



University  
of Victoria



# University Finnerty Garden Friends

## October 2008

Dear Friends,

It is just a few days to Labour Day weekend, which always seems to bring the end of summer. The regular fall activities begin once again and we pick up with friends we may not have seen for a couple of months. To me, this seems to have been a very short summer, and one that was cooler than average. The fall raspberries are much later than usual, and the tomatoes are showing no signs of ripening. I have even had the fire on, not what I would expect for August.

When I last wrote to you, we were still in the middle of banding hummingbirds, and we had a very exciting discovery. We caught a bird that had first been banded here by Cam Finlay in 2001. She was mature then, which means that she was at least one year, so this year she is at least eight years old—a Canadian record for Rufous hummingbirds. A couple of other birds were caught that were five years old. A total of 227 individual birds were caught here. Of course, a number were caught several times too, so that made some mornings very busy. I mixed a total of 200 litres of syrup. Some mornings, it was very frustrating for the people operating the traps since the birds would come up, look the situation over, and retreat to the large honeysuckle for a feed. A goodly number of birds were nesting near the house, and they very quickly became trap savvy. We also had the first clear evidence of double brooding by a Rufous. The total number of birds caught was lower than last year but on a par with 2005. How many are actually banded is somewhat weather dependent.

One of our members, Leslie Drew, is doing research with Roger Wiles (the caretaker of the Cowichan Lake property) on the history of the gardeners associated with the property. As most of you know, the property was bequeathed to UVic by Mrs. Simpson. The property was originally owned by Dr. and Mrs. Stoker, who settled there prior to 1900. The Stokers were enthusiastic gardeners and their garden grew to include a blend of native alpine flora collected by Dr. Stoker from nearby hills as well as exotic species rhododendrons. Both

Dr. and Mrs. Stoker were accomplished artists. Dr. Hooker of Kew Gardens recognized the ability of Susan Stoker, and she left some 215 paintings to the Provincial Museum. They were exhibited in 1936, shortly after her death, and again in 1955. At the moment, however, they seem to have vanished completely, the Museum being unable to find them. The main works of Dr. Stoker were of insect paintings done in India in 1876.

There is quite a bit of evidence that the Stokers were some of the first environmentalists. They are among the very first to study the plants of southern Vancouver Island from a botanical point of view. Their property was bought in the 1930s by the Buchanan Simpsons who expanded the collection of rare plants and added a substantial number of rhododendrons. Mrs. Simpson was trained in botany at University College, London. The Simpsons got seed from the collections made by Joseph Rock and that is the source of many of the species rhododendrons in the collection. Some 4,000 plants, including 100-200 species rhododendrons, were sold to the Greigs and moved to Royston in the mid-thirties.

The Simpsons also received rhododendron seeds from Cyril Berkeley and from George Forrest. It is probably fairly safe to say that the Stokers taught the Simpsons a great deal, and we have benefitted from this gift of knowledge. Dr. Stoker died in 1931 and Mrs. Stoker moved into Duncan (Quamichan Lake area). The Simpsons had resided on the property since their arrival in 1914, and for many years they lived in a float house attached to the property. This is an altogether fascinating story and I shall be glad to see the final version when Leslie finishes it. One of the Stoker family, Mr. Patrick Stoker of Montreal, has been a Friend and supporter of the Gardens for many years, and we welcome his continuing interest.

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## Snow Gardens

*Margaret deWeese*

Structurally a garden when covered by snow shows interesting elements which exemplify the beauty of the tree or shrub. For instance, the *Corylus cortorta* or the Corkscrew Witch Hazel is at its most beautiful when the branches are leafless and the snow outlines its twisted branches. We do not get much snow in the southern part of Vancouver Island so the chances of these views (thankfully, some sigh) are few and far between. I like the fresh fallen snow, especially at dusk and dawn with the colour shades of blue and the lights glowing.

Snow may be a friend to plants, giving them a blanket during the hard frosts, but it also can be destructive, especially when it weighs down branches and snaps off leaders of tender trees. Many readers will have donned heavy clothing, boots and mitts and taken a broom to thwack snow from bowed branches, often getting a neck full of snow into the bargain. The branches look as if they will never regain their former upright growth, but, amazingly, a few days after a snow melt, there they are, arms to the skies as if they never had been weighed down with a burden. Perhaps a bit like the average person after a setback.

Nestled under that snow blanket are all the garden chores left undone—the leaves one did not get raked, the weeds which should have been pulled, the blanched iris leaves fallen to the ground are all covered so one may view the garden as a whole and look at its bones. It is often a very satisfying image.

