



University
of Victoria

University Finnerty Garden Friends July 2011 Newsletter

Dear Friends, what a year it has been with the weather! In my last letter to you, I noted that we were away behind in the amount of rainfall—not so now. It has been the wettest spring I ever remember. And the coldest! Here on Galiano we are yet to have a day where the temperature has reached 20C. The slow cold, wet, spring has resulted in the greatest crop of grass since I have been here. When the rhododendrons came into bloom, they stayed in bloom for several weeks. The hellebores are still in bloom and the daffodils lasted for over a month. On the other hand, the vegetable garden, apart from the lettuce and green onions, is looking very sad and the pole beans are pathetic. I grew the beans in the house. When they became too large, I had to plant them outside. They immediately went into a decline, and are only just now starting to show some signs of life. The rhubarb is almost big enough to log!

The hummingbirds were very slow to arrive, and, in fact, their numbers have just now shown signs of prosperity. Last year by this time, I had mixed up 180 litres of syrup, this year 62 litres. The banders caught a female anna today, so they are slowly moving onto the island. I have yet to see a male. I am still feeding the raven pair that live near here, and this year once again they have had a family—so far I have heard two

young, but there may be more. They keep the crows away, which, I think, aids the nesting song birds. And the ravens are fascinating companions. It has taken them several years, but they now are fairly tame and carry on long conversations with me when I am working in the garden. And, of course, I talk to them.

I visited the Plant Sale this year, and was so pleased to see so many old friends. As is usual, the gymnasium looked beautiful, and there were some very interesting plants for sale. The plants from Finnerty were first rate, and augmented the commercial offerings. The total sales were down a bit from last year, but were still well over \$50,000. We use the money for new plants and new developments in the Finnerty Gardens. As you all know, gardens get tired, plants need replacing and beds need redesigning as the basic planting of rhododendrons grows. Carmen and her team do a fabulous job.

On June 24, the new alpine bed in memory of Ian McTaggart Cowan was officially opened. Ian was a wonderful man, and his contributions to the Gardens will always be remembered.

Betty Kennedy

Tour of Finnerty Gardens

Carmen Varcoe

On a spring smile day on the last day of May, Finnerty Gardens was visited by the University of Victoria's Board of Governors. Accompanying them were Tom Smith, Bentley Sly, Rhonda Rose and Carmen Varcoe.

Upon arriving at the Chapel, all remarked on the spicy scent—what was it? *Magnolia sieboldii* was in full bloom to the right of the entrance gate. On the other side of the entrance was the magnificent *Davidia involucrata* (the Handkerchief Tree) in all its glory. This is just one of the trees that was donated to the gardens by David Lam, the former Lieutenant Governor.

Tom mentioned the collaborative process of the garden staff with the Advisory Board, Bentley outlined to the Board the history of the Finnerty Gardens and how it goes back to its origins in India, Lake Cowichan and Royston.

Rhonda showed the Board some of the eye catching specimens in the garden. To begin with, Rhododendron Mrs. Josephine Firth was still looking quite lovely. Across the path, they all remarked on the great stand of Timber Bamboo that continues to draw attention.

Rhonda and Carmen showed them the latest developments in the Alpine Bed and mentioned the upcoming dedication ceremony in Ian McTaggart-Cowan's memory. This bed has just recently been overhauled and was looking most attractive with dwarf conifers, rhododendrons and ground covers all very suitable for the theme of the bed.

Some of the plant collections were also shown to the group to demonstrate how donations have been placed in the gardens. They understood the need for acknowledgement of such donations but not necessarily all having plaques or signs.



The *Picea likiangensis* with its bright purple red new cones was stunning in the meadow. It even evoked the remark: “never seen anything like this before!”

Further along the path the Board was shown the Stumpery, the newest area to be developed in the garden. Rhonda pointed out that it really was a reclamation project—an area not previously cultivated combined with stumps that the University already had. Carmen noted here that this stumpery is looking more developed than a recent one seen in the Rhododendron Species Foundation Garden in Seattle.

Rhonda mentioned that the Finnerty Gardens, like anywhere, suffer losses due to “old age”, storm damage and wet winter soils. Garry Oaks that have always been in the gardens have gradually been disappearing. Perhaps it’s just that their life span has come to an end?

