



University
of Victoria

University Finnerty Garden Friends June 2012 Newsletter

The hummingbird banders were here at 5:30 a.m. today and the temperature was 8.4°C; there was a cold breeze off the Pass, and no sun. Not a nice morning for either the hummingbirds or the banders. They caught only nine birds, in spite of the fact that the syrup eaten in 24 hours ending last evening at 8 p.m. totaled 2.5 litres. Right after the banders left, the sun came out and the birds arrived in goodly numbers to catch up. I think this will be the last year that I have banders here. They have been coming since 1997, but I am not sure that it doesn't have an effect on the birds—they certainly recognize the traps and avoid them. Interestingly, there are more birds around this year than last. By June 1 last year, I had mixed only 74 litres of syrup, this year 128 on the same date. These figures are far below the totals for 2009 and 2010.

At the moment, the whole of Galiano is suffering from one of the worst outbreaks of tent caterpillars in many years. Many of the trees are completely defoliated, especially alders and fruit trees. Even some of the oaks have been seriously attacked. I have endured comparatively little damage since the moths have to go through a good band of evergreens to reach here. I also removed all the egg cases on the smaller trees. Now, most of the caterpillars have the little wasp eggs attached.

My garden has been lovely this spring—after a relatively poor show of blooms last year, the plants, especially the rhododendrons, are making amends. I guess you could call my garden mature now, and the succession of blooms gives me great pleasure. We start with the hellebores and hamamelis in January and finish with the late rhododendrons like 'Purple Splendor'. I have had many visitors to the garden this spring and most of them comment on the perfume from the various plants. I like *Daphne odora* the best of all, although the big Hall's Honeysuckle is delightful, but has a much shorter life.

Finnerty Gardens are looking very well, and I am so glad to see the bed dedicated to Norman Todd—he has been Mr. Rhododendron in Victoria for many years. His wide range of knowledge which formed the basis for his many articles has given joy to many of us over the years. I love walking through the Gardens every chance I get and covet some of the plants while wishing that one day they will be available at the plant sale.

I hope that you all have a good summer, that the caterpillars don't come back next year and that you will visit the Gardens on a regular basis—they truly are spectacular. Carmen and the Advisory Committee do a wonderful job, and Rhonda and her crew of dedicated gardeners lavish love on it.

Betty Kennedy

Numbers up!

Judith Terry

How many people attend the UVic Plant Sale annually? People always want to know, and more than thirty years have gone by without a count. My own guess has always been about 500. I am happy to have been proved wrong: when counters were put in hand for the first time at entry and exit doors this year, they clocked 1,000 entrants (not counting volunteers).

The answer to the other even more frequent question is “How much did you make?” Our highest total was in 2007, when we grossed nearly \$65,000. Changes in the UVic accounting system account for some of the apparent decrease since then, and the totals have ranged between \$53,000 and \$59,000. As our accountant, John Gordon—who, with his wife Judy, puts in incredibly long hours to manage the figures—always points out, these are still amazing totals for only 4–5 hours of selling. This year’s gross was \$54,436, and although it does not break any records, the Plant Sale Committee is very pleased. Challenges may be out there from the great increase in other garden sales around town, for instance, as well as underlying anxiety about the global economy. There is no sign that the UVic Plant Sale is anything but a viable entity, however. One benefit of the large number of plants now propagated from Finnerty Gardens is that every plant sold realizes a total profit. It will be interesting to see what difference that makes to the numbers. Quite possibly the amount to be donated for the upkeep of Finnerty Gardens (to which UVic always directs the profit) may actually increase slightly. We have always been able to depend on a sum between \$15,000 and \$20,000.