The Japanese have special lanterns for snow viewing, although it seems that all lights and lanterns in a garden have that special quality with a pile of snow sitting atop the shape like a hat. Taking sculptural form to a much larger scale, the internationally renowned landscape architect, Isamu Noguchi, designed a 189 hectare park in Sapporo, Hokkaido so that in winter from the air, it appears to be a snow sculpture. All children know about snow sculpture, for one of the first things children choose to do in the fresh snow is to make snow angels. Snow is an added bonus to the garden's dimension.



*The Japanese have special lanterns for snow viewing, although it seems that all lights and lanterns in a garden have that special quality*



photo: Daphne Donaldson

## Gardens: Public versus Private

*Carmen Varcoe, Chair of Finnerty Gardens Advisory Board*

There are many types of gardens in this world, but I feel the main distinction is between a public and a private garden. Though both serve the needs of people, one involves higher maintenance because it is intended for the many eyes of the public. In Finnerty Gardens this means a vigilant quest not only for keeping down the weeds but also for always seeking to improve both the aesthetics and the health of the plants.

It's like always getting ready for a visit from the relatives. One tends to look at the housekeeping with a different eye than when alone in the house. Similarly, when visitors come to our garden, I suddenly become very picky about such things as weeds in the path or having the lawn mowed. At Finnerty, we always have to be expecting the "relatives" to visit. Paths are one priority as these have to be kept level, and weed free. The edges of the paths are another constant source of maintenance. Here we have to make sure the plants are not overtaking the path or smothering their neighbours.

Larger trees and shrubs have to be pruned regularly to let in light as well as not to obstruct views of other plants around them. Staking too has to be done regularly or the winter winds will take their toll. Perennials often have to be divided and moved at the right time. Remember Finnerty is open all year round! How many of us with personal gardens think about winter visitors?

Another large distinction is that in a personal garden you can have a completely free reign to do as you wish. If you like certain plants, there's nobody other than perhaps a spouse to tell you that you can't have them all—even if there is little enough space. At Finnerty, we have to be aware that in an all-season garden we have to provide all year around appeal. Hence, we try to look for plants that will give one or more seasons of interest or something fascinating at a time when the rhododendrons are not blooming. We also have to be consistent in checking plants that are not looking good. Continuous editing is essential to keep a public garden looking attractive. In a private garden, one can coddle sick plants forever in the hope they will eventually prove garden-worthy. This is a failing I have as I try to coax plants back to some semblance of health while they are looking pretty poorly most of the year. I'm working hard in my own garden to look at plants more objectively rather than persisting in a "special needs" project!

Additionally, in Finnerty Gardens we have a much broader spectrum of visitors. People often have different reasons to visit this garden—a leisurely stroll with a dog on a leash; a place to read, study or eat lunch; or to take visiting relatives. In a private garden, you can be alone for longer periods of time

so areas receive closer scrutiny than perhaps larger beds like up at Finnerty. In a private garden you can do whatever you wish to the pests such as: trap the rabbits, shoot the deer (just kidding), or yell at the dogs to get out of the beds. Of course, you can wear whatever you find handy in the closet or go out in one's pyjamas in the case of the early morning walk about. In a public garden like Finnerty, you have a much larger area to work with. This is often a wonderful bonus as we can then look at large drifts of plants that just wouldn't be suitable in a private garden.

Lately, the Board has been working on a bed that hopefully will be one with an oriental theme. We have already begun with a fairly substantial planting of Japanese and Chinese peonies. These plants will be spectacular in a few years, not only for their large blooms but also for their most attractive foliage. Along with these peonies, we are trying to plant suitable companion plants from the same area of the world. So this is a very exciting thing one can do in a public garden. Most of us would be very hard pressed to undertake a similar project in our own gardens.

I know there were famous gardeners like Gertrude Jekyll who had such a large garden that she could have a primrose walk and a Michaelmas daisy border closed off when the season of interest had passed. She of course had lots of help. Another noted gardener with a large garden was E.A. Bowles who decided to create a border with all his oddities, calling it his "lunatic asylum".

