

Indumentum

Newsletter of the Vancouver Rhododendron Society

Volume 36, Number 1, September 2004



The Vancouver Rhododendron Society is a chapter of the American Rhododendron Society

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This Month's Meeting: Thursday, September 16th 7:30 pm
Floral Hall, VanDusen Botanical Garden

Program: Todd Major: 'Designing Your Garden for Dynamic Canopy Structure'

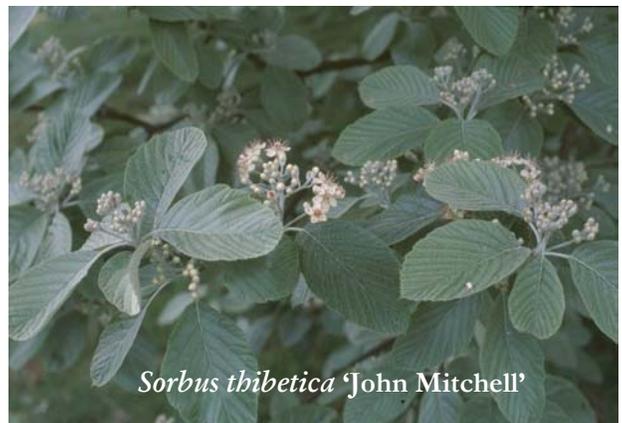
Education: Ron Knight: Highlights from the 2004 Show and Sale

Plant Sales: Margaret Charlton

Plants for Late Summer Interest – Sorbus Part I

Rhododendrons in flower, it must be said, are relatively fleeting in their glory. With a few notable exceptions, most species and hybrids open their flowers for only a few days or weeks, with the majority doing so once a year, in spring. I often point out that rhododendrons ought to be chosen on the basis of foliage quality for those very reasons. Late summer (now) is *not* the time for rhododendron flowers. Locally, *R. auriculatum* and *R. saluenense* sometimes hold out until August, and make a magnificent show, but they're clearly exceptions.

Companion plants can fill the colour gap at this time, and many rhody growers employ an array of hydrangeas, Kirengeshoma or other late flowering, shade tolerant perennials for this purpose. Trees are another matter. Acers, particularly Japanese maples, are the typical (and much recommended) rhododendron companions, but late summer isn't their time either. Enter *Sorbus*: variety in leaf colour and texture, a wide range of fruit colour, reliable berry-set, small stature, and excellent garden adaptability, including growing right in among rhododendrons.



Sorbus thibetica 'John Mitchell'

There are basically two kinds of *Sorbus*: those with pinnately compound leaves (mountain ashes) and those with simple leaves (whitebeams). For most people in the Vancouver area, "mountain ash" is the European *S. aucuparia* (rowan or European mountain ash). This is unfortunate, not because these are inferior trees (there are many excellent cultivars), but because we have our own superb native *S. sitchensis* (Sitka mountain ash)

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President's Message

I hope you had a pleasant summer and are looking forward to seeing everyone again at our first meeting of the new VRS season on Thursday, September 16th.



Since nothing new has happened VRS-wise over the summer, I thought I would forego my usual mundane president's report and try a more "scholarly" article. The topic is "Digital Photography for Rhodoholics," and you'll find it on page 4.

Ron Knight

... *Plants for Late Summer Interest continued from page 1*

in the local mountains. Few people seem to know it. There is also a huge number of Asian (and other) mountain ash and whitebeam species that are every bit as attractive and growable here as the ubiquitous rowan.

