreme! I suppose this floral form of “Texas Hold’em” is what has given rise to the Proven Performers List and the announcement of the Rhododendron of the Year. A subtle means of shepherding the uninformed public.

In essence, the outcome of a hybridizers’ round table discussion is to focus a hybridizer’s work on producing plants that will fulfill the buying public’s expectations; that is, producing plants that provide year-round appeal, are hardy in most conditions, compact, and need little care. Sounds reasonable, but at what cost?

In 1934, a new introduction to the rhododendron world came from Yakushima (Yaku Island) of the Japanese archipelago. The species *R. yakushmanum*, now designated as *R. degronianum* ssp. *Yakushmanum*, is the epitome of the “perfect” rhododendron—a hardy, compact, mounding plant with indumented foliage, and ball-shaped trusses. To further enhance the status of this debutante, the Royal Horticultural Society bestowed one of its highest awards, a First Class Certificate, to the named form ‘Koichiro Wada’ in 1947. Hybridizers seemed to become besotted with this ingénue and began churning out “Yak” hybrids into the trade *ad nauseum*. Now don’t get me wrong—there are some fine Yak hybrids; however, there are also, in my opinion, far too many hybrids that are carbon copies of each other, opening pink and fading to white all within a day or two. I’ll stick my neck out even further and suggest the same about many of the *R. williamsianum* hybrids—there are just too many look-alikes. Perhaps some hybridizers would do well to take a page out of Bismarck’s *Blut und Eisen* [blood and iron] doctrine, being slightly more cold-hearted when assessing and evaluating their rhodo offspring and culling more stringently.

I have expressed my opinion in the past that hybridizing is another form of artistic expression, and will also concede that art appreciation is very subjective. So, too, is the choosing of rhododendrons. But I do feel that hybridizing to appease the ephemeral affectations of an erratic public rather than the pursuit of personal vision is akin to placing Mona Lisa’s smile onto black velvet.

My overactive curiosity for all things rhododendron has unfurled stories and achievements of an unexpected number of hybridizers here on Vancouver Island. It will perhaps be a surprise to some that

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Albert de Mezey

A legendary figure in horticulture in Victoria, Albert de Mezey, died on December 26 at the age of 102. He was an authority on native plants of Vancouver Island and an accomplished grower and hybridizer of rhododendrons.

He was born in Hungary into a land-owning family and received a classical education that led to engineering. After his father's death when he was 15, the young de Mezey experienced political upheaval in his native country and hard times in Canada after moving to the Prairies in 1928 with his mother and sister. He managed, however, to attend university, and by the Second World War he was overhauling and manufacturing machinery in Edmonton and later in eastern Canada and the United States.

A tall, good-looking man with a commanding presence, he was multilingual and had a knack not only for making money, but also for grasping complicated subjects and illuminating them. His knowledge of plants and of art and antiques was encyclopedic.


After moving to Victoria in 1946, he took a keen interest in native plants and while exploring up-Island became well acquainted with *Rhododendron macrophyllum* and *R. albiflorum*. At Forbidden Plateau, to his surprise, he found the latter species growing in limestone. While being a practical man, he could also take a philosophical view, and one of his much-quoted remarks on rhododendrons was

that to grow them successfully one needed the energy of someone of 30 and live to be 300.

He belonged first to the venerable Vancouver Island Rock and Alpine Garden Society and became its president, and later to the Victoria Rhododendron Society. He was a life member of both as well as the Victoria Orchid Society.

He made several rhododendron hybrids, which grow in regional gardens today, but did not register them. Three, including 'Mary's Favourite,' named for his sister, were registered by Herman Vaartnou; *Rhododendron* 'Peggy Abkhazi' was registered by Bill Dale.

An outstanding philanthropist, he was in the forefront of support for immigrants after the Hungarian Uprising of 1956. Among institutions benefitting from his generosity were the University of Alberta, the University of Victoria, the Royal Ontario Museum, and the Royal British Columbia Museum.


At "Kildonan," his Samuel Maclure mansion in Fairfield, he made a fine garden and grew many special plants including the first *R. yakushimanum* to be imported to Victoria in the 1950s. He looked after his mother and his sister to the end of their lives, and then cared for other elderly people. He donated his heritage home to the De Mezey Memorial Abbeyfield Housing Society for seniors. 

by Leslie Drew

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rhododendron hybridizers have been producing plant material on the Island for over 100 years. I expect some of you will know of many of these hybridizers and many of you will know some of them, but I would be quite surprised if more than a handful of you are aware of all the Island hybridizers and their hybrids. I would like to introduce them to you over the next few editions of this Newsletter and perhaps give my opinion of their best hybrids.

