



University  
of Victoria

# University Finnerty Garden Friends

January 2010

Dear Friends,

Once again it is my pleasure to wish you all a Happy New Year for 2010. And for those of you still gardening, I wish also a great growing year.

I am not sure why I am always so surprised when Sam, our editor, phones to remind me that my letter is due. The months seem to go by so quickly—perhaps it is a function of old age! However, be that as it may, I am still working at my gardening here on Galiano. In some ways, it has been an odd year with weather. The summer was so hot and dry and then October and November were so wet. I have been keeping weather records here for over 20 years, and October 2009 was the fourth wettest in that period. And November has been wet too, though not a record. The rains were very welcome, but in spite of the recent weather, the whole year is still one of the driest I have recorded. On this island, there basically are no rivers or lakes, so our water supply comes from the aquifers. And Environment Canada reports that they are falling, in particular in some areas more than others. There has been quite a bit of development, and often people coming here (especially those from Vancouver where there are few water meters) have little appreciation of the need to conserve water. During the past summer, a number of wells ran dry, and in many cases, it provides an invitation for salt water to invade the well. Also I believe that once this occurs, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to reverse the process. It is worrying. I am glad I have my 60,000 gallons of stored water collected from roofs. My pond did well and let me keep the tanks topped up until early July.

My garden has been a source of great satisfaction and joy to me this year. My new raised beds in the vegetable garden have produced huge crops—the weather was almost perfect for many things. Tomatoes, for example—I had well over 100 pounds, and I am still eating the last of the fresh fruit.

I produced 250 pounds of squash and am looking forward to using one at my Christmas dinner. The carrots were the only disappointment—their bed was invaded by rats (*rattus rattus*) which ate the carrots by digging tunnels and eating them from the bottom up. I tried trapping and got several, but I am not sure I have wiped out the colony. They also ate one of my squash completely and ate holes of various sizes in several others. They liked the Buttercups—their skin is softer—but found the Hubbards beyond them. I had such a large crop of fruits as well as vegetables that I had to buy a new freezer to store them all.

The rhododendrons were so thoroughly mixed up by the wet mild fall that many started to bloom. It is always a joy to see them throwing out some blossoms and giving promise of what is to come. I put in a lot more bulbs, but have given up in my attempts to grow species crocus. The flickers dig them and eat them, but fortunately they do not touch the large Dutch hybrids. However, I much prefer the species—they seem to go better in a woodland garden.

The Finnerty Gardens are looking wonderful. The fall colours were superb and the garden is in excellent shape. The committee under Carmen Varcoe is revitalizing some beds that were getting a bit tired. The results are excellent. Unfortunately, we still have the rabbits and deer with us. The latter come in when people leave the gates open. Sad, since both types of animal do a lot of damage. I hope you saw the gardens when the fall colours were at their best, and that you will visit in the spring when you can take pleasure from all the spring flowers, bulbs and shrubs.

*Betty Kennedy*

# Monster Tree Devours Victoria

M.J. Harvey

In the early summer of 2009, while suffering from a bad hip, I was pickaxing some shoots from the dirt floor of my, as then, unfinished greenhouse, trying to get out their roots as deeply as possible consistent with leaving the glass intact. These shoots were not just any old weeds, they were coming from the roots of a tree some distance away in the backyard of a neighbor on the next street—harbingers as it were of an invasion of the rest of our property.

My wife and I were previously residents of Sooke and I could not help casting my mind back to the account of Captain Walter Colquhoun Grant some 160 years ago. In the Elida Peers historical text, Grant had emigrated from his native Scotland to work initially for the Hudson Bay Company and had then set up a water-powered sawmill at the mouth of the Veitch Creek in Sooke. (The foundation of the mill is still visible from the bridge on the Galloping Goose trail.)

