



# NEWSLETTER

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EDITOR: LESLIE DREW

March 2007



*The species R. moupinense is one of the early-blossoming treasures of rhododendron growers. Fertilizing is one of the ways to improve leaf colour and reduce blemishes. See Liz Murray's "March in the Garden" on page 5.*

## Joyce Gammie Receives Silver Bowl

The Cowichan Valley Rhododendron Society's Silver Bowl, awarded annually to a member for outstanding service, has been presented to Joyce Gammie.

The presentation was made by a former president, Janet Gardner, at the February 8 regular meeting. This normally takes place at the Christmas party, but last December the event had to be called off owing to snow.

A longtime member, Joyce has served in a variety of executive capacities over the years, and has opened her Chemainus garden for tours sponsored by the CVRS on several occasions. She has been a consistent volunteer for the annual Plant Sale. She is always willing to work for the club whenever needed. ☺

## What's Coming Up

**March Supper Meeting:** March 7 in St. John's Anglican Church Hall, 486 Jubilee Street, Duncan. Set-up at 5 PM, arrive 5:30, potluck supper starts at 6. Please bring your potluck contribution, plate, cup/glass, and cutlery plus a can of food or money for the local Food Basket. There will be tributes to Stan and Nyra Groves and Fred Collins, as planned for the Christmas party. Speaker is Glen Jamieson of Qualicum Beach—Plant Hunting in Yunnan, China: From George Forrest to the Present.

It will be appreciated if the Tea and Goodies team for March, Fiona and Hugh Lawrence, Jackie Walker, and Susan O'Connor, can help in the kitchen.

**Directors' Meeting:** March 14 at 7:30 PM at the home of Ingeborg Woodsworth, McLean Road. Take the Old Lake Cowichan Road turnoff past Berkey's Corner, turn sharp left just past Tansor Service.

**Propagating Group Meeting:** March 13 at the home of Leslie Drew, 4401 Creighton Road, Sahtlam.

**Annual Spring Sale:** May 5 in the Rabbit Barn at the Exhibition Grounds.

**ARS Annual Convention:** April 12–15, South San Francisco, Embassy Suites Hotel. See Web site (<http://www.ars2007conf.org>) for details.

*April meeting to be held April 4, 2007,  
in St. John's Anglican Church Hall,  
486 Jubilee Street, Duncan*

*The Cowichan Valley Rhododendron Society*

A Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society

PO Box 904, Duncan, BC V9L 3Y2 <http://cowichan.rhodos.ca>



## President's Message

Rain has brought back the garden! This much-needed rain, however, has not penetrated as deeply as we might think, at least not everywhere. On digging postholes, we encountered dry soil at 45 cm, and apparently this is the story in several other parts of the Cowichan Valley.

And yes, there is still a lot of winter damage to attend to. Nevertheless, most trees and shrubs are sprouting nice fat buds. And snowdrops, even at my elevation, are putting on a spectacular show.

Talking about shows, have you enjoyed our speakers' beautiful presentations on a large screen in good sharp focus? We need one more person to help Roy Elvins, our member and Church custodian, set up the audio-visual equipment. At our last general meeting, Roy was unable to make

the arrangements, leaving Janet Gardner, our busy librarian, trying to do everything singlehandedly. Bill Dumont has offered to help when he is able to attend, so we need a third person should neither Roy nor Bill be available before the meeting,

Don't forget to come early to our next meeting on March 7th for the delayed Christmas potluck. We want time to enjoy good food and good company before our program, so come no later than 5:30 with your dish for the supper plus either one non-perishable food item or a monetary contribution to the Food Basket Society. Also, bring your own plate, cup/glass, and cutlery to save time cleaning up.

See you there.  by Ingeborg Woodsworth

## From the Minutes . . .

Extracts from the February 2007 meeting of Directors of the Cowichan Valley Rhododendron Society held February 15 at the home of Siggi and Maria Kemmler, Gibbins Road:

. . . Anne Slaby, convener for garden tours this spring, said several members had offered to open their gardens, and that the schedule would be ready for the April Newsletter.


