

The Victoria Rhododendron Society *Newsletter*



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

March 2010

Twenty-ninth Year of Publication

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web page – <http://victoriarhodo.ca>

MEETING 7:30

MONDAY, March 1, 2010

GARTH HOMER CENTRE, 811 DARWIN STREET, VICTORIA, B. C.

Speaker: Andree Connell

“Cyclamens: An Underused Companion Plant for Rhododendrons”

Andree Connell is a well-known grower of a variety of interesting cyclamens that can thrive in our climate.



REFRESHMENTS

Coffee and tea are provided by the Rhododendron Society after the meeting. A cookie or a bar is always a nice treat. Would the following members provide wrapped refreshments for March's meeting? Thank you in advance.
Etta and Ruth Cook, Jan Dammel, Carol and Bill Dancer, Mary Dennis, Heather Dickman and Milius Douglas.

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Joanna Massa would appreciate help in setting up the table, serving and cleaning up after.

Please phone Joanna at 250-642-5491 to confirm or leave a message.

VRS Annual Show and Plant Sale

Saturday, May 8th 2010

(Set-Sup Friday, May 7, 2010 at Cadboro Bay United Church, 2625 Arbutus Road)

Show Chair Lois Blackmore will circulate Volunteer Sign-Up Sheets at the March 1 Meeting

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OUR BEAUTIFUL SKUNK CABBAGE

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By M.J. Harvey

One of the truly great plants of British Columbia is the skunk cabbage, *Lysichiton americanum*. It got its rather insulting common name by accident. This came about because early explorers on the east coast of North America had come across an aroid plant in swamps from Nova Scotia to Georgia with small, ground-hugging brown and greenish striped flowers that gave off a really bad smell of putrid flesh.



Lysichiton americanum

The smell is actually useful to the plant because when it flowers in very early spring there is a shortage of pollinating insects. The fake carrion-type of smell it gives off attracts flies, which are highly mobile strong fliers, which distribute the pollen. It is of course pure deception and yes, plants do tell lies. To ensure a good volatilization of the, ahem, perfume, the spadix heats up by a biochemical reaction. This heat will also melt any snow covering the inflorescence.



Symplocarpus

Having discovered a black and white striped animal in the same region, European explorers badly transliterated the Abnaki name as 'skunk' and putting two and two together called the plant 'skunk cabbage' - *Symplocarpus foetidus*.

On the west coast, from Alaska to California, is an unrelated (apart from being another ar-

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oid) swamp plant but, remembering the east coast species, the early explorers gave it the knee-jerk name of western skunk cabbage. "What is in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet". Oh yeah! Are we affected by a name? You bet! Many people would grow it if it had a more appealing name.

The problem with the name skunk cabbage is that it is instantly memorable. When telling someone what it is you don't have to repeat it. I once wrote a joke article for the Hardy Plant Group proposing that the name should be changed to 'marsh candles'. This is possibly a better name but of course was a non-starter.

By contrast the genus name is charming. *Lysichiton* is from Greek *lysis*, shedding or spreading, and *chiton*, cloak. I like to think of the plant as a Walter Raleigh type, gallantly throwing its yellow cloak, the spathe, in front of the woodland fairies, naiads no doubt, to prevent their feet getting muddy. Incidentally I looked up the name derivation in *Dictionary of Plant Names* by Allen Coombes—we were at Kew together.

Having spent 27 years on the east coast I am familiar with the eastern skunk cabbage and I can tell you that when I came here I was very impressed by the west coast plants - favorably impressed I must emphasize. It is a much more statuesque, garden-friendly species. This opinion is borne out by its reception on other continents. Most of the great estates in the UK have it and are proud of it. I have also seen it used effectively in New Zealand whose damp climate suits it better than Australia, excepting Tasmania. But if you were born in British Columbia I know that you are reading this with an expression of disgust or disbelief on your face. Like our musicians, plants have to go elsewhere

to get recognition.

And the smell. It is nothing like the east coast species - very mild. I have had friends with dogs that smelt worse - the dogs not the friends. The reason? The western plant is pollinated by mosquitoes. Mosquitoes are attracted by carbon dioxide and slightly sweaty body-odors, not dead deer. But a skunk cabbage is a skunk cabbage is a skunk cabbage - don't expect any British Columbian to approve.

But grace is at hand. There is another species, very closely related, very similar, smaller overall and with pure white flowers. Look west, way, way west to eastern Siberia and northern Japan especially along streams running off the mountain wilderness and volcanoes of the Kamchatka Peninsula - one of the great-undervisited places on Earth. This is *L. camtschatcensis* and my copy of *Perennials* by Phillips and Rix, says 'Flowers sweetly scented'.