Scouting for lumber markets for his sawmill, Grant took passage on the American schooner Dart to what was then called the Sandwich Islands. It was there that the wife of the Scottish consul gifted him a packet of broom seeds. Three of these seeds germinated, took hold and flourished in the Sooke soil. Soon Sooke was known for its masses of brilliant yellow flowers in early summer and others eagerly planted the abundantly produced seeds in their gardens. These were destined to colour the face of western North America. Sweating away in my greenhouse and cursing the roots reluctant to part company with the soil, I got to imagining a what-if situation.

What if I could have been there 160 years ago and seen those three little seedlings emerge from the soil? What if I could have pulled them up and thus saved Vancouver Island and the rest of the West Coast from a covering, a plague some say, of what is now called, in honour of Grant's origin, Scotch broom? Well, even if I had a time machine I know someone else would have introduced broom, it is a very pretty garden plant, so the spread would have still occurred. Grant's introduction of broom is just the earliest to be recorded.

That reverie in the greenhouse got me to wondering—were we at a correspondingly early stage with another potential weed in the shape of the tiny shoots I was hacking out? Was this another plague plant, a tree that, like broom, is beautiful with many attractive features, one that people eagerly plant on their property but which then slowly but inexorably spreads, unstoppable? So, for the past few months I have taken to spotting other specimens of this tree, this plague-in-the-making, as I travel round Victoria. I find it is scattered around the district mainly on streets built before, say, 1950.

And what, you may be thinking, is this monster? It is actually a very decorative tree, easy to grow, called the Tree of Heaven—*Ailanthus altissima*. It comes from northern China but got its names from another species previously discovered further south which forms tall specimens and in Moluccan is called 'Ailantro', meaning, a tree tall enough to reach to the sky. The species we have is a large, deciduous, often unisexual tree, frequently 50 to 70 feet tall, rarely 100 feet in its native habitat according to Bean. The pinnate leaves are generally 30-50 cm long with a central stalk and pairs of leaflets on either side but on young, vigorous shoots the leaves may be over a metre in length. They resemble a magnified version of sumach.

Among the welcome aspects of *Ailanthus* are its attractive tropical-looking foliage which turns a bright yellow in the fall before disintegrating into readily swept leaflets. Bean says: "it is very effectively used as a fine-foliaged plant in summer by cutting young trees back to the ground in spring, and reducing the young shoots to one. Treated this way, and given good soil, leaves 4 feet long are produced." I can vouch for this statement



*Ailanthus altissima*. Shared under Fotograf: Darkone, 5 September 2005. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.5 License.

since just over our back fence a sucker cut off by the jobbing gardener in winter 2008–09, had by September 2009 grown to 8 feet with very long leaves while being completely neglected.

In late summer the female trees bear large, burnt-orange clusters of keys—samaras—and it is this characteristic which has enabled me to spot specimens while driving round town.

Bean continues: “The keys have a twist which causes them to revolve with great rapidity as they fall. They are thus much longer in reaching the ground, and in even a slight movement of air, will be carried a considerable distance. This is no doubt a provision to help in the dissemination of the seed.”

On the downside the flowers on the male trees are said to be malodorous, although all the trees I have noticed seem to be female. Even so there seem to be some viable seeds produced—this needs investigating. But it is the grove-forming characteristic which is the most immediate problem.

Small trees transplant readily and for a number of years behave very gratifyingly as single-trunked handsome specimen trees. During this time they are, however, sending out a wide-ranging network of surface roots and once a sufficient biomass has accumulated, the more shallow of the roots start to produce aerial shoots. Nourished by the mother tree and the already extensive root system these shoots make rapid growth. Keen, alert gardeners can keep on top of the problem but in neglected properties, or where the owner is intrigued by this gift from heaven, the progress to a substantial tree takes only two to four years.

One study Linda and I made serendipitously while attending a matinée at the Belfry Theatre in the summer. We walked past some of the old houses on Gladstone, some recently gentrified, and surveyed the distribution of *Ailanthus*. From a presumed single introduction there are now six contiguous front gardens with it present. In addition, shoots are coming up in the road in the cracks between the curb and the asphalt, plus leaves emerging from between the slits in the drain covers. I suspect this species has a potential for invading drains and as such will be of interest to property owners.