Two species that stand out for me in a long list of favourites are *Sorbus thibetica* 'John Mitchell' (see photo on page 1; photos by the author) and *S. hupehensis* (Hubei mountain ash; see photo right). 'John Mitchell' is a selection of *S. thibetica* (the only representative of the species presently in commerce), which is similar to the more commonly planted European whitebeam, *S. aria*. Upon emergence, both the European and Tibetan whitebeam's leaves are covered in soft white hairs, and both tend to shed these hairs from their upper surfaces by mid summer; however, the leaves of 'John Mitchell' are broader (to 15x15 cm) and remain bright green, while those of *S. aria* take on a brownish cast by early summer. *Sorbus thibetica* is a medium-sized, shade tolerant tree. Its small white flowers are produced in May and followed by orange to reddish fruits. Unfortunately, this species is propagated by grafting and is therefore rare. UBC Botanical Garden has plans to propagate this and a number of other hard-to-find species.

Hubei mountain ash is a smaller tree with blue-green leaves and long lasting white berries—*Sorbus* fruits are technically "pomes," the characteristic fruit of apples and their relatives. Its bare stems are smooth and a pleasing grey-brown and its pinnate leaves are remarkably handsome, particularly as a foil for its creamy flowers (in spring) and white fruits and pinkish

fruit stalks (in late summer and fall). Rounding out the multi-season interest, trees produce orange and yellow autumn colour. An interesting feature of this mountain ash is its ability to produce identical seedlings from seed. This phenomenon (fertile seed production without normal fertilization) is common to the Chinese and Himalayan pinnate-leaved *Sorbus* species, and to the European simple-leaved species. Perhaps because Hubei mountain ash is relatively slow growing, nurseries have avoided offering it (if there's another reason, I'd be interested to discover it!), but it's easy from seed and ideally suited to growing amongst or through rhododendrons. A similar and closely related species, *S. oligodonta* (kite-leaved rowan), is sometimes offered for sale under the name 'Pink Pagoda'. It has heavy crops of beautiful pink "berries" and is equally attractive.

Why not branch out (as it were) to *Sorbus*? Both whitebeams and mountain ashes are perfectly at home as shade-providing emergent trees in the rhododendron garden. There are many more besides *S. thibetica* and *S. hupehensis* that are outstanding ornamentals, so stay tuned....

Douglas Justice



Sorbus hupehensis

Subscription Rates

VRS + ARS Membership (US & Overseas)	\$50.00 \$US 28.00
VRS Membership (no ARS Quarterly Journal)	\$25.00
Associate Membership (member of another ARS Chapter in Canada)	\$10.00
Associate Membership (member of another ARS Chapter outside of Canada)	\$US 10.00

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	1 month	3 months	8 months
Business card	\$10.00	\$25.00	\$50.00
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½ page	\$40.00	\$108.00	\$256.00
full page	\$70.00	\$189.00	\$448.00

News and Notes

The 2004 VRS Picnic at Ron and Derrick's Garden

Sunday, June 13, 2004 broke to overcast skies and the potential for rain, an unwelcome possibility for the VRS picnickers preparing to descend on Ron Feicht and Derrick Hoffman's home in West Vancouver for the annual end-of-season festivity. Fortunately, by late afternoon the clouds had rolled away, a misty mantle rose to reveal the heights of Anvil Island and distant mountains beyond the far reaches of Howe Sound, and photogenic cotton-wool cumulus clouds enhanced a beautiful blue-skied sunny day—ideal for the convivial gathering that came together at Eagleridge Drive.

The Ron & Derrick garden is much more than simply a highly varied collection of interesting plants. Its history is worth the telling. It stands as a testimony to the imaginations and hard work of the artist/gardeners who have created a novel piece of nature that engages even my poorly instructed senses. The property is pie-shaped (about 300 feet on two long edges), slopes steeply toward Marine Drive to the west, and was little more than bare granite and broken scree when acquired some 15 years ago. An "essential" spacious greenhouse came soon after.

Looking east (upwards) from Marine Drive, the house rests high and steadfast on a secure granite outcrop. To the left and right, the garden is framed by a canopy of tall native conifers. The understory consists in part of maples, magnolias, and well established rhododendrons, while windmill palms, ceanothus, kalmia, hebes, and viburnum constitute some of the other larger plants. Ground covers are varied, consisting of grasses, thymes, asarum, arabis, heather, vaccinium, etc. The whole creation is complimented by a variety of perennials.