Lysichiton camtschatcensis

Now I have been accused of having a one-track mind. Being a geneticist I immediately want to make the hybrid. In fact the hybrid is already well known since it crops up spontaneously where the two species are cultivated together. For instance on a Magnolia Society trip my wife and I were shown the hybrid at Chyverton in Cornwall by the owners. The two species had been planted by the stream at least a century ago and the hybrids stood out of the shallow stream bed as slightly taller plants with intermediate cream-coloured spathes.

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At the time, we lived in Sooke with the Veitch Creek running across the property. We had the native yellow plants by the hundreds. To make hybrids the problem was thus to get the white one. Seedlings, available at Fraser's Thimble Farm would take several years to flower. Fortunately, one of our local expert gardeners, Carmen Varcoe, had the white species growing in her garden and was willing to allow me to get pollen from it and also to use it as a seed source. I ended up attempting reciprocal crosses, putting pollen of the yellow species on stigmas of the white one, and white pollen on yellow stigmas.

Readers should understand that making hybrids is a very speculative enterprise. The chances of ending up with hybrid seedlings are low. Normal tricks in making hybrids involve bringing the plants into an insect-free greenhouse and removing the stamens before any pollen is shed. These lessen the chance of self-pollination. In this case neither were possible; the rhizomes are attached to enormous masses of roots held down by a high-suction swamp, and the individual unit flowers are tiny things compressed together on the spadix with the anthers hidden below the surface.

I ended up taking an unopened spathe of *americanum* and smearing pollen of *camtschatcense* on the projecting tiny knobs of the stigmas. I covered the whole thing with a paper bag secured with a rubber band. The white flowers in Carmen's garden were treated in a similar but reciprocal manner. After about ten days the anthers on the yellow flowers burst out and shed surprisingly large amounts of pol-



Lysichiton camtschatcense

len, which blew about and of course covered the previously pollinated stigmas. What had resulted? I had no idea - I was just winging it. This is 'Hail Mary' hybridization.

Luck, I think, was on my side. Apparently the stigmas mature first (protogyny), then pollen tube grows down the style and fertilizes the egg. After this has happened the pollen is shed but by then it is too late to result in self-pollination. But I was not to know this for at least six years, when the first seedlings flowered. So making hybrids is a form of gambling, but at least it is cheaper than the casino.

In 2000 I got several dozen seeds, stratified them over winter in damp peaty soil and got good but irregular germination in 2001. Unfortunately there are no leaf characteristics to detect whether they were hybrid or selfed seedlings so I just kept on growing them.

I donated seedlings from Carmen's *camtschatcensis* to Hatley, Finnerty and Abkhazi gardens. The idea was that the plants would look good if they were hybrids, but if they were not hybrids they would still look good because they would be white. The Abkhazi plant died but several at Finnerty were planted by Rhonda Rose on the far side of the long pond at the water's edge and have done magnificently. Go see them in spring. The flowers are pretty much white so I was afraid they were pure *camtschatcensis* but their size is so huge that they are probably hybrids.

Plants from the Sooke yellow plant I variously sold, gave away or planted alongside the Veitch Creek. The property was sold before they flowered so what resulted is not known. I saved one plant for our new garden where it is in the corner of a small pond but has not flowered yet.

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Anyone brave enough to risk opprobrium by planting a skunk cabbage needs a damp spot although I have thought of sinking a half-barrel or a plastic tub in the ground to maintain a local wet habitat. Bear in mind that these are large plants whose leaves grow to over a metre long by late summer. So you either make it a feature plant of part of your garden or you hide it away in a corner. Be bold, think 'beautiful marsh candles'.

An Overview of February's Talk

- **In this part of the world there is no better example of garden longevity than one that lives on at Marble Bay on Cowichan Lake, nor one that has given so much plant material to gardens elsewhere.**

• This was the topic of Leslie Drew, VRS member and writer on B.C. historical subjects, speaking at the February meeting on "The Enduring Garden of the Stokers and the Simpsons." She said the garden has survived for more than a hundred years because the two couples who made it, keen naturalists, knew what they were doing, had an ideal location, and because a lot of other people cared. In addition: "Because the property has been protected under University of Victoria ownership and looked after so well by Roger Wiles, the caretaker, the garden stays beautiful in its own timeless way, and endlessly fascinating."