I suppose that my feelings on learning and curiosity can easily be summed up by quoting one of our great Canadian authors, Robertson Davies:

Although there may be nothing new under the sun, what is old is new to us and so rich and astonishing that we never tire of it. If we do tire of it, if we lose our curiosity, we have lost something of infinite value, because to a high degree it is curiosity that gives meaning and savour to life. 



Rhododendrons in February


Gardening is a form of self-expression and, in Bacon's words, "the purest of human pleasures."

This came to mind when I saw Leslie Drew's lovely rhododendron 'Lee's Scarlet' in flower the other day. Since then I have thought of all the other early-flowering rhodos that either are already in full flower this mild winter or soon will be. For instance, the various hybrids of *R. mucronulatum*—'Praecox,' 'Christmas Cheer,' 'Rosamundi,' and many others—are all quite hardy and easy to grow. *Rhododendron dauricum* 'April Rose,' one of my special favourites, will soon show its ruby-purple-pink full-petalled blossoms, wonderfully complimenting 'Praecox.'

Oh yes, my wish list is getting longer every time I explore the ARS Journal and various rhododendron growers' catalogues offering new, early-flowering rhodos. After all, in our mild climate, we can stretch the blooming season from January to September.


February is still a good month to order seeds as well as start them. Also, February opens the season for fertilizing rhododendrons and other early-flowering shrubs and trees such as magnolias. We lucky coastal gardeners this year have all the rain needed to wash the nutrients into the soil.

Finally, do look around your garden in this rainy spell to check on the location of your plants. Any that are in a flat or hollow area with little or no air circulation should be moved to a more favourable spot. Cold air, like water, seeks the lowest possible level, and plants in the lowest places will be the most likely to freeze if we get a cold snap.

Don't forget to bring a truss of your first-flowering rhodos to each meeting to cheer all of us. Let's hope for a lot of them on February 1st. 

by Ingeborg Woodsworth

Collection on Sale

A private collection of rhododendrons will be sold at Qualicum Beach on February 18th. The species and hybrids are being offered by Richard White, immediate past president of the Nanaimo Chapter, who is selling his home. The plants will be sold in his garden at 391 Quatna Road. A list of the rhododendrons, their heights and prices, will be available from the secretary at the next general meeting of the CVRS on February 1st. 

— 2006 Directors —

PRESIDENT	Ingeborg Woodsworth <i>mayocreekgardens@shaw.ca</i>	749-6291
VICE-PRESIDENT (Acting)	Ian Efford <i>efford@shaw.ca</i>	246-1453
SECRETARY	Leslie Drew <i>sahtlamrise@shaw.ca</i>	748-6152
TREASURER	Siggi Kemmler <i>siggi-k@shaw.ca</i>	746-8751
MEMBERS AT LARGE	Roger and Anne Slaby <i>rs0321@telus.net</i>	748-4623
	Ian Efford <i>efford@shaw.ca</i>	246-1453
	Jackie Walker <i>jacquelinewalker@shaw.ca</i>	743-3650
EX-OFFICIO	Alan Campbell <i>stonefold@shaw.ca</i>	743-3597

— 2006 Conveners —

BARGAIN TABLE/RAFFLE	Joyce Gammie Daphne Jackson Dawn Fedorchuk	246-2484 748-9475 715-1233
GARDEN CLUB LIAISON	Joyce Gammie	246-2484
GARDEN TOURS	Anne and Roger Slaby	748-4623
HISTORIAN	Bev Mountain	746-6339
INTER-CHAPTER RELATIONS	Ingeborg Woodsworth	749-6291
LIBRARIAN	Janet Gardner	748-1867
MEMBERSHIPS	Jackie Walker	743-3650
NEWSLETTER	Leslie Drew	748-6152
PICNIC/CHRISTMAS PARTY	Joan Clarke Mhairi Bruce	748-1272 743-8327
SPEAKERS (to mid-June)	Sandy Campbell	743-3597
SPRING SALE	Ian Efford Michael Krieger	246-1453 391-6215
SPRING SHOW	Sharon Tillie Janet Gardner	748-8254 748-1867
PROPAGATION	Alan Campbell	743-3597
REFRESHMENTS	Maria Kemmler Sheryl Krieger	746-8751 391-6215
SUNSHINE	Ann Springford	746-7303
WEB SITE	Alan Campbell	743-3597