As background, it could be significant that Ron, born in the prairies, was captivated by the luxuriance of the West Coast environment. An early interest in bonsai led to homemade plant

pots, from which developed the accomplished potter-gardener of today.

With rock and sweat, Ron and Derrick have built walls, terraces and winding paths throughout their domain, and over the years have moved over 120 cubic yards of soil (bucket by laborious bucket!) into nooks and pockets to nurture the vegetations of their choice—a multitude of plants chosen carefully for habit, form, texture, colour, fragrance and harmony (plus herbs for the kitchen). While succulents thrive in what may be an ideal environment, at the opposite end of the horticultural spectrum some deep woodland groundcovers (from England) seem to prosper, too, in their carefully sited, well shaded moist niches. A group of ponds, sustained by flowing water, appear almost as a surprise—two large, one small, which, together with the plants, now soothe a landscape once dominated by rock. Other discoveries that surprise the visitor include a nest of children's toys in a rocky nook, a rusting iron chain from farm or seashore, a bell by the fish pond—all items that convey some aspect of the passage of time and days gone by.

I cannot even begin to do justice to the range of plants, from tall trees to delicate ground covers to grasses to bonsai to special features in pots—but there is even more to come! Ron and Derrick (both avid artist-collectors) have a home that hosts a gallery of interesting artifacts, including paintings, pottery, sculptures—a friendly place where everyone was made most welcome.

To crown the day the picnickers enjoyed a sumptuous feast of dishes of many kinds, provided by culinary volunteers organized so well (as always) by Vern Finley. Beverages and wines provided by the guests and our hosts greatly complemented the fine food (it is suspected that this author imbibed more than just one glass!)

It was an occasion for the VRS to remember—just don't miss the next opportunity to visit a magnum opus such as Ron and Derrick's place!

Louis K. Peterson.



RSF Plant Distribution: The new procedure for the Rhododendron Species Foundation Canadian plant distribution, begun last spring, will be in place this fall. Canadian RSF members who have ordered plants will be able to pick them up at UBC Monday to Friday, from October 25th to October 29th. You must arrive at UBC between 10:00 and 11:00 am, or between 1:00 and 2:00 pm, on any of those days. Douglas Justice will provide further directions for all those expecting plants.

Joe Ronsley

Christmas is Coming!

Books make excellent Christmas presents! Order your selections via the VRS from Whitecap Books and/or Timber Press, and receive a 35% discount (the society qualifies for a special discount and free delivery for orders above \$200).

A \$50.00 order would cost you \$34.78 (with GST) and benefit the VRS \$8.03, while a \$100.00 order costs \$69.55 and benefits \$16.05 to VRS. In addition to gardening books, Whitecap carries titles on cooking, health, crafts, children, nature, environment, arts, history and more! Timber Press deals solely with plants and gardening. I will bring catalogues to the September and October meetings and be happy to take orders from you then, or by e-mail (advance payment by cheque to the VRS is preferred). Order soon to ensure timely delivery. You may view the Whitecap and Timber Press listings at www.whitecap.ca

Louis Peterson, 604-921-7260 or lpeterso@sfu.ca

Digital Photography for Rhodoholics

Over the past thirty years I have owned three very good Pentax 35mm single lens reflex cameras. They have produced a lot of excellent slides and prints. However, despite reading photography books and getting helpful hints from **Glen Patterson**, my results have been inconsistent, especially with close-up garden shots. Moreover, I've often been disappointed after developing a roll of film, to find that some less-than-satisfactory rhododendron photographs I took a week before couldn't be retaken until the following spring because the plants had passed their peak bloom time. Another annoyance was having to carry a pencil and paper with me to record the rhododendron name and exposure setting that I used for each photograph. And film and developing costs were expensive.

