



University  
of Victoria

# University Finnerty Garden Friends

## Spring 2009

DEAR FRIENDS,

Last week when I started to think about the newsletter, I looked out of the window and saw some more snow. I was discouraged, and I think that the plants in the garden felt much the same. It has been a hard winter for gardens, and many plants have suffered extensively from the cold and wind. Though it is still too early to assess all of the damage, some plants have certainly been killed, and others damaged badly. In my garden, the early rhododendrons lost many of their buds and were badly frozen, others suffered extensive leaf damage, and the camellias were also hard hit. Of course, much of this is our own fault as we like to push the boundaries and plant things that are not really hardy here. Mind you, I will now have some space in my garden for some new acquisitions. UVic's Garden Sale should do well this year!

Just as I was feeling really blue, I saw a flash of yellow and the first daffodils were coming into bloom. Mind you, there has been a lot of bloom already — hellebores, witch hazel, crocus, primroses, and many of the early rhododendrons. But somehow, they all pale when the first daffodils come into bloom—then spring seems really to be arriving! And

the first rufous hummingbird has been seen in Galiano. I put up additional feeders— there was one up all winter for the Anna's—and the banding sessions start on March 23.

We have just had a wonderful acquisition to the Finnerty Gardens in memory of Dora and Bob Kreiss. Dora Kreiss, a long time rhododendron gardener passed away in November 2008. Her family proposes subdividing the Kreiss family property near French Creek and told Carmen Varcoe that she could take as many of the rarer plants as she wished. She identified a number of very special plants. Rhonda Rose put together a hard working team of gardeners, and they collected over 100 plants — some of them very rare. The gardeners have cleared a beautiful new area in the Finnerty Gardens for them and have amended the soil and taken down some dead trees. Dora and Bob Kreiss have always been supportive of the Gardens, and these new plantings will be a wonderful memorial to them.

I hope to see many of you at UVic's Annual Plant Sale on Sunday May 3rd from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm. In the meantime, have a great spring.

*Betty Kennedy*



photo: Beth Doman

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# A Notable Collection

*Carmen Varcoe*

This past year the rhododendron society lost one of its stalwart members, Dora Kreiss. Dora and Bob Kreiss gardened for 30 years out on the West Coast on a large seaside garden. When Dora and Bob bought the property, their son, Bob said that all there was around the A-frame dwelling was dirt and native salal. Dora loved her rhododendrons, especially species rhododendrons. For many years Dora would place an order with the Rhododendron Species Foundation and as a result, her garden became one of the largest species rhododendron collections on the island. In 2000, I had the good fortune to visit the garden and make personal tours of the plants with Dora. My first impression of the garden was that the A-frame house seemed to grow out of the enormous rhododendrons. Many of the plants were totally unknown to me but the vigour and variety of the leaves was fascinating. Listening in on the conversation between Dora and Evelyn Weesjes, I knew I was privy to a great discussion about the attraction of species rhododendrons. Dora and Bob's children, who are spread all over North America, were considering putting most of the lots up for sale. As a result, many of the rhododendrons would be in jeopardy either from the developer's backhoe or neglect from unknowing new owners regarding how to water and care for them.

To see if some of these plants could be accommodated at

Finnerty, Rhonda Rose and I met with some of the Kreiss family and walked around the gardens to help them decide if this was a possible place to accommodate their plants. All of the family were impressed with the gardens and thought this would be a wonderful testament to their parents' love for rhododendrons. It was decided that most of the collection could eventually be installed in the undeveloped area west of the woodland pond. This area of the gardens has remained in a semi-wild state and would provide lots of high canopy of Douglas firs to protect large leaved rhododendrons from direct sunlight. As it is in the confines of the deer fence, the area is also more secure than elsewhere. To save and perpetuate these special rhododendrons, the Kreiss family then kindly offered the plants to Finnerty in memory of their parents. In late January, Rhonda, Judy Gordon, Evelyn Weesjes and I spent a day looking over, tagging and cataloguing the plants that could probably be moved.