Tracing the steps in development, she said the garden was started by Lt. Col. Dr. Richard Stoker and his wife Susan, about 1900, as a native plant collection. They had been plant hunters in northern India during the 25 years Dr. Stoker served in the British Army's Indian Medical Service, and explored from hill stations into higher ranges of the Himalayas

in search of botanical treasures. They came to the Cowichan at just over 50 years of age, had a winter home built on Quamichan Lake, and their summer home at Marble Bay. Each autumn on hunting trips into the mountains, Dr. Stoker collected seed for his wife to dry and package – or brought home plants for the garden. Susan Stoker gradually began circulating seed of Island and B.C. wildflowers to botanical institutions and private collectors around the world. She was later credited with having introduced several species into cultivation in the British Isles. She also depicted wildflowers in paintings and on porcelain.

In 1914 a much younger couple settled in a floathouse in a corner of the Stoker property – George Buchanan Simpson and his wife Suzanne, French-born and educated in England. The two couples got along well; the women especially formed a close friendship. Before long, the Simpsons decided to start a specialty nursery of the world's rarer alpine plants, species iris, hardy primulas, bulbs, species rhododendrons and rare hardy flowering shrubs. In addition to cold frames they had a small ornamental garden of their own, partly a testing ground for exotics. The timing was right; rock gardens were extremely popular in the United States, and newly-discovered flowering plants much in demand.

Susan Stoker's original collection, in rock pockets with a central pond stocked with aquatics, was much admired by visitors in the early 1920s, better known outside the region than within. A few years later, old age forced the Stokers to live year-round at their Quamichan Lake home, and for a time the Simpsons probably looked after their garden as best they could, while missing their great friends.

In 1934, the Simpsons themselves decided to sell their Marble Bay Alpine Plant Nursery,

all 4,000 plants, some species rhododendrons among them, and go off to France. The buyers were Ted and Mary Greig of Royston, up-Island on the east coast, who had an alpine plant nursery. Mary Greig was reluctant to take the species rhododendrons, but Buchanan Simpson was persuasive. The alpine did not fare well in their new sea-level environment, but the rhodos flourished. The Greigs subsequently changed their focus. Before long, their nursery became the first in B.C. to specialize in rhododendrons, and Mary Greig started hybridizing. This nursery's sale to the Vancouver Parks Board in 1966 resulted in major public plantings that survive to this day.

In 1938, the Simpsons returned from abroad and, as luck would have it, were able to buy the former Stoker property with its old-growth forest, log house, beach and historic garden. Prohibited under sale terms from competing with the Greigs, they could now garden for their own enjoyment and study, and concentrate on rhododendrons. They removed Scotch broom, and greatly enlarged the Stokers' native plant garden. Mary Greig contributed rhodos, and they moved abundant seedlings from their old nursery garden.

In 1966, by then widowed and, like the Stokers, childless, Suzanne Simpson gave the entire property to UVic, provided she could spend the rest of her life there. In 1974, after her death, the university designated the property as the Jeanne S. Simpson Field Studies Resource Centre. Most of the rhododendrons were moved to UVic where they made the foundation for the Finnerty Garden.

To this day the Stoker-Simpson garden features a bank of giant rhodos at the back and in front an azalea dell where examples of *Mollis* azaleas and the species *luteum* form a colourful mass in spring.

Every spring everywhere bulbs and other plants



Azalea luteum

pop up, some unidentified, all vivid reminders of days long ago when this place was famous for rare native plants. Rhododendrons and their progeny, from the two outflows, count as legacies all over the Pacific Northwest and beyond.

(A note from Leslie Drew: I would appreciate any leads to photos of the Stoker garden or the enlarged Stoker-Simpson garden from the 1920s to 1960s. Buchanan Simpson was active in naturalists' circles in the 1920s, and any leads to correspondence would be welcome).

Contact Leslie by email, sahtlamrise@shaw.ca, or mail 4491 Creighton Rd., Duncan, B.C., V9L 6J7.