There are numerous colonies of *Ailanthus* around the city, including for a block or two on Richmond near, I think, Woodley. In one yard the owner had apparently mown the front lawn in the spring only to have a fairly uniformly spaced mini-forest of shoots emerge during the drought over the summer. It was quite amusing to see although the owner may not have viewed it that way.

On the other hand, out in the country, with plenty of space, Tree of Heaven puts on a good show. I remember seeing a tall,

decorative clump at Cherry Point Winery east of Duncan, while attending a tasting.

So, is this a broom-of-the-future, or am I being unduly alarmist? Although the plant is very hardy, not damaged in the least by our snow and frost, we may be just too far north for a really serious problem to develop. I see in the Western Garden Book that there is a problem further south. The book comments, “Planted in the 1800s in California’s gold country where it now runs wild...Often condemned as a weed tree because it suckers profusely and self-seeds, but it must be praised for its ability to create beauty and shade under adverse conditions—drought, hot winds, extreme air pollution and every type of difficult soil.” In the abbreviated dictionary that the RHS puts out—a notably cryptic book—Griffith comments: “Widespread urban weed”. This is unusually verbose so it was obviously thought important to insert as a warning.

If you do have *Ailanthus*, or worse, if your neighbor has it, how do you get rid of it? Say you cut down the main tree. This has the effect of stimulating the roots to produce more shoots, some at great distances from the stump. Here in the Oak Bay municipality where I now reside and dearly love, there is a by-law making it illegal to cut down any tree over 12 inches in diameter. To cut down such a tree, I am told, requires a certificate from a certified arborist which has to be presented to council together with an undertaking to replace the tree with one of equal value. In addition there is a groundswell of citizens wanting council to ban the use of chemicals in gardens. Since I have so far successfully spot-treated small shoots in my property with Roundup, I do not look forward to being deprived of this quite innocuous tool. As a scientist, I sometimes wonder whether unpleasant memories of compulsory high school science—science-phobia I call it—is at play in this fear of “chemicals”.

It is now fall as I write, the greenhouse has been finished thanks to much heavy lifting by some dear friends. The dirt floor was first covered with a layer of landscape fabric then two inches of navijack (mixed gravel). The benches are in and my collection of *Clivias* is looking happy. I shall spend the winter wondering what will push through in the spring—maybe I should have put down a four inch thick pad of concrete, we shall see.

*D.L. Clarke, Bean’s Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles, 5 vol, Murray*

*(Editors), Sunset Western Garden Book, Sunset Publishing*

*Mark Griffiths, Index of Garden Plants, RHS*

*Elida Peers, The Sooke Story, Sooke Museum*

# Fall in Finnerty Gardens

*Karen Grose, Finnerty Gardens Trades Qualified Gardener*

My favorite time of the year besides spring is the fall in the Finnerty Gardens. I took holidays in August this year, in order to have a lot of energy for the fall. I find it easier to get the garden in good shape for the spring if I can get as much as possible done before the winter rains begin, since it is better for the garden if I'm not compacting the soil in the winter and spring.

Jeremy began renovating the lawns in mid-September. He dethatched, aerated and top dressed the lawns with sand before he over seeded and applied an organic fall fertilizer called Nature's Gold. We will need to undertake one more fertilizer application this winter to get the lawns looking great for next year.

We slowly began taking down the perennials that were finished blooming and falling over. Going through bed by bed, we divided and dug up plants for both the garden and the plant sale. *Hostas* were the first on our list and we potted up more than 300 pots with over eleven different varieties. Altogether, we have potted up around 900 pots of various plants from the garden for the university's plant sale in May.

The bulbs arrived in October and we began planting them in areas that never had bulbs or in new beds such as the West Coast Bed. We are always trying new bulbs to boost the spring colour in the garden. We spend a great deal of time blowing the leaves into the beds off the paths and lawns; accessibility is something we take pride in for the many people who visit daily. This will continue through the winter incorporated with our winter chores of clearing drains and winter pruning.