All of these problems have disappeared with my new Canon Powershot G5 (5 megapixel) digital camera. When I focus on a scene, it appears "live" and in colour on a screen that folds out beside the camera. I can adjust the white balance to suit every imaginable lighting situation. I can force the camera to select the exposure setting from a single flower, while ignoring the background lighting. As with my Pentax, I can shoot in automatic mode, set the aperture or shutter speed manually, and overexpose or underexpose to accommodate difficult lighting conditions. But in all of these situations, the "live" screen image changes



Rhododendron campylogynum



Rhododendron 'Warlock'

to show me exactly what my finished photograph will look like—before I actually click the shutter button.

The Canon lens allows me to zoom in tight on a single flower or take wide-angle shots of the full garden. A macro setting lets me move the camera to within six inches of a plant and clearly focus on individual leaf hairs. I am able to change the film speed to duplicate ASA settings of 50 to 400. There is a built-in flash with a red eye reduction feature and a terminal to attach a larger external flash. I can take continuous shots at two images per second, as well as movies, both interesting but relatively useless features. Best of all, however, after taking a rhododendron photograph, I can say the name of the plant into a built-in microphone and it is recorded, in addition to all of the exposure setting information.

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Rhododendron 'Anah Kruschke'

After taking a number of shots of a certain rhododendron using various exposure settings, I can play back each of the images on the screen and erase all but the best one. I can also plug the camera directly into my television set, see the photographs on the large screen, and hear the name of each rhododendron come through my stereo system. As an alternative, I can use a USB cable to connect the camera to my computer to download, view, and modify the photographs using Photoshop Elements. Photographs that I choose to print on 8½" × 11" photo paper are reproduced on my inkjet printer with professional-looking results.

My photographs are recorded by the camera onto a tiny CF card and the 256K card, which I prefer, stores 130 to 150 images. After transferring the images to my computer, the card can be reused. With the battery fully charged, the camera will take over 300 images before I have to plug it into a wall outlet. In order to save the battery when I use the camera with my computer or television set, I run off normal household current. When I am traveling and unable to recharge, I carry an extra battery.

New five-megapixel cameras by Canon, Nikon, or Olympus sell for around \$900 at London Drugs. Unless you plan to print gigantic posters or do a lot of computer editing, you won't need more than five megapixels. CF cards (256K) are \$80 at Costco. If you have your own inkjet printer, there should be no further costs after your initial outlay.

Over the past nine months, my digital camera has completely changed the way I approach garden photography. My pictures are far better than what I usually produced with my Pentax cameras and I am much more consistent. The camera functions were easy to learn and fun to use. With the Canon G5 set on "automatic," I was able

to take good quality photographs immediately. As a result of attending an evening workshop and reading a digital photography book, I am starting to successfully handle some of the more difficult garden lighting situations with the manual functions.

Some things I've learned are:

- Always use a tripod when photographing flowers.
- An old umbrella lying sideways on the ground can help keep trusses still on windy days.
- Set the camera at the highest resolution and compression and the lowest ASA setting.
- Never use the digital zoom feature because picture quality is sacrificed.
- The best lighting occurs on cloudy days and in early mornings; full sunlight is the worst.
- Setting the camera's white balance for "cloudy day light" enhances the colour in yellow flowers.
- White, very deep red, and pale pink and yellow trusses usually look best when manually underexposed.
- Backlighting purple and maroon flowers makes them appear to glow.
- Using flash with close-ups often produces harsh contrasts.

