



University
of Victoria

University Finnerty Garden Friends

April 2012 Newsletter

Dear Friends, our wonderful editor, Sam, starts early getting us organized for the next issue—this is being written for the April issue—and I have just finished reading the January issue! Sam makes sure we keep our noses to the grindstone! And talking of our editor, he turns 90 in March and I would like to say “bless you” and to thank him for the wonderful contribution he has made to the Garden Friends. He is a very special person.

Now I am trying to decide whether spring is here or whether we will have a final cold spell. My Galiano garden is well ahead with many plants in bloom. It has been a very good year for hamamelis—my H. ‘Pallida’ has been blooming since Christmas and gives me pleasure every time I sit down to eat a meal. H. ‘Arnold Promise’ is in full bloom and fills the back garden with scent—it makes even pulling weeds a pleasant occupation. This has been a good hellebore year, and I always look forward each spring to the first blooming of the young seedlings. I now have two doubles—a dark purple and a paler pink lilac—both are lovely. And there are still more of the young ones yet to bloom. Some of the rhododendrons have been blooming spasmodically since November and are now getting their main spring blooming organized—I think particularly of ‘*Rosamundi*’ (which as Harold Greer maintains, should really be ‘Christmas Cheer’). The early crocus and the snowdrops make bright patches of colour and the *Anemone blanda* are just starting to bloom. The clumps of yellow English

primroses are at their best and I expect to find the early daffodils showing yellow when I get back to the island.

I have been weeding and cleaning out the vegetable garden and was very surprised to find that the lettuce in open beds had survived the cold weather. And I am still eating my own potatoes, carrots, beets, leeks, squash and chard. Truly we do live in a wonderful part of the world. Now I am planning where things will go this year and shortly will be trying very early sowings of the hardier vegetables. And the rhubarb is up and is, I am sure, relishing its new top dressing of well rotted horse manure.

As you know, I do all my garden watering using water from the roofs which I store in tanks placed around the property—every building has its collection of tanks. This year is the first I can remember when a number of the tanks are still empty half-way through February. It has been a very dry winter and that spells problems for people on wells. Some of the island aquifers will be in trouble, and that is a problem because the salt water can invade wells when the pressure in the aquifer is allowed to drop. I use my well only for house usage and all my garden watering is done with collected water.

Don't forget the giant Plant Sale at UVic in May—look for the splendid collection of plants grown on from some of Finnerty's prize possessions. I hope to see you there.

Betty Kennedy

Tree Peonies: 2. The large flowered group

M.J. Harvey

The large flowered tree peonies are the most decorative and prized of all the peonies but they are surrounded by an aura of mystery and complexity in the West largely because of some historic misunderstandings made at the time when they were first introduced into Britain.

In addition, the uncertainty surrounding the 'correct' scientific names has been further exacerbated by the obstinacy of some Western taxonomists in sticking to a very narrow interpretation of the rules of nomenclature. A further complication is that exploration and new information was cut off from the West for over 60 years by the sequence of World War 2, the Chinese Revolution and the Cold War. This prevented the reassessment that the group so urgently needed. We were left to reshuffle fragmentary information gathered in the 1920s and '30s and stare at the inadequate plant material that was in gardens.

It was not until 1990, following the end of the Cold War that travel restrictions were relaxed permitting travel in the interior mountains of China. As a result there is now possible a modern synthesis of how the tree peonies arose and what their origins were. In this the Chinese have largely led the way.

I shall attempt a little historic tour of peony history in the following two or three articles, describing the early events of their initial introduction into cultivation in 7th century China; their subsequent spread and popularity; the urgency that the English put into getting living specimens to 18th century Britain; the wild species that have been recognised so far; and finally some of the genetic factors which made the original wild plants auto hybridise as soon as they were dug up and grown in the early Chinese gardens. I shall also point out that present day gardeners need a little genetic knowledge when growing plants from seed to avoid the error of assuming that the seedlings will resemble the seed parent. It ain't necessarily so! I shall show how to avoid these problems.