Amongst the keenest customers at the Sale are the volunteers themselves, who come from all across the community. There is a short sale on Saturday, as a thank you for their invaluable help, and many people return year after year from a shifting list of about 200. Given how long the Sale has now been in operation, many gardens in Victoria have benefited from years of buying. My own certainly has. I wonder how many others look at their treasured plants and recall where and when they were bought. Looking around the yard for places to plant this year’s irresistible purchases (there is not a great deal of room left), I am struck with how many beloved specimens originate from the UVic Plant Sale, a



A young enthusiast. Photo: Daphne Donaldson

Magnolia Campbellii, for one. “You must have this,” said my dear friend, the hardy plant specialist Elizabeth England, as she pushed it across the table to me in the spring after we had moved into our house, thirty years ago. “It needs a sheltered spot,” she added. I planted the two foot high little pet about four feet from the house wall on the south side. Not a good idea, as I too late discovered, for what can grow into a 70 foot tree. Even so, it thrived, and with judicious pruning now stands amazingly straight with a peak higher than the roof slope. It makes a splendid show. That it is incredibly lop sided no one seems to notice.

Ferns are among my favourite plants; even more so these days since they are deer proof. Over the years I have bought

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Drought Tolerant Plants

George Radford

This spring I was rather relaxed about removing seedlings from the garden. When the water restrictions were announced I took a second look at some I was about to remove. *Malva moschata* is a heavy seeder and I always try to deadhead, however I obviously miss some. I have eliminated the pink form which has a washy pink flower and enjoy the silvery white flower form in dry corners around the garden. It is a splendid combination with the silver grey foliage and yellow flowers of verbascums. A dry, sunny slope can be gloriously furnished by seedlings of these plants.

I would add the hardy *Geranium endressi* to the planting. Without a drop of water it will quickly spread into a floriferous mound of pink flowers and be profligate with seedlings. *Geranium pratense*, *Astrantia major* and Welsh poppies—*Meconopsis cambrica*—will also happily thrive without water and indeed will often bloom more luxuriantly. The vast majority of the hardy geraniums are quite happy without water once they are established and we are fortunate local nurseries have such an excellent selection. The book *My Experience Growing Hardy Geraniums* by Phoebe Noble details growing these plants in her North Saanich garden.

The great English gardener Margery Fish describes, in one of her published notes, her problem with a part of her garden where the heavy clay turned to concrete in a drought. She thought of the 'Silvers', *Artemisia ludoviciana* and *A. 'Silver Queen'* for substance and style of foliage. The flowers were to be removed—when the plants are 12 inches high, cut them down to six inches which delays the flowering and makes dwarf, sturdy plants instead of lanky stems difficult to control. The dwarf *artemisia*s, *A. canescens* and *A. discolor*, make billowing clumps of silver, ground covering silver mats in the case of *A. pedemontana* and *A. schmidtiana*. Combine them with hardy geraniums as the artemisia flowers are of little significance.

Mrs. Fish planted several anaphalis species for winter interest of the ivory 'everlasting' flowers, particularly *A. yedoensis* with sturdy three foot stems and wide leaves which flutter in the wind, grey above and silver below. The anaphalis are root runners so be careful where you plant them. Contrast companions are the euphorbias such as *E. characias*, which, once established, can seed and supply interesting variations in



the form of the flower head. The foliage of *Tanacetum densum* subsp. *Amani* is ideal for a feathery, silvery, ground cover at a path edge or to spread over rocks in hot sunshine. Try this tanacetum as a base plant for the stems of blue grey foliage of *Othonnopsis cheirifolia* which delights in a hot dry position where it produces long lasting, fleshy, yellow daisies. The deep magenta pink flowers of *Lychnis coronaria* 'Abbotswood Rose' are good contrast and should be left to seed as the plants are short-lived perennials. In Esquimalt's Saxe Point Park, near the sea, *Lychnis coronaria* has seeded around a large plant of the golden foliaged pampas grass, a splendid example of drought tolerant planting. Nearby, billows of cistus, brachyglottis and spartium thrive and bloom for months.