. . . Treasurer Siggi Kemmler raised the subject of the bursary that the club offers for a student intending to make a career in horticulture. He said that minutes from 2000 and 2001 showed that interest from \$12 000 in term deposits—money realized from the ARS Western Regional Conference held here for the first time—had been designated for the bursary, but that no set sum had been specified. Interest rates at that time brought in about \$500 annually. However, bursaries are usually maintained at a set level as educational institutions like to know how much the actual amount is each year to inform students planning to apply. He was asked to draft a resolution for the next general meeting.

. . . Librarian Janet Gardner said she would be ordering a copy of the new Kenneth Cox book, *Rhododendrons and Azaleas: A Colour Guide*, as the directors wished. Books were being loaned and returned on time in most instances. 

## Tours In and Out

The Nanaimo Rhododendron Society will be visiting gardens of CVRS members in April, and our chapter is organizing a trip for its members and their friends to a North Saanich nursery.

The tour bus from Nanaimo is scheduled for April 28, stopping first at Mayo Creek Gardens west of Duncan and going on to the garden of Liz and Allan Murray in Cobble Hill.

The CVRS tour, which would also be on a Saturday in April, will be to Russell Nursery in North Saanich. The invitation came from Brian Russell when he spoke to our club last year on Japanese maples. One or two other attractions are also planned for a full day. This is an outing quite apart from the annual in-club tours of members' gardens which all chapters hold. 



## THE QUESTION BOX

# Rhododendron Ratings


by Norman Todd

**Q** Should I rely on the rating numbers given in catalogues for selecting plants for my Duncan garden?

**A** Many North American catalogues and publications list three numbers to rate a rhododendron garden's worthiness. The first is for the flower, the second for the foliage and the third for the growing habit. Number 5 is "perfection," 3 is "average," and 1 is not worth growing. A 5/5/5 would be sublime in every respect. Fortunately, there aren't any 5/5/5's There are lots that are close.

My opinion is that these ratings should not be given much credence. What is a good garden plant in Duncan is unlikely to behave the same way in Halifax, Nova Scotia, or Auckland, New Zealand, or Edinburgh, Scotland. Furthermore, I don't know how the ratings are determined. I believe the ARS has a ratings committee, but as far as I know they occasionally give a Superior Plant Award (SPA) but do not attribute any numbers. The suspicion is, therefore, that the plant breeder, individually or in a very small group, does the rating. Well, we all know how wonderful we judge our own grandchildren to be.

At the Regional Conference last fall at Harrison Hot Springs during the breeders' round table, Frank Fujioka, a Washington State hybridizer of great repute, made a plea to discontinue the use of number ratings. I gave a hearty "Hear, hear." In the new Kenneth Cox book, *Rhododendrons and Azaleas: A Colour Guide* (a must-have book for the rhododendron gardener), the only award he recognizes as having any usefulness is the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit (AGM). He tells of overhearing through the thin tent walls at the Chelsea Flower Show the post-prandial, inebriated ramblings of the jurors awarding the First Class Certificate (FCC). The judgement was decided by viewing a truss in a bottle—just like at our shows. You will agree this is not a very stringent method for bestowing a lifetime award. Cox accepts the AGM because it is made on the basis of field trials by a committee and is subject to revision.

So how should one be guided in selecting a rhododendron? Readers of this have already taken the very best step—they have joined a rhododendron society. Local knowledge is far and away the very best guide. By all means try out the new hybrids and the new plant introductions from our intrepid plant collectors. If you see a truss in a local show that takes your fancy, give the plant a trial in your own garden. Use the Internet to find the particular hue that your artistic eye deems essential to colour-echo that spiky plant in the foreground. Then, after a dozen or more years, you can disseminate your rating with smug professional profundity. It will be worth knowing. 

## PROPAGATION

# Seeds Not All Equal


by Siggi Kemmler

**A**t our last meeting of the Propagating Group, Al Campbell supplied us with two handouts, the Rhododendron Species Foundation 2007 seed list and "The Easy Way to Germinate Rhododendron and Azalea Seed and Grow Seedlings," an article by Frank Pelurie, a leader in wetland preservation in West Virginia and who helped to save a large collection of Glenn Dale azaleas. For those interested, some of these handouts will be available at the next general meeting.