So it is always necessary to be sourcing out new plants and looking at ways to enhance the gardens. One of the major roles of the Advisory Board is to help with this aspect and as a result, the Finnerty Gardens have become much more than a collection of rhododendrons. A new *Acer conspicuum* ‘Phoenix’ has been planted in an area that was surrounded with Garry Oaks. It’s a wonderful bright red barked maple, especially stunning in winter.

The Board was then shown the large leaved Rhododendron Bed and Rhonda mentioned the generosity of Herman Vaartnou as he was largely responsible for the collection of these exotic looking plants.

Rhonda and Carmen then mentioned the history behind the Kreiss Collection. Rhonda outlined the project and how it all came to fruition. Comments such as: “They look like they have always been here” were heard. It was important to note that a price tag cannot be put on such plants as they are so rare and so mature. Further along the path, the Board was introduced to Jeremy Quinn, one of the gardeners who is responsible for keeping the gardens so well cared for, whatever the season.

Finally, the Board was shown the Hydrangea Collection and the reasoning behind putting it near the Chapel as it afforded some views from inside. At the end of the tour it

was stressed by Carmen that the Finnerty Gardens serve a unique role on campus as they are the only facility that does not have a connection to any faculty. So in one sense they do not have an educational component. However, it was quickly pointed out by one of the Board members that it serves as a place to come to wind down, reload or simply hang out. Rhonda also pointed out that many students use the gardens as a place to practice music, art etc.

So the Finnerty Gardens serve a vital need on campus, as they provide a beautiful sanctuary for everyone both on campus and in the community.



The Lazy Gardener—4

Perennials and Conclusions

M.J. Harvey



The aim of the lazy gardener is to have a stable mixture of plants and hardscaping that does not change dramatically from year to year. That much is obvious but in practice it is a hard state to achieve. I was intending to end this series with a long list of well-behaved perennials, i.e. those that are tidy, noncreeping and nonseeding, but then I thought no, that would be boring and you can get it on the internet anyway—or so I assume, not having a computer. So here are a few thoughts uninfluenced by Wikipedia beginning with a survey of various types of stable gardens.

'Natural' Gardens

One method of achieving stability is to plant tough, local species that look after themselves. In more shady areas of Vancouver Island a closely planted array of our native sword fern, *Polystichum munitum*, *Mahonia aquifolium*, flowering currant and snowberry will fill the bill and this approach is being taken by some municipalities for landscaping roadside banks. It certainly works, but to keen gardeners it is really, really boring.

Meadow Gardens

An alternative local approach to the above is the 'meadow', which in British Columbia can be an alternative form of native species garden since we have been blessed with some world-admired indigenous plants. A few municipalities use this to preserve some of our local sites which naturally have a spring flora of bulbs and herbs in our low-rainfall southern

island areas. Garry oak meadow is the local name for this habitat.

Examples of this use of the native flora are the higher part of Beacon Hill Park, and Costain Green—a triangular area at the intersection of Beach Drive and Midland Road. In addition the graveyard of the old St. Mary's Church on Metchosin Road just before the intersection with Happy Valley Road has a phenomenal spring display of shooting star, fawn lily and camas.

The invasion of introduced plants is largely controlled by never watering and mowing everything off once the native plants have seeded. The result of this management system is an utterly charming couple of months followed by a brown, desiccated patch of land for the summer drought period. This is fine for gardeners with large gardens where a portion can be so put aside, but for most people with small lots to have nothing in flower during the summer is not an option.

Command Gardens

Yet another style of gardening is the pseudoequilibrium planting. These never change from year to year but only because they are replanted twice a year. I call these command gardens (borrowing the term from the economists).

Included in command gardens are the carpet beds of my youth which consisted of closely planted dwarf herbs of contrasting foliage colours often spelling out the name of the town or some motto. They reached their peak in the 'floral clock', complete with hidden mechanism to move

the hands. They were a specialty along now longabandoned British seaside promenades—swept away by the blast from jet planes.

Locally we have many municipalities planting command gardens along roads and at intersections for reasons of civic pride and for traffic calming. Bulbs and hardy annuals are used for the spring display and a bizarre mixture of species including banana plants, angels' trumpets, cannas, *Tibouchina*, salvias and snapdragons for summer. These are of course unstable associations but since they only have to last a few months that is not a consideration.

Don't get me wrong—I love seeing brilliant displays along our roads; they cheer everyone up and a great deal of creative thought goes into their design. But they take a lot of work or, in other words, they are expensive, and just about the opposite of our desired lazy garden.