A further thought from Margery Fish about the very beautiful drought tolerant *Helichrysum splendidum*: "I grow the semi-herbaceous *Clematis integrifolia* through it. The dark blue hanging flowers show up well against the silver foliage and as the clematis has very brittle stems, this is a good way to grow it."

(Gardeners should be aware that the milky substance in the Euphorbia can cause an extremely painful inflammation.)

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At the time of writing, the late George Radford—a well known and admired Victoria horticulturalist—was Garden Consultant to Government House Gardens.

One Corner of the Garden

Sarah J. Blackstone, Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts

When the garden is in bloom it is wonderful to stroll from place to place marveling at the explosion of colour and the stunning variety of the plantings. However, if you stop for even a short time and really look at one little piece of all this beauty, you may find other treasures. This spring, I was fortunate to find a bushtit nest hanging right over one of the many pathways. As a bird photographer, you couldn't dream of a better situation for setting up your tripod and getting those special shots. For several weeks, I stood in more or less the same spot hours at a time (lunch hours, after work, and weekends), taking pictures and learning more about these tiny birds. The pair came to the nest about every ten minutes with beaks full of dandelion fluff, flowers, moss, lichen or spider webs. They would be there for maybe two minutes, busy as busy, and then they were gone again. After a while I learned that they have special little calls they make to each other that let you know they are close by. While waiting to hear those calls, I had time on my hands and other bird calls echoed around me. Peering into the bushes and up in the trees, I garnered an amazing list of other birds that were sharing my corner of the garden. I saw: chestnut-sided chickadees, Anna's hummingbirds, spotted towhees, downy woodpeckers, red crossbills, a Swainson's thrush, a MacGillivray's warbler, orange-crowned warblers, brown creepers, red-breasted nuthatches, house finches, robins, white-crowned sparrows, song sparrows, fox sparrows, a Cooper's Hawk, a pileated woodpecker, crows, ravens, an osprey, a red-tailed hawk, and turkey buzzards—all without moving more than two feet in either direction on the path.

As I struggled to get the perfect shots of the bushtits, I began to suspect this was not the only nest being constructed near my observation post. I kept seeing and hearing the downy woodpeckers—particularly their alarm call. I focused on their activities and sure enough, high in a garry oak tree I found their nest hole. Their activity was frenetic for a few days, then slowed way down. It is likely they had finished their excavations and the female was now sitting on her eggs. About once an hour I saw the male quietly fly to the nest hole and disappear inside for a few minutes. He was providing food for the female while she sat tight on the clutch of eggs. Later in the month the activity was frenetic again as both the



Bushtit. Photo: Sarah J. Blackstone

male and female struggled to feed the hatchlings. Every ten minutes or so, an adult would show up with a mouth full of caterpillars, stopping only long enough to feed the brood before leaving again.

While watching the downys, I saw a strange bird perched not too far away. With the binoculars I was able to recognize that this bird was a female crossbill—a bird I had never seen before. She had a bill full of moss—another bird working away on a nest. She flew high in a pine tree and disappeared—but was soon back for more moss. While I couldn't see the nest from the ground, I had pinpointed the general location and I saw her regularly after that.

It is easy to dismiss birds we see every day and I tend to ignore the little chickadees that are so present in Victoria. Boredom sometimes leads to new discoveries however. Usually a flock of chickadees will come by the bushtit nest, noisy and active, but soon gone on to other parts of the garden. They make me smile with their antics, but I don't pay them much attention. In this case, there were two birds that didn't move on with the flock. I kept seeing them out of the corner of my eye and I started watching their activities a bit



Anna's Hummingbird. Photo: Sarah J. Blackstone



Red Crossbill. Photo: Sarah J. Blackstone

more closely. Sure enough, they were excavating a nest cavity in the same tree that already had a downy woodpecker nest in it.

An Anna's Hummingbird is often buzzing around the area as well. She hovers in an open area chasing little bugs (hummingbirds are quite good flycatchers), and she has a favorite perch where she sits and watches for other hummingbirds that might be invading her territory. If she sees another hummer she chitters loudly and zooms off to chase it away.