The criteria for selection involved rarity of a species, and size and health of the plants. Unfortunately, several of the large mature big leaved rhododendrons were deemed too difficult to move. Cutting material was taken from some of these plants in the hope that grafting could be done to perpetuate them. When the selection process was completed, the team tagged approximately 122 plants. Of these 80 are definitely identified



Kreiss house surrounded by rhododendrons



Bob Kreiss and gardeners Peter, Jeremy & Evelyn Weesjes

as the correct species. The remaining 40 or so are a combination of some hybrids and some unnamed or mislabelled species.

The area at Finnerty needed complete clearing and soil preparation. Speed was of the essence. Rhonda and her crew set about a plan to prepare as much of the area as time permitted. Within a week or so, the bed was cleared of the ivy, blackberry and underbrush. The soil was amended. The Board was amazed at the speed with which this was carried out. The area, which had been full of underbrush and totally wild, was now a pristine beautifully cultivated bed with a perfect sheltered setting of tall conifers.

Logs and stumps were left to add to the terrain. Secondly, in early February, a work crew headed by Peter Roberts plus some of the Advisory Board members went out to the site to begin the digging process. Travel time to the Kreiss property limited the amount of work to be done each day. However, the digging up and moving of this collection was completed over a two to three week period. A large truck was rented to transport all the larger leaved rhododendrons. The enthusiasm of Rhonda, Peter and the work crew was notable. All agreed the rhododendrons being moved were of an age and stature that is rare to come by in most gardens nowadays. Fortunately, rhododendrons move well at any time of the year. Some pruning had to be done to allow for ease of transport. Care was taken to include as much of the root ball as possible.

Within a month, the whole procedure had come to fruition and most of the collection was successfully relocated in the newly prepared bed. Becoming the stewards of such plants is a big responsibility. We are so fortunate in having the manpower and financial means to be able to accommodate such a fine collection. Incorporating such a collection in Finnerty Gardens is one way to ensure these special plants will endure not only for our present enjoyment but for future lovers of rhododendrons. I am sure that Dora and Bob Kreiss and their family would be truly happy to see these plants being nurtured in their new home.

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*A chronological record of the tagging, preparation and transplanting process by the hard-working gardeners and volunteers*



Preparing the rhodos for transplanting



Large-leaved species tagged and ready for digging



Newly-prepared bed ready for Kreiss collection



Transplanted rhodos in their new home at Finnerty Gardens

# The Abkhazi Garden

*Valerie Murray*

In Victoria we are fortunate to have many wonderful public gardens to feed our spirits, each offering something unique to the visitor and yet having threads that link them.

The Abkhazi Garden is an old garden but one of the newest “public” gardens in the city.

It was created by Peggy Pemberton Carter, a British woman, born in Shanghai, and Prince Nicholas Abkhazi, the last prince of Abkhazia. Peggy and Nicholas had met in Paris in the 1920s but did not make a life together until after WWII when they found each other again, married and set down roots in Victoria in 1946. The wild lot that Peggy purchased was one of the last undeveloped lots close to downtown Victoria. No one had wanted to build on the property because it was dominated by rock, but it was this very rock that attracted Peggy. She saw the possibilities where others saw the problems and she designed the garden to fit seamlessly into the natural rocky landscape under carefully protected native Garry oaks. It is the natural landscape and the Abkhazis’ response to it that is the defining feature of the garden.

Behind a simple hornbeam hedge on Fairfield Road, Peggy and Nicholas led a very private life. An open gate, however, was a sign to friends and neighbours that visitors were welcome. From as early as 1949 horticultural societies came to visit the garden which was always a place of peace and beauty. Time has only enhanced its magic. Over the last six decades curious conifers and Japanese maples have reached a handsome maturity and the unusual rhododendrons, that the garden is known for, have grown to be magnificent trees with sculptural trunks and branches as attractive as the flowers that adorn them every spring.

The Abkhazis had both died by 1994 and five years later the garden was threatened with destruction when a townhouse development was approved for the one and a half acre property.

A campaign was begun by local residents and spearheaded by The Land Conservancy of B.C., a charitable land trust. TLC now owns and manages the garden with a small staff and a very large contingent of dedicated volunteers.