Plantless and Few Plant Garden

In the first of this series of articles, I mentioned the over 600-year-old Zen garden Ryoan ji at Kyoto. Ryoan ji has managed to maintain its serenity all that time, but only at the expense of eliminating plants. This does not sit entirely well with me or most of my friends—admired but not copied. Other Zen gardens of course have some plants and one local Zentype garden may be seen at the lower part of Glendale Gardens and Woodland in Saanich.

Islamic gardens represent paradise, which of course is a garden, and rely on usually geometric paved pathways, streams and canals with usually clipped trees as the plant component. Historic examples extend from Moorish Spain to Mughal India. China has peng jing gardens of carefully clipped trees together with rocks representing mountain landscapes—a few contain only carefully chosen rocks. Then of course Europe evolved the topiary garden of shaped yew and box trees either with or without flower beds. Levens in the north of England is my favorite.

The Plantsperson's Garden

There is something in the psychology of certain gardeners in which the hunt for and acquisition of rare plants satisfies some deep craving. Psychologists would probably hypothesize that it is the sublimation of the primitive urge to find food. This spring Ian Back organized a bus tour for members of the Victoria Horticultural Society to visit mainland nurseries purveying unusual plants. These are jolly trips and for the real nutters among us the mere sight of a

name on a label releases sufficient serotonin, or whichever neurotransmitter gardeners have, to reduce us to automatons or zombies: "Must have! Must have!" (For me it was *Pseudocystonema sinensis* which will go to Abkhazi Garden).

Zone Denial and Heartbreak Plants

Zone denial is attempting to grow plants that are not hardy for the site. This is encouraged by specialist nurseries which enjoy supplying replacements when the need arises—it is a good business model.

Zones 8 and 9 are the tricky levels of hardiness for us, 10 is for tropicals which have to be brought inside during the winters—these latter include virtually all the cacti and succulents although I note that BC has two native prickly pears one of which occurs on Vancouver Island.

A few difficult species will persist if they reach a sufficiently large size to take them over an inclement period. The fan palm *Trachycarpus fortunei* and the Chilean bell flower *Lapageria* (the Chilean national flower) are in this category. Oak Bay municipality used to run an annual palm tree count but gave up after finding there was no competition. I think they have more palm trees than the rest of Canada put together. Mature fan palms have weathered some extremely cold outflow winds coming from the mainland.

Tree ferns seem fated to die. A good *Dicksonia* will survive for a few years but even well-wrapped for the winter they all seem to go eventually. My advice? Grow in a big tub and wheel it indoors for the winter. The same for 'hardy' bananas.

Some plants die for reasons other than temperature. The hardiness zone system using minimum winter temperature is a crude measure at best. For instance some Chinese and Japanese regions have cool, almost dry winters with abundant summer rains. As a result some plants dislike our dry summers even though they are nominally Zone 6 or 7. Included are the *Asiatic Cypripediums*, *Hepaticas*, *Podophyllums* and the *Glaucidium* I really, really want to grow.

I am reminded of Al Smith's wonderful shows of *Pleione* orchids which he protects over winter with large sheets of glass (old automobile windshields) removing them in time for the spring blooming.

Lazy gardeners must remember that they are not interior designers. You may want a particular plant in a particular site because it would look really nice. No! To maintain a

slowgrowing plant for many years its requirements come first. Gardening books are vague in the extreme about what these requirements are. The rule is: "Ask the plant." The trouble is they don't talk much and one has to deduce their answer when they thrive or die. Friends can help in this. For instance I mentioned that I had a nice sunny southfacing wall for a Zone 9 *Lapageria*. "No! No!" Judith said, "The leaves burn in the sun, they need some shade." Many of the more delightful herbs have particular requirements for humus, soil pH (no lime for some), shade, wind and summer moisture. Getting these just so is the secret to success—but tricky.

Final Words

Certain plants are pretty surefire for our purpose of not seeding or spreading and, importantly, surviving. Early in the year are spring bulbs and hellebores. Most hellebores set seed too efficiently except for the *H. xhybridus* doubles, but the modern hybrids involving the Christmas rose are both sterile and vigorous. To obtain mine in the '90s, I had to resort to hand pollination but once commerce caught up with tissue propagation every supermarket and hardware store began selling them. Freely available are the *H. xericsmithii* hybrids with white and pinkyred tinted flowers but my money goes on the *H. xnigercors* crosses (*niger* x *argutifloius*) which look like Christmas roses on steroids with taller, multiflowered racemes. One I noticed in spring was named 'White Beauty.'

