



University
of Victoria

University Finnerty Garden Friends

January 2009

Dear Friends,

It is getting close to that very special season of the year, and I would like to send you all a very warm greeting. I know that I am writing for the January newsletter, but this is really my only opportunity to greet you. I hope you have a wonderful Christmas and a good New Year. Dare I say a happy and prosperous New Year?

It has been a fabulous fall, and I hope you all took the opportunity to enjoy the Finnerty Gardens and to see the magnificent fall colours. The combination of sunny weather and an earlier rain led to all the colours being especially brilliant this year. Even the broad-leaved maples were a beautiful gold instead of their usual brown. And the Japanese maples were simply gorgeous. It is unfortunate that we often fail to remember the glories of the fall and do not visit the Gardens at this time of the year. My garden here on Galiano was spectacular, and many of the trees and shrubs glowed in the sunshine. We had little wind, so the leaves stayed on the trees for longer than usual.

There is a new study going on at Galiano—my place has been selected as a possible spot to find sharp-tailed snakes. These are a small snake (12 inches or so long), which are very secretive and rare. The end of their tails looks like a thorn, but is really just flesh. They like to eat slugs! Though they were known only on Pender Island, during the past year, one was found on Galiano. As a result, the study is trying to determine if there are more of them around than was first believed. The snakes like hot sunny slopes, and are to be found in piles of rotting wood or stones. They are dormant at this time of the year, but I am to check the five selected sites once a week beginning in March.

I would like to pay a special tribute to Carmen Varcoe and the Advisory Committee for their continuing work in Finnerty Gardens. They have now developed a planting

strategy which has given the Gardens year-round interest. The rhododendrons are magnificent, but of course their bloom period is comparatively short. Carmen's efforts have led to gardens which can be enjoyed all year. And so they should be. We are indeed fortunate to have people of wide knowledge and experience working on the Advisory Committee.

A long-time supporter of the Gardens died recently—Dora Kreiss—and her son is giving the Gardens a large rhododendron in her memory. Dora was 94, and lived near Sooke with a magnificent collection of rhododendrons planted in the forest at the edge of the sea. It was started years ago by herself and her husband Bob.

The arrangements for the plant sale are getting underway, and this year the sale will feature a special table of plants from the Gardens. I intend to buy some for my garden.

All the best to every one of you,

Betty Kennedy
University of Victoria
Finnerty Garden Friends



photo: Daphne Donaldson

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Ferns in the Garden

Carol Dancer

I once read somewhere that ferns belong to the still early morning in the evolution of our planet. As ferns are among the world's oldest plants dating back well over 200 million years, they give the garden a sense of living timelessness. Ferns were one of the plants, among mosses and horsetails, that dominated the landscape before trees and flowers evolved. They are among my favorite plants because of their quiet calm beauty, sense of stillness and cool colouring.

Botanists generally agree that there are about 10,500 species of ferns distributed in some 240 genera, which are found throughout the world in both the northern and southern hemispheres. They have evolved to live in almost any situation: some as epiphytes living up in trees in high rainfall areas, while others have adapted to life on rocks in near desert conditions. Ferns can be evergreen or deciduous and most are long-lived perennials very suitable for the modern garden.

Ferns are not like most other plants as they do not reproduce from seed. If you were to look on the underside of a fertile fern frond, always remembering that all fronds are not fertile, you would see small brown or green capsules which contain spores. The spores, unlike seeds, contain no embryo so a two-generation process takes place to reproduce a fern. In very simple terms, the spore germinates into a prothallus which develops both male and female sex organs. It is only after fertilization and an egg cell develops that a young fern is produced. Growing one's own ferns can be a long but rewarding process. Because ferns do not have flowers many gardeners overlook their value as garden-worthy plants. In fact it was not until the Victorian era that ferns were used in gardens. It was at this time the term "fernery" became part of garden language. A fernery was and is simply an area in the garden devoted to the culture of ferns.