Moutan—The Early History in China

It is most likely that the earliest use of tree peonies in China was as a component of herbal medicines. The plants are dug up, the roots dried and slices incorporated into the mixtures

used to brew medicinal teas. The Chinese name for tree peonies is moutan and this name appears to date from very ancient times. The two character name translates as 'male red (flower)'. Moutan is still used in Chinese herbal medicine.

The Tang dynasty, 618–907 A.D., had its initial centre in the central mountains and provided the first records of the cultivation of tree peonies. The Tang emperors conquered land from the local tribes resulting in a period of stability and wealth (at least for the emperor and court). This produced a golden age when music, poetry and other arts flourished. By contrast Europe was in the Dark Ages.

Palaces were built for the emperor and around them fine gardens were developed. It can be safely assumed that wild peonies were dug up from the surrounding hills and grown in these gardens. Now gardeners are a curious and competitive bunch and it can also be assumed that this applied in ancient times. Plants which were rare or unusual would have been at a premium and competed for. Thus collectors would have ranged far and wide over the mountains searching for that something different.

Plants with multiple petals attract attention and would have been in demand, unusual colours also. Eventually seedlings from garden plants would have been raised to supply a greater quantity of plants and many of these seedlings would have been hybrids between the different geographical sources of peonies now planted side by side in the gardens.

I am not implying that the Chinese were great geneticists, the hybrids arise automatically when plants from differing populations are grown next to each other. I shall discuss the mechanism (self incompatibility) later, it controls much of what happens in peonies. What the gardeners of the time had, was what we would now call a hybrid swarm from which they were able to select the best seedlings with larger, more colourful and more double flowers. They did not have to know this but in hindsight, it enables us to explain the rapid rise of moutan cultivation in China.

Over time the royal court relocated to a more easterly region taking moutan culture and the prestige associated with it—a prestige that peonies have never lost in China. The first

treatise and catalogue on the moutan was written in the 11th century, many forms were described and moutan cultivation became widespread. With the spread of Zen Buddhism to Japan the moutan (rendered 'botan') was eagerly accepted and breeding in Japan developed slightly differently there, although the old idea that the Chinese preferred heavy double flowers and the Japanese lighter more open blooms is not true. The Chinese called tree peonies Hua Wang—the King of Flowers—and images were widely used on scrolls, porcelain, bronzes and silk. The deciduous peonies were downgraded as the King's ministers. It was through the China trade that the Europeans first learnt of the existence and beauty of the tree peonies.

The majority of tree peonies in North America are derived from Japanese stock because of a lack of trade with China during the Cold War. There is also a current ban on plants from China from a fear of the introduction of plant diseases.

The First Tree Peony in England

The English, a nation of gardeners, knew about tree peonies; after all, the flowers were displayed on the expensive porcelain, scrolls, etc., that were so highly prized by their owners. If only, if only they could get hold of a living plant, but there were none. The problem was in maritime trade. We are talking 18th century. Ships sailed regularly to the Far East, but they were slow. Plants kept in the hold rotted from the heat and humidity; plants on deck died from salt spray and heat. This was before the development of the high speed clipper ships and the invention of the Wardian case (a mini greenhouse).

Halfway between London and Hampton Court Palace on a bend in the River Thames is a small boat landing at a former royal deer park. It is suggested that the French for "landing"—quai, quay pronounced "key" was corrupted to Kew. Contrariwise, Oxford Place Names prosaically has it named for John De Caiho, Sheriff of London 1201.

Whatever the origin of its name, Kew became a place for the British royals to relax, have picnics, get away from the city and, more pertinently, garden. King George III was probably



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the most intelligent monarch the British ever had and was interested in science and exploration. One of his advisors was Sir Joseph Banks who had accompanied James Cook on a voyage to chart Newfoundland and later he was on the Endeavour during Cook's first voyage round the world, 1768–71, to observe the transit of Venus from Tahiti (needed to calculate the distance of the Earth from the Sun). Banks was later President of the Royal Society for over 40 years.

Britain, one could say, was in its own Golden age—Handel, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Wedgwood—and was developing a taste for taking over other people's countries. Banks was in the confidence of the royal court and, with encouragement, proceeded to build up Kew as a botanic garden, which it has continued to be to this day.