Although designated a heritage garden by the city of Victoria, the garden is not fixed in a precise moment in time. The garden has changed much since the Abkhazis began clearing bramble and ivy from the untamed site 60 years ago. As plants grew and were lost or replaced and as the tastes of the Abkhazis changed when new plants became available, their garden was different in the 1940s, the 1960s and the 1980s. What never changed, however, was the respect for the unique quality of the natural landscape and the strong design of the garden layout. What remains most important is the gardener’s response to the natural site. Abkhazi Garden is also a dynamic work of art being constantly reinterpreted and kept fresh by embracing subtle changes.

The Abkhazis were always interested in the newest and the best plants. Their mentors were many of the best plantsmen of the day. The names Albert de Mezy, Herman Vaartnou, Tony Wallner, and Al Smith are part of the history of this garden as well as the Finnerty Gardens. Some of our best new plants still come from the same generous and talented people who have donated wonderful plants to the University. Dr. Joe Harvey has gifted specially bred hellebores, paeonias and magnolias, Evelyn Weejees has given choice ferns, Norman Todd has shared rhododendrons and Carmen Varcoe has offered many wonderful woodlanders. In this way the tradition of working directly with Victoria’s best growers with an eye for the finest plants still carries on.

The evolution of the garden continues. As the garden moved from a private sanctuary to a public space, the issues of safety, accessibility and seating became important. Visitors also ex-

*“No one had wanted to build on the property because it was dominated by rock; but it was this very rock that attracted Peggy.”*



pected to see more flowers throughout the year. In the early days, Abkhazi Garden was primarily a spring garden, but many plants have now been added to extend the season of interest. The Abkhazis did not plant summer bedding and that tradition continues today. They were very aware of form and texture to see them through the months when the main flush of bloom was over. New ornamental grasses help provide these textures and offer another layer of interest. The plants that have thrived over the last sixty years are the plants that have proven to be best adapted to the site. This is an ongoing process as new plantings are chosen with attention to drought tolerance. In the most exposed areas arctostaphylos and cistus varieties are thriving and look right at home on the sunny rocks. Under the oaks, as the rhododendrons have grown in stature their canopy has been lifted to create an environment for an expanding selection of woodland companions. The understory is now filled with naturalized carpets of galanthus, eranthis, erythronium, camas and cyclamen that take their turn blooming throughout the year. Trillium and arisaema collections have been added which make visitors slow down and pay attention to detail. As at Finnerty Gardens the rhododendrons at Abkhazi have been chosen to provide a very long season of bloom. We have rhododendrons in bloom from January to the end of June. Expect to see the most bloom at the end of April or the beginning of May, but do consider visiting us at other times of the year as well as there is always something to see. We hope you have a chance to visit this year.

The garden is open to the public from March 1st to the end of September, Wednesday to Sunday. Our restaurant will be open again for tea and lunch on April 1st. Visit us at 1964 Fairfield Rd., Victoria. Call for more information 250-598-8096, or check our website at [www.abkhazi.com](http://www.abkhazi.com)



photo: Dennis Robinson



## The Ravens

*Margaret de Weese*

One for bad news,  
Two for mirth.  
Three is a wedding,  
Four is a birth.  
Five is for riches,  
Six is a thief.  
Seven, a journey,  
Eight is for grief.  
Nine is a secret,  
Ten is for sorrow.  
Eleven is for love,  
Twelve — joy for tomorrow.

ENGLISH NURSERY RHYME

When the ravens built, stick by stick, their nest above the driveway, I watched with interest and pleasure. Soon there were a pile of sticks on the ground as their construction seemed hit and miss—but they were persevering. They would fly over the pond, into the forest and beyond and return carrying sticks.

The next noticeable stage was when I became aware that my pile of winter Fir rounds and the cart filled with garden pots were becoming speckled from white splatters and it wasn't safe to walk beneath the tall Balsam!

It was relatively quiet in those times, just the whirr, whirr, whirr of large powerful wings flying overhead, and I imagined the pair were taking turns to keep the eggs warm, for it was cold and wet as you recall, while the other went for food.

