

INDUMENTUM



PROGRAM

Our program this month will be a selection of members slides. A carosell will be available prior to the meeting. We look forward to seeing some excellent presentations.

EDITORS NOTE

This will be my second foray as Editor of The VRS Newsletter. The old cut and paste has been replaced by computer programs that take some time to learn. I hope members will be patient as the steep curve levels off. I look forward to bringing you a high quality Newsletter,

This will be my last President's Message. It is customary on such occasions to thank all the people who have been working closely with me. I will follow that custom, but somehow want you to know that I mean what I say with a special emphasis beyond what is generally 'customary', that what I say about my colleagues of the last two years is at a higher level of sincerity and enthusiasm than is usual.

Interesting, and unusual in organizations like the VRS, the Executive with which I have worked so closely is, with the exception of Past President Louis Peterson, Member at Large Tony Clayton, Joe and me, comprised of people who are of a pre-retirement age—Sean Rafferty, Dana Cromie, Jasbir Gill, Todd Major, Philip MacDougall, Don Haslam, and Norah Hall. They are still active in their professions or other occupations that make up their careers. That in itself has been a blessing for the VRS, an indication of the organization's strength and vitality, and promise for its future.

I would like to begin by thanking Todd Major, Editor for the past several years of the Indumentum, who is also stepping down this year. Todd has brought the publication to a new level of professionalism and beauty, making the Indumentum one of the most sophisticated in the business. Thanks, Todd, for staying on as long as you did while other obligations beckoned, and for doing a superb job. Gerry Gibbens is taking up where Todd has left off—a hard act to follow for Gerry, but he takes it on with my complete confidence.

Sean Rafferty as Vice President has always been there for me, ready to step in any time when I couldn't, and always ready if anything had to be done. Which in fact has been the case with everyone else. Who will do so and so?—a question often arising (though usually with a little more specific parameters), and always one or two people coming forward to say, 'I'll take care of that', with all of them taking it up from one time to another.

Dana Cromie, following Barbara Sherman, has done a superb job as Treasurer as well as volunteering for any other duties, like filling in at the membership table when Philip MacDougall is away earning his living, or on a trip to Asia—though at times Dana himself might be away on some Asian plant expedition. Philip maintains a schedule so full that it is hard to believe he actually sleeps from time to time. He is Vice President of the Alpine Garden Society of BC and its Programme Chair, and has at the same time not hesitated to take charge of our membership.

Jasbir Gill, our Secretary, is always there full of enthusiasm, sometimes taking care of our library as well, helping with membership activities, and she is consistently ready to step in when needed. It's been a special pleasure for me to get to know her better, and I certainly appreciate her contributions to the VRS.

'I'll do it' is a phrase when is readily heard from any of our three Members-at-Large—Norah Hall to host an event, perform with Don on legal concerns, and to help Tony Clayton with the publicity, Tony himself not only taking responsibility for publicity but helping wife Jacquie in the kitchen, among other odd jobs, and of course Don Haslam, most likely our next President, who without hesitation joins Sean in picking up and delivering plants from the Species Foundation or elsewhere for our Show and Sale, setting up the day before and taking down, and then returning with Sean the multitude of equipment to Kathy'Lau's home at the end of it all.

Then there is our Éminence grise, Past President Louis Peterson, not quite as regular in his participation as in the past, always getting involved in something new, as is his wont, but also always ready with good suggestions and advice.

Awkward though it may be, I should thank my husband Joe, too, for doing his bit on our speakers' programme, which has become the envy of chapters near and far. Forgive me Joe for sharing what is just the truth!

Then, not on the Executive but serving the VRS regularly, there are Jacquie Clayton and Heidi Schneider providing for our refreshments, both at our meetings and at the Show and Sale, Charlie Sale and Jim Hall running the raffle, and Douglas Justice with his monthly bouquet, along with his readiness to make everything run smoothly.

And finally, all our members, who turn up at monthly meetings with enthusiasm, readily volunteer for the Show and Sale, and generally make the VRS the vital organization that it is.

My time as President has been a privilege, an honour, and exceedingly rewarding as an experience. I thank you all, and wish for the next President that he have as good a time and team as I have had.

Joanne Ronsley
VRS President



Rhododendron rex ssp. fictolacteum

the following nominations for VRS Executive positions have been proposed by the nominating committee (Sean Rafferty and Joe Ronsley) and been approved by the Executive Committee:

- President Don Haslam
- Past President Joanne Ronsley
- Treasurer Dana Cromie
- Secretary Jasbir Gill
- Membership Philip MacDougall
- Programme Joe Ronsley
- Indumentum Editor Gerry Gibbens
- Member at Large Tony Clayton (continuing)
- Member at Large Norah Hall (continuing)
- Member at Large Alan Cheung

Join the Vancouver Rhododendron Society

Joining our Society provides many benefits including the opportunity to enjoy lectures on many subjects. The opportunity to volunteer in many areas including our Plant Sales. Our Garden Tours provide members with 1st hand of plant culture. We publish a monthly Newsletter 9 times a year to keep you informed and up to date. Guests are welcome to attend our monthly meetings held the 3rd Thursday of every month except July, August and December.

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The Wild Rhododendrons of Mount Elphinstone

By Ron Knight
Pender Harbour, British Columbia

Rhododendron enthusiasts who enjoy hiking on the West Coast have probably encountered the beautiful Pacific Rhododendron, *R. macrophyllum*. Although this plant is reasonably common in Oregon and Washington, it is rare farther north in Canada. In fact, in southwestern British Columbia, there are only four known wild populations. Two of these are found on Vancouver Island and another is in Manning Park on the mainland. The most northerly, and smallest stand of *macrophyllums*, just recently discovered, is found on Mount Elphinstone on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast.