Now that the students have returned, the gates are often left open, and we are therefore still battling the deer. Fortunately the deer are easy to herd out because they know who we are and where they should go. If you get behind them and slowly direct them to the gate they will go quietly, but scaring them only makes them skittish and run off uncontrollably. We removed some of the plants from the Henderson border that were outside the fence and that the deer feasted on all summer. The deer seem to leave the *Brunnera*, *Persicaria*, *Astilbe* and *Carex* alone. Jeremy replaced the plants with an assortment of deciduous *Azaleas* that will provide a colourful show for the spring. We also removed the *Hydrangeas* and deer-damaged plants from the Chapel lawn area and replaced them with *Helleborus*, *Fuchsias*, *Brunnera* and *Primulas*. We hope that the deer will continue to leave them alone, but with the numbers we have seen this year I'm not so sure. We used a new product, Meat Meal, and it would appear to keep the deer at bay. Seemingly we have got a handle on the rabbits, as the fence has been keeping them out.

Now that the garden is slowly beginning to go into its winter sleep I can hardly wait until spring.

## Harry Lauder

*Margaret deWeese*

My parents remembered Harry Lauder and although we were not prone to singing, "A Roaming in the Gloaming" was part of our record collection of 78s. Probably many of you have no idea what I am writing about. Harry Lauder was a favorite comedic singer in Glasgow, Scotland and then he toured the world for forty years, wielding his favourite cane, a *Corylus avellana* "contorta" stick or a twisted Filbert tree branch. It became so much part of his act that the tree assumed the name of a Harry Lauder tree and every nursery will supply you with the right tree should you ask for it by the comedian's name!

I planted a *Corylus avellana* "contorta" when I first started the garden. The tree has prospered. It is taller than wider, unusual for this beautiful tree in the winter snow when the contortions show up with the layered snow. It is about twelve feet tall as it has been pruned of its side branches because it is near the path.

The prunings have been used for filler with cuttings of flowering branches. Especially nice are the emerging Maple. Soon the yellow-green tassels will open pendulously and the new lime Maple leaves will open giving a very exotic flower arrangement for next to nothing!

Another wonderful part of the *Corylus Contorta* tree is the new flowers when it first comes into leaf. There are minute pink flowers to which the hummingbirds cluster to get the nectar. Amazing because at first one doesn't notice the pink at all.

The *corylus* is part of the hazelnut family but the hazelnut growers, I have heard, fear the twisted cultivar, because it affects nut production in the regular hazelnut. The *contorta* does not produce nuts.

Although I love hazelnuts I am very pleased to look out at such a twisted tree and see its beauty year round.



# The Little Oak Tree

Margaret deWeese

Most people measure time by chronometers, the sun, cell phones, computers or the calendar, which are practical. I measure the time spent in my house and garden by a little oak tree *Quercus garryana* growing outside the sliding glass doors.

When I was deciding where to site the house thirty years ago, there was a spindly little oak tree growing at the edge of the meadow fringe round the pond. I put a pink ribbon round the trunk and asked the young builder to be careful not to disturb the roots and its trunk. Oaks are slow growing and the tree seemed to have been about fifteen years old (my guess.) Now my little oak is still little compared to the magnificent specimens in Victoria and the peninsula—its girth is about twenty centimeters, sturdy and mossy. Along the trunk wrens pick tufts of moss for their wren box wedged in the fork of the main trunk. They pay no attention to their ceramic wren house but prefer the oak with a view. They hop up the trunk on the mossy east side and then disappear to the opening on the sunny side, building material in beaks.

Not far from where I live is the Nature Conservancy of Canada purchase of thirty acres to preserve one of the last stands of natural Garry oak meadow; the Elkington's "Oak Park." It is estimated that only 1% of Garry oak ecosystems survive due to building sites for desirable housing. My property was probably part of that 600 acres of the original land purchase in 1888.

Botanists from North America come to study at allotted sites.