I guess we could all put up signs in both our public and private gardens stating: "Garden under Construction". Wouldn't that save us a lot of criticism?



photo: Beth Doman

## Garden Design

Rob DeGros

Victoria is, indisputably, one of the most beautiful cities in the world that, like so many beautiful cities, contains an abundance of lovely gardens. And these are gardens which have miraculously appeared within the last hundred years or so. From elegant and meticulously maintained estates to quaint cottages set amidst tumbling rockeries and old lilac trees, a day spent wandering the neighbourhoods of Victoria will reveal a profuse legacy of gardens and gardeners. Years of inspiration and effort—hard labour, time and resources—have created many little jewels set within a larger paradise.

“More English than England” is an oft heard description of Victoria, and this perhaps gives a clue to the proliferation of delightful gardens here. For England’s great history of gardening, that well of horticultural inspiration and knowledge, arrived along with the British immigrants and poured out copiously, the pump having been primed by Victoria’s inspirational landscape: rolling, rocky topography and magical groves of Garry Oaks, not to mention the favourable climate. Along with the availability of land, this has proved to be a gardener’s dream come true.

For people of that time, garden design was probably largely a matter of common sense and convenience, working with the land and with what was available by way of plants and materials. Homes were usually smaller and lots were frequently larger than today’s and much of a garden’s character would have been derived from the existing landscape features, often a setting of rocky outcrops and Garry Oaks, thickets of snowberry or wild rose. The addition of a lawn, a few fruit trees, hedges, shrubs and perennials and perhaps some rambling roses would complete the picture—simple yet elegant. As these gardens have matured and had layers added over the years, they have developed into wonderful leafy sanctuaries. I can’t think of how many times I have been in the back yard of a regular city-sized lot in Fernwood, Fairfield or Oak Bay and felt like I

was in a park—looking around and seeing only trees and sky. To me, many of these gardens were beautifully designed—not complicated or fussy but developing gracefully over time.

These days, at the other end of the spectrum, we have new developments where all of the trees are stripped off, rocky terrain is blasted, chewed up and leveled out as engineered fill. Lots are smaller, homes are huge and gardens are to be created in the little spaces left in between. As challenging as this is, it is still possible but much more demanding—usually requiring a lot of planting, overplanting really, layering and screening in an effort to create any feeling of a leafy-and-private sanctuary.

For many people the process of designing a garden is bewildering, particularly when starting with a blank slate. There are just so many choices and possibilities. Even as a professional garden designer, I can confess to being nonplussed at times over what to do—what to create. The strongest advice I would give to anyone designing a garden is to “create whatever you would like.” There are no wrongs or rights as far as a style is concerned—you create what is right for you. One of the most inspirational gardens I have seen, located in a rural setting outside of Nelson, was chock-full of kitschy plastic garden ornaments and pots. Tacky? Not really, because there was such a feeling of joy and passion in the garden— you couldn’t help but enjoy the energy that the person had poured into it. This was an infectious kind of enthusiasm.

There are literally hundreds of good books out there that will help with the aesthetics and science of creating a garden. But knowing and respecting what you want and like is key. As a designer I find that the single most important thing I can do is to listen to my client. Really listen—to what they want. From there it’s pretty easy. The second most important thing is to know what you’re working with. Spend lots of time in the garden. Just sitting and relaxing, and usually ideas will come.

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photo: Daphne Donaldson

The best ideas come when you're not trying; when they're not forced. And ideas are like gold. One or two good ideas and basically everything will flow from there.

To proceed from the idea stage to the reality stage, it helps to get ideas into scale and to visualize them in some way. I like to take measurements of a site—usually at 1/8" or 1/4" to the foot and create a base plan and then use trace paper to fool around with ideas. I find that a lot of people can visualize better if they actually lay things out on the ground, marking edges of beds, walkways, patios etc. with flexible rope or hose and putting in tall stakes where trees might go. I've even had a client who took a plan I drew up and then proceeded to make a scale model of the proposed garden, like an architect's model. It was very effective. The design adage "Form Follows Function" is a good one. Usually if you think about the things you want to do in the garden, it will become apparent what size to make the places which support those activities, and possibly also the shape. And an idea of how you want to move around in the garden or get from one level to another may also suggest certain forms. Steps and retaining walls can provide casual seating near a patio for example, but a sloping bit of lawn may be necessary to provide lawnmower and wheelbarrow access. A garden which has had this kind of thought put into it usually winds up feeling very user-friendly and seems as though it has always been there.