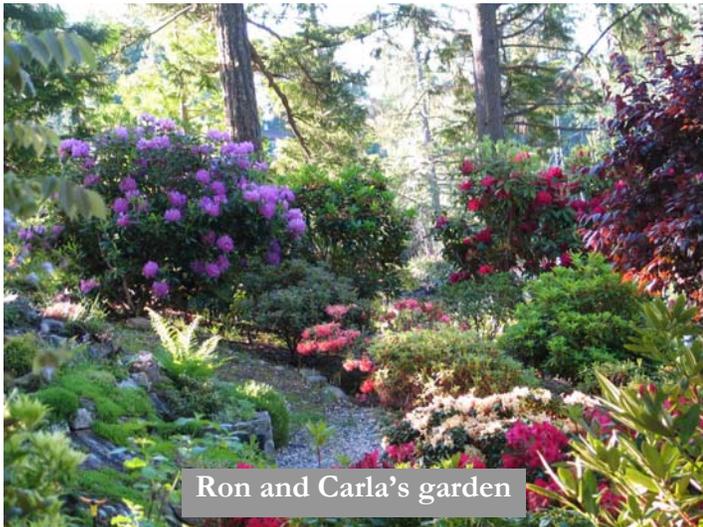
I've included a few sample photographs with this article, taken in my Pender Harbour garden this spring, in early morning light, at very low aperture settings. All have been cropped and resized in Photoshop Elements, but none has



Rhododendron 'Apricot Fantasy'

been enhanced. 'Anah Kruschke' was backlit by sunlight. 'Warlock' was manually underexposed by a full f/stop. The tiny *R. campylogynum* flowers were photographed with the macro setting, using a black umbrella to create the dark background.

Ron Knight



Ron and Carla's garden

Education Notes for 2004/2005

In September **Ron Knight** will treat us to a slide show of highlights from the Show and Sale, and in October **Todd Major** will give us tips on Garden Tool Maintenance (my secateurs spent some months in the compost pile, and are in need of restoration!).

For the rest of the season we will endeavour to meet some of your earlier requests, which included: (a) A Basic Computer Workshop Session for members wishing to learn more about using a computer to access websites; (b) Origin of Soils; (c) Chemistry of Plant & Flower Colours; (d) Composition & Improvement of Soils; (e) Light on Photosynthesis; (f) The Evolution of the Atmosphere; (g) Cycles in Nature; (h) Cuttings, Seeds and Mulching; (i) 5-minute Vignettes by Members on "My Favourite Plant" (volunteers needed!).

Other suggestions were: (j) Plant Diseases; (k) Taxonomy of Rhodos; (l) Generic Relationships; (m) Why Species?; (n) DNA Research. Thank you for suggestions.

Louis Peterson

September Program

Most VRS members know **Todd Major**, a lively personality among us. He has served over the last two years on the VRS Executive Committee. Even more important, he has conducted several of our educational sessions, and done so with extraordinary success. He is a superb teacher. Todd has strong opinions, which he is not reticent in expressing or reluctant to pursue when convinced that truth is on his side. And sometimes it is!

For the past thirteen years he has been Director of the Park and Tilford Gardens in North Vancouver, where he has been responsible for most of the garden's real development in design and the introduction of interesting and unusual plants. Moreover, he has introduced and advocated environmentally responsible methods of pest control and plant health enhancement. In addition, Todd operated the practical element of the horticultural programme at Capilano College, providing one of the best apprentice programmes in our area. Most obvious to the public, he essentially gave the Park and Tilford Gardens the look it has today, providing not only a restful, but an interesting and beautiful, spiritually enhancing respite from the usual relatively, and typically, crass atmosphere of the shopping centre to which the garden is attached. Unfortunately, because of new unenlightened and uninterested management of these special gardens, Todd is no longer in charge of them, and it is uncertain whether the high standards that he has set will continue.

But fortunately, Todd is still with the VRS. And he is still one of the most knowledgeable horticulturists around. Members who have attended his educational sessions will surely want to hear him give a full-fledged lecture at our first meeting of the activity year the evening of September 16th. His subject 'Designing your garden for dynamic canopy structure' is highly relevant to anyone trying to grow rhododendrons, or anything else, along with trees. And who doesn't want to include trees in a garden? Given the combination of speaker and subject, the lecture, as well as the canopy structure should be dynamic.

Joe Ronsley

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