It was suggested that one or more of our experienced growers give a teaching and demonstration session. This would be very helpful, in particular for seed germination, since not all seeds are equal—some are easy to germinate, some are not. To select for colour, hardiness, and size one

has to know the species or consult a guide; the seed list is silent on these subjects.

For plant selection generally, the Great Plant Pick list can be helpful, but it would also be helpful to annotate the Cowichan Valley proven performers list to include information regarding colour, plant size, and time of bloom. Any volunteers?

The propagating box with the porous fibre cloth in the bottom has the advantage of permitting free air circulation through the growing medium. The disadvantage is that it will quickly dry out that medium, particularly during cold spells when the bottom heat is on for long periods. A few days ago, I tried to spray the cloth bottom directly and was surprised to find that it accepts the water quite well. Now the air percolating through the sand and growing medium will be moist. 



## Wind Chill Effect on Rhododendrons

by Alan Campbell

An interesting discussion took place a number of weeks ago on an Internet chat group that concerns itself with the growing of rhododendrons. This rhodo forum has some 400 registered users with a wide range of knowledge and experience.

First, it was stated that Webster defines wind chill as “a still-air temperature that would have the same cooling effect on exposed human skin as a given combination of temperature and wind speed—also called chill factor, wind chill factor, and wind chill index.”

As plants do not feel, having no nerves to transmit impulses, to use the term wind chill in relation to plants is meaningless.

A posting from Bruce Clyburn of District 12 of the ARS in Nova Scotia revealed a different point of view.

*I, on the other hand, drift from the literal definition and interpret it as the combined effects of temperature and wind. Wind can increase the evaporation of soil moisture, thus speeding drying and making water harder for the plant to obtain. It also speeds evaporation of moisture from the plant's leaves and bark. The faster the wind, the faster the moisture is lost.*

The next posting was by Steve Henning (“The Rhody-man”) of Pennsylvania in District 8. His comments give in-depth reasons how and why our gardens should be prepared for winter.

*You are correct, Bruce; the biology is entirely different. In humans, the body temperature should be near 98.6°F, and the wind chill is the effect of the environment to combat our body's effort to keep that temperature. Also, our extremities are susceptible to frostbite, but our core is producing heat and trying to combat that. So the colder and the windier it is, the harder it is on the person.*

*In a plant everything is different. The plant has no body temperature, but must maintain cell integrity, which it loses when the cells freeze (frostbite) or they are desiccated. The temperature at which cells freeze varies, depending on the variety and hardening of the plant.*

*There are at least four different scenarios:*

1. When the ground is thawed and the air



Maintaining cell integrity is of prime importance [photo courtesy of Dave Bonta]

*temperature is above freezing also, sap can flow and replenish the moisture lost from the leaves until the ground is desiccated. So here the effect is the drying root zone. The severity depends on the moisture available. It causes drought damage, wind burn, sun burn and possibly death.*

2. When the ground is frozen, but the air is warmer, the plant is very vulnerable to desiccation. The leaves are not curled up and the biological processes in the stem portion of the plant can occur. So a variety that will maintain dormancy under such conditions will do better. Those that don't will suffer more. They will suffer even more depending upon the dryness of the air.

3. When the ground is frozen and the air is below freezing, the plant is better off until the temperature gets down to where some of the cells are freezing and being destroyed. So this depends how hardened off the plant is and on the variety also.



## March In The Garden

by Liz Murray

Longer evenings, more spring-like days, more rhododendron blooms in the garden—meander and enjoy—it is such a nice time in the garden.

Time to fertilize, whether it be chemical or organic; time to purchase what you need to do the job. If you are planning to go the organic route, you will need to look for a commercial organic fertilizer for your rhododendrons that matches the 10–8–6, or you could mix your own.

Allan's organic fertilizer was developed for our garden many years ago. We have used it extensively and feel that we have had great success with it. It is made with once-living material, or byproducts of living things (i.e. blood meal, bone meal, canola meal, etc.).