Garry oak meadow at UVic. Photo: Beth Doman

For the drivers by, there is a viewing platform so the ecosystem with its abundance of wild flowers is not trodden down. There is also identification signage. The hundred year old house will soon contain a small museum to further inform the interested public. Caretakers live in the haunting old house with its green copper roof—at Halloween this provides an extraordinary experience!

## The Best of the Last Garry oak Ecosystems

Prior to its protection, the BC Conservation Data Centre expertly described the 30-acre family estate of Cowichan pioneer Gerald Erlam Elkington, located at Maple Bay, as being the number one unprotected Garry oak site in the province. Nowhere is there a finer remaining example of an intact Garry oak ecosystem. It's the best of the last.

## Rarest of the Rare

Of all the ecosystems in British Columbia, Garry oak (*Quercus garryana*) is among the most rare and endangered. A mosaic of woodlands, meadows, grasslands, and open rocky areas, biologically rich Garry oak ecosystems are the most threatened component of BC's precious Coastal Douglas fir region. Garry oak habitats now occupy much less than 1% of the land base of BC, yet are still under relentless siege from urban development and agriculture.

Garry oak landscapes reflect the climate and topography of south-eastern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands where the moderating ocean and mountain rain-shadows produce near Mediterranean conditions. Here we find blue Camas, white Easter lily, shooting star, Hooker's onion and chocolate lily. Rare species include *Howells triteleia*, yellow montane violet, deltoid balsamroot, and dozens of others.

In BC, Garry oak ecosystems are sadly in steady decline, largely as a consequence of their attractiveness for human habitation. They are red-listed by the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, indicating that they are considered endangered and greatly at risk of extirpation.

At the present rate of people moving to the Island soon every little oak will need its pink ribbon. My grateful thanks to Barbara Stone and the Cowichan Community plus the Land Conservancy for preserving this rare example of such a fragile ecosystem.

For this article, I am also indebted to:

<http://www.cowichanlandtrust.ca/projects/cowichan-garry-oak-preserve>

# A Walk Through Finnerty Gardens

*Robert Degros*

I've been on the Advisory Board at Finnerty Gardens for perhaps two years now. We meet at the garden about every six weeks or so and review various situations and agendas. Very interesting and rewarding. Prior to this experience, I had not visited the gardens even once despite hearing repeatedly about how beautiful they are, and despite living in Victoria for over ten years. Tsk. Too busy running a business, raising a family etc. etc.

Within my capacity as a board member, I have now made up for lost time and visited the garden on at least a dozen occasions, though not in a particularly footloose or fancy-free fashion. About time, I decided, for a nice, leisurely, agenda-less meander.

On October 21st—one month after the official onset of a most agreeable autumn—I arose early and spent the morning inventorying a garden on the Saanich Peninsula: measuring and observing, mulling over ideas and budgets, brainstorming with the client—enjoyable but a bit of a cranial squeeze. Ready for some relaxation and fortified with a delicious bowl of soup from Georgie's Café (formerly the Bagel Queen), I parked the rig, and actually remembered to put a parking sticker on the dash, turned off my cell phone and proceeded to stroll through the heavy lattice gates at the main entry. Time to enjoy the moment.

And at this moment—a choice—left or right. I can't decide, so stay put and admire the layering and lushness here. Lovely trees (Magnolia and Davidia) spread over rhodos of mixed size and texture which in turn are set amidst a lively tapestry of ferns, sedges and grasses. And boulders. Wonderful, big granite boulders, beautifully placed. It is an energizing moment, the more so given that the morning rain has let up and shafts of sunlight glint from wet shiny foliage. Leaves bob ever so

slightly in the air currents.

The left route seems the more intriguing so off I go, only to plop down almost immediately onto a well-placed bench at the junction of paths. I sit, ostensibly, to write a few notes but find myself lingering—kicking back, slowing down and letting lunch settle. Several people pass by, singly mostly. I'm thinking how simply and immediately and with such little fuss one can enter this garden. From the stimulating and sometimes intense and strident life of the university, it is possible to slip away and become absorbed into the garden in mere moments. A magic pill for relaxation, contemplation and inspiration. Very understated.