George III was not particularly interested in plants, his interests were in improved farming techniques—hence "Farmer George"—and he kept a flock of merino sheep, smuggled out of Spain, on his farm across the road. But the ladies were very much into plants (and building follies) and gave the greatest encouragement to Sir Joseph to obtain rare

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Clematis in the garden

George Radford

The foliage of *Clematis cirrhosa* 'Freckles' is elegant all winter, the foundation of green colour overlaid with bronze. I regularly pass the stump of a much lamented *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* which was the host for the clematis until it died of Phytophthora Root Rot. The stump is now almost concealed by the clematis and on a cold February day the vines hanging down the stump were decorated with creamy yellow flowers like pendant lampshades with wine red spots inside.

This is often the joy of clematis, to enhance or conceal a plant or feature in the landscape. It is one of a family of plants, the Ranunculaceae, which are gloriously floriferous and vigorously hardy in our climate. Sometimes we may resent the buttercup which threatens to take over the lawn and love it when we see a golden swath of it in a farmer's field.

Spring is the time to look around your garden and visualize the addition of a clematis or two or three. Local nurseries will have an excellent selection, usually in gallon pots but also in small cardboard containers. In my own experience these small plants can grow with great vitality and indeed surpass a one gallon pot which has had its roots disturbed during planting.

I looked one day at an old flowering cherry, its branches spread over a flower bed like a sheltering umbrella. Radiant with white flowers in spring, I thought it could be an excellent host for the very choice *C. rehderiana* which blooms late summer to fall. Panicles of primrose yellow bells would cascade from the cherry branches, scenting the air with cowslip-like fragrance.

C. texensis 'Duchess of Albany' has climbed to the top of the old hawthorn in a corner of my garden, displaying its waxy tulip like pink flowers all summer. I visit a garden where a mature blue spruce is an important focal point and suggested the pink clematis flowers would be highlighted by the blue foliage of the spruce. This led to consideration of the bare lower trunk of the spruce and *C. x jouiniana*, a scrambler, not a climber, with trusses of milky blue, fragrant flowers. Tie its vines to the tree trunk and allow some vines to spread around the base. As a further addition for colour echo,

plant the herbaceous *C. heracleifolia davidiana* with china blue hyacinth flowers. This clematis takes several years to establish a woody root stock but is worth the wait.

I first admired semi herbaceous *C. x durandii* trained over a shrub at Sissinghurst in England, and planted one at the base of a pieris but growth was poor.

Recently I looked at a venerable *Cornus mas* in full flower. It is very beautiful with lichen patches on the branches. If the stems of *C. x durandii* were tied to the branches of the cornus, the deep purple flowers would be a show in September. In front, a colour echo would be herbaceous *C. integrifolia* with indigo blue flowers.

If you are fortunate to have an established eleagnus with golden variegated foliage, plant the choice *C. viticella* 'Purpurea Plena Elegans' with fully double, dense rosette flowers of softest murrey purple, long flowering. It is also a good companion for *Hydrangea paniculata*.

Double clematis flowers are among the choicest of nature's beauties. Many of us have evergreen *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus* or *C. impressus* in our gardens. Plant the large flowered hybrid clematis 'Vyvyan Pennell' to display, among the glossy ceanothus foliage, its double flowers with rich lilac outer sepals and bluer inner ones.

The flowers of *C. texensis* 'Gravetye Beauty' are a brilliant red and beautifully displayed over the foliage of a variegated holly.

C. 'Nelly Moser' is a large flowered hybrid. It is a rich lilac rose with a central white stripe to each segment and purplish anthers, very striking but the flowers fade, so plant, if you can, to avoid hot afternoon sun.

The above are just a few suggestions. Look around your garden for a place to plant at least one of these beautiful clematis.

This article, like "Spring Is in the Air" later in the newsletter, is reprinted with permission from *V.H.S. Gardenry*. At the time of writing, the late George Radford—a well known and admired Victoria horticulturalist—was Garden Consultant to Government House Gardens.

Picture gallery

Beth Doman

On January 17, a dusting of snow fell on campus, followed by a brief period of sunshine. This created an opportunity for me to run out with our new Canon DSLR. Of course I ended up, as I always do, in Finnerty Gardens.