Rhododendron macrophyllum was named in 1792 by Archibald Menzies who was the doctor and botanist aboard Captain Vancouver's ship when he visited the Pacific Northwest. Menzies called the plant *macrophyllum* (large leafed) because at the time of its discovery there were no known rhododendrons with bigger leaves. Of course we now know that many Asian rhododendrons exceed *macrophyllum* in leaf size; however the Pacific Rhododendron at least has the distinction of being the tallest of the West Coast native rhododendrons. It has large, jade-green leaves and twenty or more flowers are held in each dome-shaped truss. These blooms can vary in color on different specimens from various shades of pink to white.

I first learned that there were *macrophyllums* on the Sunshine Coast from reading an article by Dr. Ben

Hall, a geneticist, in the Winter 2006 issue of the ARS Journal. What an exciting revelation that was, --- a grove of wild rhododendrons within an hour's drive of my home! The article referred to Dr. Hall's DNA studies on *macrophyllum* flower and leaf bud samples, showing the Mount Elphinstone population to be a distinct genetic variation of the species. Along with small populations in Washington State and Manning Park, these rare rhododendrons, referred to as the Clade 1 type, prefer to live near salt water.

After reading Dr. Hall's article, I was curious to find out how the Mount Elphinstone rhododendrons had been discovered. I learned from Joe and Joanne Ronsley that four years ago, they had been contacted by a Sunshine Coast environmentalist concerning a stand of pink-flowering rhododendrons on the mountain near her home. She wanted to know if these rhododendrons were wild ones, worthy of protection, or merely escaped garden plants. The Ronsleys invited Steve Hootman to join a mini-expedition to Mount Elphinstone with their environmentalist friend serving as the guide. Once there, they ascertained that the plants were all wild *macrophyllums* and arranged for tissue samples to be sent to Dr. Hall.

All through the winter of 2006, I tried to persuade the same environmentalist to have a member of her group take me to the Mount Elphinstone rhododendron grove when the plants were in bloom. However, after 4 months, 12 e-mail, 2 meetings, and several phone calls, I realized it wasn't going to happen. The environmentalists were now only willing to guide "outsiders" who were committed



to joining their group and helping them further their anti-logging agenda. Since political protest wasn't high on my list of preferred retirement activities, I decided to look elsewhere for a guide and in late May 2006 found a local landscaper who agreed to take me to see the *macrophyllums*.

On a sunny Sunday in the last week of May, we drove several kilometers from the main Sunshine Coast highway, along rugged logging roads, until we reached a tiny island of forest totally surrounded by clear-cut. As we walked into the dimly lit grove, I felt as if I had entered an outdoor cathedral. Under my feet was a thick carpet of yellow moss. Far above my head, shafts of sunlight broke through the second growth Douglas Fir canopy, spotlighting salal, Oregon grape, and ferns on the forest floor.

And then all of a sudden, the rhododendrons appeared in front of me (Photo1). They were gigantic, -- some over 15 feet (5 m) tall, and all in full bloom! Many had side branches that extended an equal distance outwards (Photo 2). There seemed to be about a dozen individual specimens although it was hard to tell because many had layered new plants from low-growing branches.

All of the rhododendrons appeared to be in good health and sported vigorous new growth. Their leaves were glossy green with little insect damage and no indication of fungal disease. Flowering was profuse, with huge light pink blooms appearing on every plant (Photo 3). In addition, there were some four inch (10 cm) tall seedlings growing out of two well-rotted logs that were near the southwest edge of the grove. I spent the next hour taking dozens of photographs.

After that visit, I contacted Brian Smart, Planning Forester for the District of Sechelt's Community Forest. He told me that he knew about the Mount Elphinstone rhododendrons and had taken aerial photographs of the grove (Photo 4). He assured me that, "The Community Forest Advisory Committee is excited to have these

rare and beautiful rhododendrons within the Community Forest Tenure area. We are looking forward to working with the Rhododendron Societies to develop a proper protection and management strategy and we are also interested in the idea of assisting with propagating these rhododendrons within the Community Forest area."

In October 2006, Dean Goard, past-president of the Victoria Rhododendron Society, joined me on Mount Elphinstone to collect seed pods and cuttings. Since then, he and the Victoria Propagators Group have been able to root some of these cuttings and produce over one hundred seedlings. These seedlings will be ready to transplant into one gallon pots in late spring 2009. Some will be offered to members of local garden clubs and rhododendron chapters for garden testing. Others will be reserved for the new Sunshine Coast Botanical Garden in Sechelt where they will form a satellite *macrophyllum* population. The Pacific Rhododendron has a reputation for not adapting well to garden environments, but perhaps this Clade 1 variety will be different.

Much additional work needs to be done. For example, with a grant from the Community Forest committee, a path with signage has to be built around the rhododendrons. Although few Sunshine Coast residents, at present, know the location of the grove, tours are planned for local politicians and garden club members, and a marked path will prevent trampling of seedlings.

A very contentious debate will be entered into soon by Sunshine Coast politicians: Should the Elphinstone rhododendron grove remain relatively inaccessible and hidden from the general public, or should it be developed and publicized as an environmental education destination?

And in the back of everyone's mind will be the bigger question: How did these *macrophyllums* get to Mount Elphinstone in the first place, and are there other undiscovered



populations on the Sunshine Coast?

It's time to lace up my hiking boots and find out.

Ron Knight is a past-president of the VRS and currently serves as ARS District 1 Director. He may be contacted through his web site:
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Photo credits for this article:

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Photos(3) - Ron Knight