The surrounding, dense plantings invite further walking and discovery. It is pleasantly warm. More crosspaths, more choices. I am drawn to the left by the brilliant fall colours of Tupelo tree and Full Moon Maple, past a gorgeous, lush cushion of oxalis (Redwood Sorrel) and a striking stand of thick, gold-stemmed timber bamboo flanking the pond.

A long, curving loop through woodland brings me out onto a sinuous finger of rich green lawn. Border plantings include a lush assortment of ferns, brightly coloured fuchsias and a lovely, healthy bank of bold-leafed Bergenia (Elephant Ears). Leaves from an overhanging Sweet Gum tree are dancing on the grass, like starfish dressed in fall colours. I want to see a piece of statuary in the centre of this long channel of lawn. I can picture a tall bronze piece by local sculptor Elza Mayhew—it would look wonderful and help to slow the eye down. Probably drive the person crazy who cuts the lawn, mind you.

From here, I find myself drawn once again to the pond. Very attractive water. The Tupelo tree again catches my eye. A "wow" tree. Same for the bamboo—the strongly segmented, yellowy-chartreuse culms echoed by a giant grass nearby (Arundo?).

*"Wow," he said, "It's just amazing here—so beautiful."*

*He seemed quite transfixed and was definitely well out of the usual age group of a garden connoisseur.*



Tropical looking Hellebores (*foetidus*) are massed in front. What a wonderful combination. A simple, low fence made of a bamboo pole protects the bamboo. The pole is attached to low bamboo posts using black plastic zap straps. Great idea. Simple yet effective, as they say. Enthusiastic chatter from a couple of students on a nearby bench drifts through the garden. Ongoing for quite a long time, they are clearly covering a lot of ground. And what a place to do it. Fantastic. As are the Full Moon Maple leaves, laying in brilliant shades of red over a dense carpet of *Rubus calcynoides*. Never seen *R. c.* look so good. Close by, some handsome weeping hemlocks nestle between substantial boulders. Nice.

Continuing on, I make my way past flaming *Stewartias*, still fragrant *Clethras* (sweet pepperbush) westward to what feels like the heart of the garden, the rhododendrons in the forest—venerable rhodos of fantastic variety and texture grouped beneath towering old fir trees. Karen goes bombing by on a motorized utility cart and Jeremy clips his way energetically through a dense mass of spent perennials. Two very good reasons why these gardens are in such wonderful shape.

The new West Coast Bed, full of sumptuous rhododendrons and whimsical bits of fallen limbs and rotting logs, looks like it has always been there but was hewn from the bush barely eight months earlier. A work of art where the spirit of the Kreiss family and their West Coast dream most definitely lives on.

The woodland pond—tranquil and beautiful—has, as usual, attracted several people who are taking time out of their days to sit and fill up their tanks and soak up the surroundings. Several weeks ago while having a meeting, we walked through this area. A young couple, not long out of high school, were occupying the bench at pond's end. As we passed the young fellow asked me: "Do you guys plan the garden and that sort of thing?" "Partly," I replied. "Wow," he said, "It's just amazing here—so beautiful." He seemed quite transfixed and was definitely well out of the usual age group of a garden connoisseur. High praise indeed for the gardens.

Returning to the entry gate, I'm drawn by a wonderful fragrance into the Memorial Garden. Here, a graceful *Katsura* tree has shed all of its leaves into a golden carpet, generating a smell which is fantastic—spicy and powerful. Many people have rhapsodized to me about the aroma of *Katsuras* but this is the first time it has hit me so strongly. I am of the converted now. And after another intoxicating sniff or two I'm on my way, glad for having taken a rejuvenating, restorative walk in the garden.

## 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. Telephone: 250-592-1991 (home)

E-mail: [slmacey@shaw.ca](mailto: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: <http://www.external.uvic.ca/garden/>. 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) E-mail: [slyon@uvic.ca](mailto:slyon@uvic.ca)