For the Victorians fern collecting became a craze and a family pastime with trips into the countryside seeking potential plants

for the garden. At that time, digging plants in the wild was quite common. To this day, we have no idea of how many plants were lost because of that practice. Fortunately such practices are now becoming illegal all over the world. During this craze, ferns also became a part of the world of art. Literally hundreds of decorative books were published containing drawings of ferns. Some of the great china makers, such as Wedgwood and Royal Worcester, used fern motifs on their pottery. Ferns were even carved into headstones. However, by the 1890s the fern craze was beginning to wane and by the end of the first world war most of the great ferneries were gone. In the last few years, ferns have enjoyed a renewed popularity due in part to the increasing availability of the many ferns originating from Asia and New Zealand. Many of these ferns have fronds in striking colours or textures to add interest in a garden.

As a general rule, ferns like shade although most of the ferns we grow can tolerate either morning or late afternoon sun. Ferns need shelter from wind and a soil high in humus. I usually fertilize with an organic fertilizer, such as fish fertilizer at half strength in early spring and again June. A spring clean-up of old fronds is about the only other requirement. Ferns have a very fine and shallow root structure so be very gentle if you cultivate around your plants.

Ferns associate well with other plants. They are beautiful planted among hostas, grasses, certain lilies, primulas and other shade-loving plants.

The following are just a few of the ferns that I cherish in my own garden and would recommend for Victorian gardens:

Dryopteris wallichiana (Wallich's fern). This is the fern I would not be without. It is magnificent from the time the new fronds begin to unfold in early spring until the following spring when it is time to trim back the old fronds to make way for the new. It has the most amazing brown to black scales on the

"Nature has provided other forms of beauty than mere brilliancy of colour. To this end the fern world presents a delicate tracery of verdant foliage to a surpassing degree."

The Book of British Ferns by C.T. Druery



photo: Beth Doman

back of its fronds. This is a large fern, over a meter tall, which can hold its own among big-leaf rhododendrons, hydrangea or other bold-leaf plants. It is evergreen and is native to northern India, Nepal and western China.

Cyrtomium falcatum (Japanese holly fern). As the common name would indicate, the fronds of this fern are pinnate like a holly (meaning the leaflets are arranged in rows along the stem), very dark green and glossy so that the light reflects off the fronds. I always feel that reflected light is important in a shade garden. It adds to the texture and interest in the planting scheme. This is a fairly small fern growing only to about 50 c., is evergreen and looks wonderful growing among small hostas and other low-growing woodlanders.

Athyrium niponicum (Japanese Painted Fern). This is one fern the nursery trade has no problem selling. It is number one in sales and for good reason. I will always remember the first time I saw this fern. It was love at first sight and I had to have it. Never mind that I was in a garden center in Vancouver, B.C. and was living in Halifax, N.S. at the time, that fern was going to be mine. When planted in a shady spot but with good light, this fern is a little beauty. The young fronds are a mixture of burgundy, grey and green. As the fronds mature they become darker but are still colourful and provide a contrast for the new fronds which appear throughout the growing season. This fern is deciduous.

Doodia media (Rasp Fern). This beautiful little fern, native to New Zealand, is quite new to the local scene and it will take a few years to determine just how hardy it proves to be. It is a small fern, only about 18 c. in height, but the new fronds are bright red, gradually turning pink and then green. It is evergreen and is called the Rasp Fern because the fronds are prickly to the touch.

Dicksonia antartica (The Tree Fern). I had to include this fern in my list of favorite ferns even though it is not reliably hardy here in Victoria. Despite having said that, I am glad to report my plant has survived five winters in my garden with no damage. The fronds have increased in size each year and it is beginning to develop a trunk. If a sheltered, shady spot could be found it is worth a try if only to mention casually to gardening friends off island that your Australian Tree Fern is looking great.

We are so lucky in the selection of ferns available to us here in the Victoria area but don't forget the UVic plant sale in May when a very good selection of ferns are always available at the fern table—see you there.

The Turtles in My Pond

Margaret deWeese

The letter I opened was from a former student. It began:

Der Mrs. duwees,

I have six trtles the siz of dinnr plats who ned a loving home. I kep them in a larg box in the kitchn and they et hamburgr....