Spring is in the air!

George Radford

Spring is in the air, daffodils bloom over carpets of crocus. The old flowering plum is a cloud of pink tinged white flowers, soon to be succeeded by copper shaded purple leaves. Winter is past and a time of joyous gardening and pilgrimage to plant nurseries is at hand. There is also a reasonable security, as I write, that the dam has enough water for garden use, with moderation.

I spent some time on my knees on a sunny day removing last year's foliage from Yellow Bishop's Hat—*Epimedium X versicolour* 'Sulphureum'. This enables the spring flowers and new foliage to flourish. During the winter, last year's foliage had little frost damage and was elegantly decorative. The rhizomes of this genus slowly spread into a woody structure and benefit from a spring tonic of sulphate of potash—you can buy a small box of it in garden shops. Also try to add fine compost or potting soil mix.

This tonic will also be appreciated by the tubers of *Cyclamen hederifolium* and *C. coum*, which are blooming as I write. The exquisite rose pink flowers are like jewels glowing amongst rain washed glossy green foliage. I like to watch for seedlings later in the year and move them gently on the end of a broken knife. Plant firmly, just below the surface of the soil.

Spring weeding adds to the compost pile but can be hard on the knees. I have a pad but find a remnant chunk of foam softer.

When I was weeding, I looked at the rosettes of the spring foliage of fall blooming *Colchicum autumnalis*. The rosettes gradually unwind into a tuft of foliage. It can be a little unsightly, but it is important to leave it until it dries off in the dry weather of June. A spring tonic will encourage fall bloom. This builds up the vitality of the bulb.

The red noses of the herbaceous peonies were poking out of the soil in January, encouraged by the mild weather. They will enjoy a sprinkling of bonemeal and potash, but watch how you apply compost—put the compost on the soil adjacent to the plant. If you want flowers as well as foliage, the red buds should not be covered by more than two inches of soil from where they grow from the tuber.

Nurseries are now selling tubers, which should be planted



firmly in rich soil, kept moist in dry weather for the first year. They are an investment in beauty; cared for as suggested they will flower for a lifetime. Bleeding Heart, *Dicentra spectabilis*, grows with vigor in the loamy soil under the *Acer palmatum*. In spring the fresh green foliage arches up from the earth with flowers (in the words of the great Irish gardener William Robinson) "resembling rosy hearts—in strings of a dozen or more gracefully borne on slender stalks—remarkable beauty". Nurseries will be selling dicentra in one gallon containers. The roots are rather brittle so prepare the planting hole and slip the plant carefully into place and firm the soil. I put a small bamboo cane on each side to mark the location, as the foliage can die out of sight by August.

"Drooping ivory bugles an inch or so in length in the way of a Solomon's Seal" is how A.T. Johnson described *Disporum smithii* growing in his garden in Wales. There are several species of disporum, North American and Japanese. Members of the lily family, they enjoy the same conditions as dicentra and make excellent neighbours. The filtered shade of a Japanese Maple is ideal, plus loamy soil. If you have the space, also include plants of Solomon's Seal, *Polygonatum*. There are several species and hybrids. They should be planted and then left to spread their rhizomes without disturbance. Their arching stems and the hanging green tipped leaves give an air of elegance to the spring garden. The fresh green fronds of our native sword ferns are an excellent contrast.

The Norman Todd Bed

Jeremy Quin

Creating the Norman Todd Bed initially started as an idea at a Friends of the Gardens Advisory Committee meeting back in October of 2011. When it was suggested that the Finnerty Gardens should have a grouping of Norman's favourite rhododendrons, Karen and I suggested an area between the pergola and jogging trail beds. The area consisted of native plants in a bush line setting, infested with ivy and a favorite hiding spot for deer that managed to get into the Gardens. The Advisory Committee agreed that the area would make an excellent location for Norman's favourite rhodos. First thing was to prepare the budget to do the work and get it approved. Once this was confirmed, we started the task of removing the brush and had the Grounds team bring in the mini excavator to grub the stumps and roots out of the site. This saved Karen and me suffering from sore backs for a week.