As an avid birdwatcher, I often walk the garden with

binoculars and camera and I have seen some amazing birds there—Cooper's hawks and great horned owls, banded pigeons and black and white warblers. My experience with the bushtits has taught me that not all the amazing birds are large or spectacular. The common residents are living a good life among the blooming rhododendrons and azaleas. All we have to do is stop and watch for a while, and they will reveal themselves and show us all their daily activities. Living completely in the moment with no electronic devices or other distractions serves as a wonderful stress relieving technique and the rewards are immense.

Plant sale, cont. from p. 2

at least a dozen, now large, robust, and extraordinarily elegant, particularly as their fronds uncurl in an incredible variety of colours. "When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush" wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins of springtime. WEEDS, indeed! He obviously gave in to a desire for alliteration and assonance: those aren't weeds, they're ferns! Japanese Painted fern with its silver, green and lilac fronds, Irish Tattling fern, green and spidery like a woven fountain, Maidenhair (the only one not left inviolate by the deer), Hart's Tongue, Dre's Dagger. Their exotic names alone are a pleasure. The Soft Shield fern has an endearing habit of dropping small offspring, which shelter close and hidden, like chicks beneath a mother hen.

Nine or ten years ago, I bid on a Silent Auction item and won it. Azalea Japonica 'Treasure' is now three to four

feet round and quite adorable. It blooms in late spring, a mass of single blossoms of the purest white, sweetly scented. I understood it to have been propagated from Finnerty Gardens, but I believe it does not now show up on the master plant list. Who knows? It would be fun to return the favour and donate a cutting.

Many buyers—and for sure the volunteers, who are a very talented bunch of gardeners—take the same sort of pleasure, not merely in buying plants (though that is a pleasure in itself), but in watching them grow to full maturity and beauty. Money changes hands, and we need to know how much and how many, and celebrate our success, but the ultimate pleasure deriving from the Sale is quite a different one. "A garden is a lovable thing, God wot!"

Tree Peonies: 3. The characters in the play

M. J. Harvey

I left off the previous article having traced the history of moutan (mudan), the tree peony from its domestication in 7th century China to its celebrity arrival in England in 1787 over a millennium later.

Written descriptions state that this plant grew well and that its double flowers—petals purple at the base fading to nearly white at the tip—were much admired. This famous plant had been specially commissioned to be purchased in Canton and carefully cosseted in a cabin on a sailing ship of the British East India Company to ensure its safe arrival and subsequent blooming in the royal garden at Kew, up-river from London. This first blooming in England was literally a royal command performance.

The Naming Mystery

This first English specimen was not only important socially—gardening is a social art—but since it was the first of its kind of a spectacular and entirely new group of peonies seen in the West, it needed a scientific name. So what was it called? Well it wasn't. Here lies a mystery and I think I have clues to the reason.

Rules of Nomenclature

To give a plant a scientific name several steps have to be followed: first a specimen must be preserved—these are normally a dried pressed sample mounted on a sheet of stiff paper and called a herbarium specimen; second the binomial name chosen must be written on the sheet and then published in a recognised journal together with a description written in Latin. Stop press news: As of 1 January 2012 descriptions may be published in English. Incidentally Kew now has the world's largest collection of herbarium specimens, these are housed in the Kew Herbarium on the grounds of Kew Gardens. I know it well.

So why was this important initial introduction not named? We are not told but my utterly wild guess is that the prospect of cutting off the flower and shoot of this most precious of all peonies for it to be dried and glued to a sheet of paper was more than the ladies of the court could stand. Men know their limits.

It was not until 1795, eight years later, that a separate

introduction, also a nursery grown plant purchased in Canton, was given a scientific name: *Paeonia suffruticosa*. This translates “little shrubby peony”. It has uniformly pink double flowers with no markings or spots on the petals.