I wrote back to Billy to say that I would provide a home for his six large turtles provided they found their own food in the frog pond. He, his sister and parents arrived not long after with a greased cardboard box with six very large Red Eared Sliders all clamped together. I remember only one name. It was "Killer". Over the years the turtles appeared every spring to sunbathe on the special turtle raft built for them and they grew thicker and more formidable looking each year. They have provided many visitors with astonished attention until they decide enough is enough when they dive back into the warm pond water to enjoy more tasty tadpoles. I thought they must all be male as never was there a sign of any young.

Then last summer several went walkabout. I had a report that one had been found by a jogger on the road, taken to the Maple Bay Yacht Club and put in the ocean as a sea going turtle. I can't imagine she came to a good end. Then two more were found by the Maple Bay Fire Hall, nearly a half mile from the pond. One was taken to a home nearby whereupon she produced five soft shelled eggs like alligator eggs. I was phoned to retrieve the wandering mother and the eggs too. I tried keeping the eggs in moist vermiculite but nothing stirred.

I hope the rest of Billy's turtles come to regard the pond as their safer refuge from a dangerous world, as I do!

*The flowers appear on the earth; the
time of the singing of birds is come,
and the voice of the turtle is heard in
our land.*

Song of Solomon 2:12

The Rewards and Challenges of Working in the Finnerty Gardens

Karen Grose

Every day I look forward to coming to work in the Finnerty Gardens, where I love working with plants and seeing them flourish. After graduating from high school I obtained a Horticulture Certificate and Diploma from Olds College, and for the past thirty years I have enjoyed working in this field. My passion for horticulture is so considerable that I am convinced I shall continue to relish all aspects of the trade for as long as I am able.

Its natural beauty and wide collection of plants make the Finnerty Gardens unique. As we all know, many people benefit from the garden and perhaps some more than others. Yet there are still a lot of people who are on campus everyday and do not know the garden exists. Possibly that's a good thing.

If the duties were more defined I think the garden staff could work more efficiently on a daily basis by prioritizing the work. As with every garden, you cannot predict what the future holds and in Victoria you certainly cannot predict the weather.

Proper growing conditions, pruning and knowledge of the plants by staff helps minimize the damage which leads to more work for us. One of the biggest challenges of all is how can we accomplish this using what we have to work with. I believe it starts with people, who are dedicated to horticulture, and the hard work needed for the preservation of the Finnerty Gardens. Recently our irrigation technician had some time to assist us and we were able to improve the irrigation coverage and add sprinklers to very dry areas that required additional summer watering. Staff learn the ins and outs of the garden, the dry areas, the wet areas, and strive to improve the growing conditions in the garden. Soil amendment is needed in many areas before we add more plants and continue to improve the garden to ensure the success of the plants. The design of the garden and the plant material is very dynamic and this

in itself is sometimes a challenge. I have been fortunate to work with a large number of staff with their various strengths and weaknesses and with them we manage to meet our many challenges.

The ongoing issue and what concerns me now is the deer problem. We spend a lot of time walking and checking the fence for damage caused by the deer and the general public. The staff have repaired and reinforced two gates with stronger material. We have replaced whole sections where someone cut and removed whole lengths of fence. And we will continue doing this to protect the garden in other problem areas. But of course this takes time away from our general maintenance of the plant material.

With winter coming the rabbits also become hungrier and start to eat the plants they don't eat in the summer causing damage. Trapping and catching rabbits can be challenging and is sometimes successful. Our trap was continually being vandalized by bunny lovers and finally it was stolen. Trapping them and removal is probably the only way to go but we must design better traps and stay on top of the population. This takes time away from the maintenance which requires a rigid schedule to keep the garden's appearance up to the accustomed standard.

Winter storms, snow and ice also take away precious time from our maintenance. We are pulled out of the garden to help the other grounds staff keep the campus open and safe for the campus community. We return to the garden and continue through the winter doing what is needed waiting for the daylight hours of spring and the new challenges that await. Gardening in Finnerty is one of those jobs when in a day you can be assured something unexpected will happen, which, some days, is a reward in itself.