Once the site was cleared, it appeared to be much bigger than before the work began and some of the beautiful Garry

oaks previously hidden by the brush and ivy were now exposed to view. Drainage and irrigation were installed prior to bringing in additional soil and the mulch. Discussions regarding the installation of a 1.5 metre wide path to facilitate ongoing maintenance followed and the decision was made to proceed with getting extra plants into place. Once completed, Karen and I began moving in rhodo plants from various locations in the Gardens that had become somewhat overgrown. This provided a more mature presence. Additional companion plants selected by the Friends were added to complement Norman's favourites.

Now that the bed is finished and we can stand back and look at the significant change that installing it has made, Karen and I have quickly forgotten how much work was involved in getting the planting done. It really does look as though this attractive part of the Finnerty Gardens has always been there.

PEONIES CONTINUED FROM P.3

plants for them.

For the peony problem Banks drew up a careful plan of action. In his own words he "Engaged Mr. Duncan, a medical gentleman attached to the East India Company's service to procure a plant for the royal garden at Kew where it was first received, through Mr. Duncan's exertions, in 1787."

Think of the above, Mr. Duncan, as ship's doctor, would have had the prestige of his own cabin, possibly shared. It would be cramped but he had to keep the plant in its pot in the cabin during the voyage. Thus the first Western tree peony had its own personal assistant to accompany it from China to London. The stratagem paid off: the plant survived, was planted at Kew and did well.

So how did Duncan obtain the peony in China and what was it? He didn't say but we do know that he didn't leap off the Eastindiaman, spade in hand, run into the countryside and dig one up from the wild. We know because the port where he got it was Canton (Guangzhou). Canton is

subtropical and tree peonies have a physiological requirement for a good cold dormant period to make them bloom. They won't grow in Canton.

But moutan was such a prestigious plant that the wealthy would have plants sent down from the north each spring for the pleasure of seeing the plants bloom in a pot—and then put them in the garbage.

Think of the implications of the above: Mr. Duncan obtained a regular item of commerce from a merchant; it had been brought to Canton from a northern nursery; the Chinese had been breeding moutan for over a thousand years—this was no wild plant. I shall consider what it was in the next article.

A detailed and entertaining history of Kew (not a gardening book) is Wilfrid Blunt's *In for a Penny—A Prospect of Kew Gardens*.

Events

University of Victoria's Annual Plant Sale

Sunday, May 6, 2012—10:00 am to 1:00 pm

McKinnon Gym on the UVic campus

Come join us at the ever-popular UVic Plant Sale in support of Finnerty Gardens. You will find almost everything for your garden: alpiners, annuals, perennials, aquatics, exotics, native plants; geraniums, fuschias, hanging baskets, shrubs, trees, herbs, vegetables, berries and much more. We also have an entire table dedicated to plants which have been propagated from the Finnerty Gardens including rhododendrons, scented geraniums, fuschias, hardy perennials, hostas, bamboo and more.

Contact: Shirley Lyon, UVic Finnerty Garden Friends
250-721-7014 • slyon@uvic.ca

Call for Volunteers

We are looking for volunteers to assist with the plant sale on Friday, May 4, Saturday, May 5 or Sunday, May 6. Plant sale volunteers are invited to a pre-sale on Saturday, May 5 at 12:00 noon as a thank you.

Contact: Kathleen Bellows
250-472-5045 • bellowsk@uvic.ca

Native Plant Sale Spring 2012

Presented by The Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary

Sat. and Sun. April 21 and 22, 2012—9:00 am to 3:00 pm

Free Admission • <http://www.swanlake.bc.ca/plant-list.php>

Spring Plant Sale

Presented by Horticulture Center of the Pacific

Sat. and Sun. April 28 and 29, 2012—9:00 am to 4:00 pm

Free Admission • www.hcp.ca

University of Victoria Finnerty Gardens

PO Box 1700, STN CSC
Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2
250-721-7014

www.external.uvic.ca/gardens

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.

Contact: **Sam Macey, Newsletter Editor**
250-592-1991 (home) | slmacey@shaw.ca

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.

Contact: **Shirley Lyon, UVic Finnerty Garden Friends**
250-721-7014 | slyon@uvic.ca

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