The first specimen named in a new group achieves more than usual importance since it is taken to represent the group as a whole. Usually it will be a wild species—and I might discuss what a “species” represents later—but if by chance it turns out to be a man made hybrid. Wow, we have a problem!

Actually everyone was happy with the naming system for a couple of centuries until roughly the 1980s, but then people started to squabble. Some upstart young Turks said, “Hey, this is not a variable species, this is a bunch of garden hybrids”. Countering them the conservatives replied, “No, No, there must be wild *suffruticosa* out there, you just have to look.” The latter argument is that what we have in our gardens are varieties selected over a thousand years by gardeners from a single wild species—a process called domestication—and well known in other organisms from wheats to dogs.

The evidence needed to solve the above dilemma has accumulated slowly from the efforts of many people. Let me introduce a few of the characters who contributed clues.

Joseph Rock and Others

In the 19th century travel in the inland mountainous regions of China was difficult: lack of roads, landslides, brigands, civil wars etc. But by the early 20th century nurseries and scientists realised from the herbarium specimens collected by intrepid (crazy) Westerners what a treasure house of wonderful plants existed there.

The formidable Professor Charles Sargent of Harvard, Director of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, teamed up with the famous British nursery company Veitch to send botanists on several expeditions with the instructions: get seeds or living plants. Charles' cousin John Singer Sargent left a charcoal portrait of him.

In 1910 collectors Purdom and Farrer found a wild peony in Shensi with rose coloured flowers and ten petals. Here was the wild tree peony! It was duly named *P. suffruticosa var spontanea*—the name implying that it was the wild form.

Seeds were sent but only one germinated. Despite this early apparent success the plant that Purdom came across is not a convincing fit for the elusive ancestral species. (I owe much of this account to Bean's Trees and Shrubs.)

On the next expedition in 1914 Farrer, again accompanied by Purdom, writes in his report that he saw "White blobs" from afar and pushed through thorn-scrub for a closer look. "Nor did I need near approach to discover what it was that I was hunting, for there, balancing rarely amid the brushwood, shone out at me the huge expanded goblets of *Paeonia Moutan*, refulgent as pure snow and fragrant as heavenly Roses. It grew tall and thin and stately, each plant with two or three thin, upstanding wands tipped by the swaying burden of a single upright bloom with a heart of gold, each stainless petal flamed at the base with a clear and definite feathered blotch of maroon." I could not describe it better but Farrer failed to collect a specimen nor did he find seeds. Aaargh!

Eleven years later the Austrian born collector Joseph Rock spent a year collecting specimens and seeds using the great Choni Lamasery in SW Kansu (Gansu) as his base. Growing in a garden at the lamasery was a peony corresponding exactly to Farrer's description—a photograph still exists. The monks told Rock that the plants had been gathered in the mountains. Rock was able to collect numerous seeds and sent them to the Arnold Arboretum from where Sargent distributed them to various botanic gardens to improve the chance that some would grow. This was in 1926.

The seeds that Rock collected germinated and many grew well and were propagated. For instance a plant started in Canada was sent in 1936 to Sir Frederick Stern who grew it in his famous garden at Highdown, Worthing near Brighton. This flowered in 1938 and set the standard by which the British viewed it.

Rock's peony corresponds in description largely to an earlier, nursery derived plant sent to England over a century earlier in 1806 and named *P. papaveracea*—the poppy flowered peony. This name may have to be revived since one rule of nomenclature states that the earliest correctly published name is to be used. Meanwhile Rock's peony is variously named *P. rockii*, *P. suffruticosa subspecies rockii*, *P. suffruticosa var. rockii* or *P. Gansu Group 'Highdown'*. The latter is from Britain and takes the position that their plant is a hybrid. I shall continue to use the epithet *rockii* until told to stop.