"I have been fortunate to work with a large number of staff with their various strengths and weaknesses and with them we manage to meet our many challenges."

Karen Grose



Rhonda Rose working in the gardens. Photo: Valerie Shore

Riddles

Margaeret deWeese

I love riddles. I have made some up which are not very clever riddles but more like questions. What is the most showy part of some shrubs but not the flower? Which plant per capita is the most popular shrub in Vancouver and Victoria? Which plant has over 30,000 crosses with new hybrids added each year and 900 species with more being discovered? Which plant grows in most climatic zones in the world, from the sub arctic to the high temperate rain forest, to the great plateaus and valleys of China and Tibet to the hot humid Melanesian archipelago, in Papua New Guinea and in Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand?

Of course, the answer is my favourite genus, the rhododendron whose leaves range in size from kernels of rice to giant leaf fans and whose new growth is spectacular.



photo: Beth Doman

Ode To a Rhododendron



*How near perfection is your petalled form,
'Lem's Cameo' with your cream pink radiance.
Of all rhododendron hybrids, you were born
A Queen to welcome Spring in reverence!
All year your picture on my desktop viewed
Makes me desire May to recall allegiance,
Not only to your beauty, but to life renewed.
Passing years only add to your elegance.
As we decline with gentle wit despairing,
You reward our aging with your certainty.
'Lem's Cameo' preserve my mind's reasoning.
Help me to appreciate God's rationality:
Your longevity matched to the span of mine,
Oh rhododendron, so comely and so fine.*

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There is an active rhododendron society in Victoria which meets the first Monday of the month from September to May at the Garth Homer Center on Darwin Street at 7:30 p.m. We welcome any secret or not so secret rhododendron growers to attend. At every meeting there you have a chance to win yet another rhododendron beauty for your garden or your balcony. And lovely places to see these massed beauties are: Finnerty Gardens at the university, Playfair Park at Rock and Kathleen in Saanich and the Abkhazi Gardens on Fairfield Road. Every year in Victoria glorious private gardens are opened to the public and the rhododendron society is no exception.



photo: Beth Doman

The Common Roots of an Uncommon Legacy

Roger Wiles

Further to Betty Kennedy's recent article, Roger Wiles has sent in the following article about the "Stoker-Simpson legacy as it pertains to the Finnerty Garden written from the perspective of one who has been 'Caretaker' and de facto historian-in-residence of the Cowichan Lake facility since 1982":

As gardeners we are often consumed by the minutiae of seeding, propagating, cultivating, pruning, tending, nurturing, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The mundane chores are endless, and at times can seem interminably thankless. We toil in the moment, yet, we are ever mindful of our connection to a greater scheme.

As we weed and water, we also, with a hopeful spirit, plan to preserve this cultivar, extend that bed, and to anticipate seasonal changes. It was Jeanne Suzanne Simpson's inner gardener that deliberately planned for the continuity of her beloved garden and Cowichan Lake lands. Mrs. Simpson's vision and common sense garden planning would seed the extraordinary success that is now the University of Victoria's Finnerty Gardens. Her keen environmental awareness prompted a most noble gesture of gifting UVic with an ecological field station that soars in educational and experiential value as adjacent lands are debased.

While Mrs. Simpson and her late husband, Buchanan were bereft of children, she was not without maternal instincts. These were manifest in the caring for her plants and wild creatures and the land. Her bond with nature was profound. The peninsular property on the edge of Cowichan Lake was her 25-acre protectorate and sanctuary for over 55 years.

Starting in 1912, she and Buchanan lived aboard a "float house" as was the custom. From their rustic shack atop rafted logs, they developed a plant nursery business on the shore of Marble Bay that helped sustain them in their early years. It was a singular blend of circumstances that augured their pioneer success. Mrs. Simpson was university trained in botany and their friends and mentors at Cowichan Lake, the Stokers, were very knowledgeable of the local flora and fauna and well connected with the international garden community.