V.I.R.A.G.S. Show and Sale in March

The Vancouver Island Rock and Alpine Garden Society's 2010 annual Spring show and sale will be held at Cadboro Bay United Church, 2625 Arbutus Road, Victoria, BC, on Friday, March 26 from 1pm to 8pm and on Saturday, March 27 from 9am to 4pm

Species	risk
keiskei	1
arboreum	1
griffithianum	1
mallotum	1
edgeworthii	1
macabeanum**	1
campylogynum	1
racemosum	1
sinogrande	1
williamsianum	1
roxianum	1
maximum	1
degronianum ssp.	1
moupinense	1
bureavii	1
calostrotum	1
orbiculare	1
sutchuenense	1
impeditum l rex	1
strigillosum	1
forrestii	1
barbatum	1
calophytum	1
lacteum	1
decorum	1
fortunei	2
oreotrepes	2
macrophyllum	2
oreodoxa	2
Cinnabarimum**	2
Auriculatum	2
excellens	2
thomsonii	2
catawbiense	2
campanulatum	2
wardii	2
ponticum '	2
augustinii	3
mucronulatum	3
dauricum	3
brachycarpum	5

Cultivar	risk
Purple Gem	1
Hello Dolly	1
Crete	1
PJM Compact'	1
Ken Janeck	1
Fred Peste	1
Kalinka'	1
Mardi Gras	1

Cultivar	risk
Lee's Dark Purple'	1
Yaku Princess	1
Edith Bosley**	1
Jean Marie de Montague**	1
Teddy Bear'	2
Karin Seleger'	2
Hardizer's Beauty	2
PJM Elite	2
Mikkeli'	2
Nancy Evans	2
Hellikki'	2
Polarnacht	2
Golden Torch'	2
Midnight	2
Dora Amateis	2
Aglo	2
Cunningham's White**	2
Lemon Dream'	2
Dreamland'	2
Nova Zembla	2
Besse Howells**	2
Ingrid Mehlquist'	2
Bubblegum	2
Bambino	2
Scintillation	2
Seaview Sunset'	2
Pink Snowflake	3
Henry's Red'	3
Ginny Gee'	3
Percy Wiseman	3
Tapestry	3
Chionoides**	3
Fantastica'	3
Catawbiense Album**	3
President Roosevelt**	3
Purple Passion**	3
Ebony Pearl	4
English Roseum	4
April Mist	5
Capistrano**	5
Catawbiense Grandiflorum**	5
Catabiense Bousault**	6
New Century'	6
Purple Splendor	6

Phytophthora Ramorum susceptibility based on preliminary results from 2009 Washington State University research

Risk Ratings

Risk of *P. ramorum* infection was calculated as the sum of susceptibility (infection frequency on unwounded leaves, upper and lower surfaces), severity (lesion size on wounded lower surface), and sporulation potential (sporangia and chlamydospores per lesion.)

These numbers were ranked and risk categories assigned as below:

Risk of <i>P. ramorum</i> infection
1 low
2 medium
3 high
4 very high
5 extremely high
6 don't plant this rhododendron

** found positive in WA nursery inspections



Glendale Gardens Hellebore Sunday

1 to 3 pm Sunday, February 28

Join us and celebrate the wonder of our gardens in early spring. Free lectures, tours and displays of hellebore hybrids will follow a sale of hellebores and other winter treasures including cyclamen, snowdrops and winter aconite.

Refreshments will be available.

Look for these varieties on sale:

Helleborus x nigercors 'Honeyhill Joy'

Helleborus x hybridus 'Onyx Odyssey'

Helleborus x hybridus 'Peppermint Ice'

Helleborus orientalis hybrid

Helleborus argutifolius

Helleborus Regal Ruffles Strain

Helleborus foetidus 'Wester Flisk'



Glendale Gardens Heather Lecture and Sale

9 a.m. Sat. March 13

A 9:00 am lecture on the selection and cultivation of heathers by Bryan Taylor, curator of the Heather Garden at Glendale Gardens, will precede a Heather Sale at 10:00am.

A fantastic selection of heathers and tree heaths, chosen for foliage and flower, will be available for sale in the glasshouse.

Please note that plant availability can be affected by environmental conditions, primarily fluctuations in temperature.

www.glendalegardens.ca 250-479-6162

NEW ZEALAND'S FINEST GARDENS

**Far Away Adventures is offering a
Tour, 20 days, November 7-26, 2010**

This tour includes hotels, transportation, lake cruise, guide, breakfasts, 4 garden lunches and sightseeing in Auckland, Rotorua, New Plymouth, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, Queenstown.

Cost, \$4679 per person, double occupancy. Visit www.FarandAwayAdventures.com To book, call Far and Away Adventures at 250-385-3001 Ext. 133 or toll free 1-866-333-5962.



Maple Glen Gardens, New Zealand

The Ultimate Rhododendron Conference April 9 – 11 at UBC Botanical Garden

With about a month to go, **there are still spaces left at both level 1 and level 2!**

If you wish to register, please visit www.rhodos.ca to print a registration form. For further information, email Ron Knight at: rcknight@telus.net