Then the proud parenting started and it seemed to me, the whirring did not go far afield, but into the woods near the Balsam. Pesky squirrels and bouncing rabbits became the choice of menu for these large voracious hunters, and taken to their increasingly vocal young. Ravens were chasing squirrels from branch to branch, and seldom did the squirrels escape. Flat rabbit tails were tossed from the nest.

The noise increased daily, raucous shrieking from the demanding young ravens, until I could hardly stand it. How long would it go on?

Then one day after there seemed to be trees filled with—I am sure I counted five—glossy black ravens, it was silent. They had left for new adventures and peace was restored to the garden.

## Garden Catalogues

*Margaret de Weese*

I have to admit to a certain salivation when the plethora of seeming junk mail produces a Timber Press Catalogue because I occasionally order online. There it is—all mail thrust aside as I transport myself into the garden pictured on the front cover. I like everything about Timber Press Catalogues. Their size and shape is unusual—like their latest gardening books.

The one I just received is Fall 2008 and by the time this little article is printed, it will either be on a bookshelf or composting away in a good manner in someone's bin or garden. But, indelibly it will remain with you. That picture of a treeless valley with patches of reddish sandy soil and quilted with lovely wild looking sedums and grasses—so refreshing compared to our treed, and salaled wildernesses on Vancouver Island. A place to stroll and find out what is inside. It is from a book called Plant Driven Design: Creating Gardens That Honor Plants, Place and Spirit. Would that we might all use this as a mantra!

The other thing wonderful (and sometimes scary) is getting the latest Timber Press in an email from [newbooks@timberpress.com](mailto:newbooks@timberpress.com). It is so easy to have that credit card info down instantly and the book(s) ordered! As in the case of Wild Orchids Across North America which was being promoted and on sale with free shipping. My Calypso bulbosa in the woods and others like them across North America with colour prints on nearly every page for \$19.95. It was impossible to resist. I ordered three and within the week there they were on the doorstep.

What to do with three? But there was a reason. A generous speaker at our club meeting admitted to being passionate about Wild Orchids—so, there was the perfect “Thank-you”. And one of my B&B guests could not put it down and said he would order one when he got home (no need) and now I have the sole soft cover book which I will treasure. I may never get to see *Cypripedium californicum* in amongst the maidenhair fern at Klamath Knot, but I can visit it in my lovely book with the excited prose of finding and photographing the tiny treasure by the writer, Philip Keenan. To relive someone's excitement is practically as good as experiencing it oneself! And that is how I feel every April when I see the first pink ladyslipper in my woods.

I shall be saddened when online catalogues and costs of mailing, force the hands-on catalogues to exist only on one's hard drive!



## Upcoming Events

### The University of Victoria's Annual Plant Sale

**Sunday, May 3, 2009**—10:00 am to 1:00 pm  
McKinnon Gym on the UVic campus

Come join us at the every-popular UVic Plant Sale in support of Finnerty Gardens. You will find almost everything for your garden: alpines, annuals, perennials, aquatics, exotics, native plants, hanging baskets; shrubs, trees, herbs, vegetables and much more. For more information call (250) 721-7014.

### Vancouver Island Rock & Alpine Garden Society Show

**Friday, April 17**—1:00 pm to 8:00 pm  
**Saturday, April 18**—9:00 am to 4:00 pm (11:00 am Plant Sale)

Admission by donation  
Cadboro Bay United Church—2625 Arbutus Road

### Victoria Rhododendron Society Show and Sale

**Saturday, April 25, 2009**  
Sale—10:30 am to 3:30 pm  
Show—11:00 am to 3:30 pm

Admission by donation  
Cadboro Bay United Church 2626 Arbutus Road



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## Membership

Membership in the Friends of Finnerty Gardens is \$10 per year (single or couple). Membership includes an informative newsletter published four times a year. Funds raised through membership support enhancements within the Gardens which would not be possible otherwise.

This newsletter is also available on the University of Victoria's website at: <http://www.external.uvic.ca/gardens/>. If you would prefer to view it electronically rather than in hard copy, please let us know and we'll update our mailing list accordingly.

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