Organic fertilizer is slower to release than chemical fertilizer, but feeds for much longer. Organic fertilizers are ideal for rhodos from the standpoint of the main nutrients—nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium—as well as all of the trace elements that are in the components as well as humus.

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### Wind Chill Effect . . .

...continued from Page 4

*The wind is not much of a factor here. It will make the desiccation worse, but most hardy varieties can cope. Varieties that can't cope will suffer. Here moisture in the air has much less of an effect.*

*4. When the ground is thawed but the plant is frozen, the plant should be okay unless the temperature gets low enough to compromise cell structure. The wind is not much of a factor here either.*

*So for plants it is complex and variety dependant. It is also dependant on how hardened-off the plant is. Hardening off means that cell tissue has adapted to cold weather and has maximum resistance to cold, wind and sun. This usually means the plant cells "bulk up" on chemicals that inhibit freezing and drop their moisture level to increase the concentration of chemicals in solution. So the cold weather tolerance of a plant can vary considerably, depending on how well it has hardened off. Too much nitrogen fertilizer or freakish weather with warm spells can compromise a plant's ability*

We purchase bags of the ingredients from Buckerfield's or Borden's then mix them up and store in large plastic containers. For a smaller garden, small amounts can be purchased from the bulk bins and mixed.

It is mixed by volume. Safety gloves and a mask should be worn while mixing. For large amounts an odd-job mixer on a hard surface at a comfortable height works well. Here is the formula:

4 parts alfalfa meal	1 part rock phosphate
4 parts canola meal	1 part bone mea
4 parts blood meal	1 part kelp meal
2 parts dolomite lime	1 part greensand

With its trace elements, this fertilizer will release slowly over a period of 2–3 years, but should be applied each year for maximum benefit. When to apply depends on the weather. Generally speaking:

- **Beginning of March** – Spread magnesium sulphate (Epsom salts) at the rate of half a pound per 100 square feet;
- **Mid-March** – Sprinkle organic fertilizer around the drip line of the plant 2–3 ounces (by volume) per square yard.

Happy fertilizing to all! 

*to harden off. So can bacterial infections.*

*A human being burns food for energy and is a warm bodied creature with a thermostat, a large thermal mass and some clothing for insulation. A plant is a small cold bodied entity with no thermal heat source, very little stored heat because of very small thermal mass, and no insulation unless it has snow cover, leaves or some other protection. The difference between the cell temperature and the ambient temperature is negligible. The only protection consists of the dissolved chemicals in the cell that act like antifreeze and suppress the freezing point. The composition of these chemicals is what distinguishes a hardy plant from a tender plant or a hardened off plant from one that is not.*

Steve Henning has his own Website at <http://rhodyman.net/rasite.html> and I recommend that everyone visit the site—it's just packed full of information. Also, if you care to visit the rhododendron group forum the address is <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/rhodo/>



**EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK**


**It's Our Business, Too**

by *Leslie Drew*

**T**he reality of global warming has suddenly become a burning issue with politicians of all stripes and government levels, and the sad pun is relevant to more than Australia's devastating forest fires.

All of us who garden, especially those of us who do so on more than pocket handkerchief-size grounds, have been cognizant for years now of what the warming trend is doing to our beloved plants and to us personally in the labour and care we must expend to try to protect them. Latterly, many of us have been witness to the very weather extremes that highly respected scientists have been telling us occur with climate change. We have experienced the withering intensity of the sun's rays in summer and now, this winter, we have seen the severe damage inflicted by an unprecedented spate of storms.

There will be those among us in the ARS who will say this is a matter for the politicians, not something we should be involved with. I beg to disagree. It's incumbent upon all of us to work cooperatively with others at this stage in our planet's life. We need to help devise strategies for survival amid what appears to be rapid change.

Here in the Cowichan Valley we have a massive problem: how to make sure we have enough water for the competing needs of the future, including those of gardeners urban and rural. Rhododendrons can live for donkey's years—and longer—if given sufficient water. Will it be there for us and (or) our successors 50 years from now—or even 20 years ahead? Or will rhododendron growing itself be forced to extinction? 

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