The 20th century was the most turbulent and bloodiest in history. Following Rock's 1926 collection of seeds there

were the Depression, World War II, the Chinese Revolution and the Cold War. These events conspired to prevent any new material of *rockii* from reaching the West until the 1990s following the end of the Cold War, after which the Chinese government gradually permitted conducted tours into the interior. Allowing time for seeds to germinate and produce flowering plants, there was an extraordinary seventy years before a re evaluation was possible of what *rockii* really represented.

Josef Halda, Scientist, Traditionalist, Seed Merchant

I got my first *rockii* from Josef Halda via the seed list he publishes, the existence of which was drawn to my attention by Carmen Varcoe, another peony enthusiast. Josef comes across as a character. I wouldn't call him a rogue but let's say he combines being an explorer with being an enthusiastic free enterpriser from the Czech Republic. When I met him at a Hardy Plant Meeting in the 1990s he was selling packets of seeds collected from an extraordinarily large region of the central Asian republics and China. I congratulated him on getting seeds from such difficult places. He looked at me and said, "The trouble with you English is you don't know how to bribe."

Halda wrote a book on peonies with James Waddick contributing notes on their cultivation and Halda's wife Jamila providing illustrations. This is a fascinating and well researched book which provides a good scientific survey of both the tree and deciduous species, but it is very conservative in the names applied to the tree peonies. In particular Halda takes the conventional view that the name *suffruticosa* must be kept and given centre stage. The names of plants discovered later then all start with *suffruticosa* and the later epithets are added on. This makes for tediously long names – for instance a peony I am particularly interested in becomes *Paeonia suffruticosa subspecies rockii variety linyanshanii*. It is hard to obtain labels long enough.

Gian Lupo Osti, Company Director, Gardener

Osti is an Italian who since boyhood has been fascinated by wandering in the woods and mountains and finding spectacular plants especially peonies. With no scientific training he has been growing peonies in his garden while following his career as a director of several large corporations. In 1975 as a result of a spat over corporate strategy he resigned his posts and decided to spend full time on botanical exploration.

Tree Peonies, cont.

Not knowing the scientific problems involved with tree peonies he first consulted an expert at Kew but was ticked off by the overly dismissive attitude afforded a non scientist. Not being beholden to the Rule of Priority and the Western obsession with sticking to the name *suffruticosa*, he decided to travel to China and ask the Chinese what they had found. He made two trips, one in 1994 another in 1999 and took along a professional photographer on each. Wanting to see wild peonies in their native mountain habitats he initially came up against bureaucratic stone walling along the line of: "Travel is difficult, the roads are bad, there are no hotels, you will be uncomfortable, and we have all the peonies you need to see in our gardens". He got into the mountains.

Osti wrote a book about his experiences with peonies. The Italian version came out in 1997, the English translation in 1999. The book is both a thing of beauty and drives me crazy. The photographs are wonderful but the writing is a loose travelogue that needed a good editor and lacks an index. At the back is a summary of fairly current thinking on what the original wild species were and there is a collection of photographs of some of the cultivars in commerce.

Hong Tau, Forest Scientist

Professor Hong is based at the Academy of Forestry and in his youth had been an assistant to an American professor of botany at Nanking University. He speaks English, knows the mountains and with colleagues has seen the wild moutan species. Hong is the go to person for knowledge about Chinese tree peonies. Contacted by Mr. Osti he proved to be the ideal guide and mentor. What came out of their association will be the subject of the next article.

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Submit Articles

All Friends of Finnerty Gardens — including present and past Members of the Advisory Board — are invited to submit articles of interest to horticulturists for publication in the Newsletter. The purpose is to maintain the eclectic range of horticultural interests that the Newsletter has espoused in recent years.

Ideally, articles should be of 500–1,000 words in length, and should be emailed to the editor as soon as they are ready. When articles are accepted, they will be published as quickly as space becomes available. Since the editor is an English professor rather than a horticulturist, authors must hold themselves responsible for the accuracy of the horticultural content.

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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 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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