The genus *Trillium* has almost no faults. The first to flower and topnotch is our local *T. ovatum* but for longerlasting blooms go for the subgenus with the sessile flowers. As I write the deep red *T. kurabayashii* is showing well in Abkhazi Garden; it was not named until 1972 and honours the Japanese researcher who recognized that it was different. (Do Californians only go into the woods to smoke pot?)

Peonies are among my favorite early summer plants and I could not exist without the wild tree peony *P. rockii* with its black blotched white flowers. However, I scorn the monstrous yellow tree peony, *P. ludlowii* (lutea) and its deep red relative *P. delavayi*. These get sold cheaply at plant sales because the seed is easy to germinate but honestly, go for

quality. Of the delavayi group only *P. potaninii* of modest size and orange flowers is worth garden space. I am currently attempting to cross it with the largeflowered species. Among the deciduous peonies there are many entrancing species and hybrids. Some of my own hybrids at Abkhazi attract attention especially *mlokosewitschi* x *obovata*.

For foliage interest the dwarf Japanese maples are unparalleled, you need entire and cutleaved forms in red and greenleaved varieties. For leaf interest in shady places the large ferns *Dryopteris crassirhizoma* and *wallichiana* are statuesque and *Syneilesis* provides curiously cut leaves.

Postscript

The carefree garden is an illusion, something we think we want but if we got it we would be dissatisfied. Lazy gardeners exist only indoors, in winter, in our minds. The moment you step out of the house the carefree garden fades like a dream; there is always something to be done, that is, after all, why we garden. No gardener is lazy but we should all dream: "I know a bank where the wild thyme grows."



UVic Plant Sale 2011

Judith Terry

On the first of May, well past its thirtieth birthday, the Plant Sale was its usual wonderful self. Growing up, as it were, it has developed a character, and is so well-established in the hearts and minds of Victoria's gardeners, that it is associated by many with the annual spring dash to beautify their gardens. And, since buying at the Sale also enhances one of UVic's mostloved contributions to the city, Finnerty Gardens, it's a good thing all round.

It is a relief to turn back to the simplicity of growing things from the complications of the world out there, and that is perhaps why it remains hard not to find a smiling face amongst the volunteers, officially 126 this year. There is, of course, a number at least double that, who contribute to the Sale's success: the members of the Finnerty Gardens Advisory Board, the Plant Sale Committee, the ground crew which undertakes the heavy labour of setting up and taking down. UVic certainly puts itself enthusiastically behind the Plant Sale, and the university community contributes hours of work to get the McKinnon gym functioning for this rather unusual use. The Bookstore helps out with point-of-sale machines (and an expert to explain them); cabling, electrical and network connections are installed by Rob McLeod (Facilities Management) and Ryan Pollak (Network Services); rubber matting to protect the gym floor is provided and laid by Athletics and Recreation, whose staff stand by to lock and unlock the doors early and late, and offer brooms, brushes and know-how. A complete list of

people and departments upon whose help the Sale depends would be very long indeed. Part of the fun is that, despite inevitable changes amongst those involved, there are enough returning helpers to make the three days of operation a pleasant exercise in saying hello to folk whom one has not seen for a twelvemonth.

The weather was damp and not very warm this year, and old hands looked back, wishfully and in amazement, at the times, several years running, when the doors of the gym had to be thrown wide to let in a breeze to cool off plants and humans. In such days, watering cans were as necessary as shoeboxes for the takings. But at least it did not rain on the queue waiting for the ten o'clock start, and there were people lined up all the way round to the Bookstore.

There is no fool-proof way to count how many attend, although we usually light upon 500 as a reasonable guess. The consensus was that there were somewhat fewer this year. Reasons? The TC's 10K run was on; the weather had held back the plants; the economy is still worrisome etc. All factors must be considered, and the Committee checks and discusses, revises and tweaks, to make sure the Sale does not rest on its laurels. But such things make up one element only in a favourite event which brings town and gown together very pleasantly. In any case, total sales, if not a record, were a healthy \$55,656. Everyone went to work with a will, as they always do, and left on Sunday afternoon tired for sure, but feeling the effort well worth it.



McKinnon Gym comes alive for the Plant Sale.



Rhododendron coordinator Dean Goard checks the stock before the sale.

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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The information presented and the opinions expressed by the authors in this newsletter are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the University of Victoria or any employee thereof.

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