Amongst Cowichan's earliest naturalists, Richard and Susan Stoker were instrumental in guiding and encouraging the talents of the younger couple. The Simpsons were invited to tie up their float house on the sheltered edge of the Stoker property

and begin their plantings. To her final days, Mrs. Simpson self-effacingly wished all tributes to pass over her and rest with the Stokers.

It was this long, harmonious, productive association between the two couples that created a famed garden legacy, especially in the realm of specie rhododendron culture on Vancouver Island. It was this bond and succession lived out over so many decades on this Cowichan Lake property (Lot 29) which impelled Mrs. Simpson to think in terms of continuity and a plan for the future. With the Stokers long gone and Buchanan's death in 1958, the urgency for this plan intensified.

Mrs. Simpson wished the property to be kept in as near a natural state as possible, to preserve the virgin forest and other undisturbed natural habitats. To this end, she sought the advice of trusted friends. Those friends included Yvonne and Trevor Green of Lake Cowichan, Mary Grieg of Royston, and Mrs. Roderick Haig-Brown of Campbell River. During this period of deliberation, she approached her friend and neighbour across the lake, Ed Roberts. Mr. Roberts was superintendent for the provincial Forestry Research Station at Mesachie. He advised that while the Department of Forests would certainly accept a gift of land, they could not promise to honour any sort of protective covenant.

Roberts then continued discreet inquiries on Mrs. Simpson's behalf that led to the involvement of Dr. Marcus Bell of the Biology Department at the University of Victoria. Following an amicable series of negotiations, title of this historic property was quietly and without ceremony passed to the university in 1966 on the mutual understanding that it "be used by the university for scientific research, or study, in related fields."

The Stokers and Simpsons have passed on but their legacy endures because of Jeanne Suzanne Simpson's common, garden-variety determination. Thousands of visitors a year enjoy the Finnerty Gardens on the Gordon Head campus. For more than 40 years, scores of students have had the privilege of learning in the midst of an outdoor classroom on the edge of Cowichan Lake. Other searching souls have found in this forest sanctuary a place of retreat and quiet contemplation.

How thankful Mrs. Simpson the gardener must be!



Super Soil

Margaret deWeese

If there is ever a glorious sight for a gardener to see it is a pile of screened soil, sand and compost mixed to top dress beds and lawns. It also comes in handy for visiting friends who like to make roads and dish up mud pies.

The earth round my pond is clay and above the house, in the woods, shale based. So what I have planted has grown mostly by chance and good luck. I have dug holes and filled the holes with bought soil, stuck in the plant and there it sits year after year, not growing much beyond its comfortable earth bound container. Happily most trees seem not to know the bounds of the good earth versus the poor earth and their roots grow deep into the ground showing similar top growth.

According to the gardening guru, A. R. Willis, a favourite of my father, writing in his book *The Pacific Gardener* (1964), "An ideal soil contains, by volume, 25% water, 25% air, 45% mineral material and 5% organic material. Soil with this critical 5% of organic matter holds large quantities of moisture and provides a happy home for fungi, bacteria and earthworms. These attack the organic material and produce carbon dioxide in solution. This in turn dissolves minerals required for plant nutrition...like a continuous chemical factory producing plant food."

Now the other important factor is drainage. Around my place the drainage is exceedingly poor, to the point when I appealed the land taxes one year, the official who came out to inspect, after surveying the pools of surface water, dropped the land assessment by more than one hundred thousand dollars. So you know it is amazing anything grows except horsetail, Western Red Cedar and Cottonwoods. These do in abundance, but other plants do survive, though their roots may be sadly saturated and waterlogged. A few rhododendrons have suffered from phytophthora and have had to be added to the debris pile.

Luckily I like moss and horsetail so I don't wish to rid the lawn of moss or the other pernicious weed. It seems to me that if an area isn't suited to roses then it is the gardener who should adapt.



An Invitation to Submit Articles for the Finnerty Gardens Newsletter

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.

NEWSLETTER EDITOR Sam Macey

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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 web-site 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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