As far as plantings go, I usually begin with the trees and work down. Trees are pretty essential in most gardens—they define

spaces, create focal points, screen views, produce character and shade, bring scale to large buildings and, overall, bring a feeling of nature into the garden. All plantings will of course be dependent on the site conditions and the character which the garden is intended to have; for example, a Mediterranean feeling as distinct from a woodland garden. A framework of evergreen plants is useful to provide some fullness in winter but too many evergreens can create a heavy, boring feeling in the garden. Deciduous plants help to give lightness to a garden and provide change and often nice flowering and fall colour. A simple and very effective way to design plantings is simply to select and install some trees and then go to the nursery and buy plants at various times of the year that will compliment each other. Year round colour and interest—voila.

Really, to create a nice garden, you don't need to look too much further than what's around you. Victoria has an abundance of beautiful gardens, often created by so-called "amateur" gardeners who seem to have a knowledge of plants and gardening which is downright frightening. How they got this way I'm not quite sure—probably going and looking at a lot of gardens and then regularly getting their hands dirty is my best guess. I suppose this is the ultimate recipe for designing a rewarding garden.

P.S. Favorite Reads for garden design: Thomas Church, *Gardens Are For People*, or any of the books on garden design by John Brookes.



photo: Beth Doman

# Equisetum

*Margaret de Weese*

A friend groped for the right word when she was trying to recall what she remembered in my garden, "You know, the weed that looks like a Christmas tree?" And we deduced that she was referring to the ubiquitous horsetail. Granted there is a great quantity of this pernicious weed in the eyes of many, but I love it because it always reminds me of this wonderful scene from so many years ago when I taught primary school.

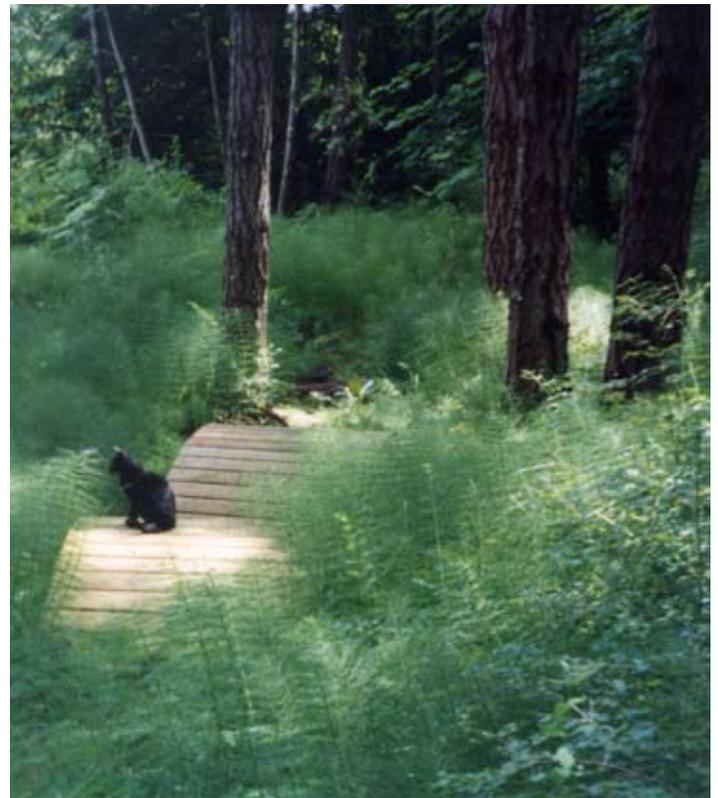
I had invited the little three-room school to my property for a picnic at the end of the school year. My Grade One class had practiced a little musical "The Three Nanny Goats". They were to have a command performance in the bog where stood three curved bridges like the body of a larger serpent. The ground swayed with horsetail as the parents and the other classes stood on the levee and watched the performance below.

The sun shone, the clear voices of the children singing the refrain, as the meek Troll poked out his hideous mask from under the largest bridge, sounded out across the pond and cameras clicked. The problem was the littlest Nanny goat could not manage the steep curving ascent of the largest bridge and had to have a helping push from me who was hiding behind a Douglas Fir. It was a magical performance.

Horsetail has a bad rap from gardeners. A Croatian friend of mine gathers the horsetail to dry for putting into floral arrangements. The bright green fades to a sea green colour and it gives a very feathery effect. I have heard tell that it is also medicinal. The University of Maryland website (<http://www.umm.edu/altmed/articles/horsetail-000257.htm>) includes the following: "Horsetail ( *Equisetum arvense* ), an herbal remedy dating back to at least ancient Roman and Greek medicine, was used traditionally to stop bleeding, heal ulcers and wounds, and treat tuberculosis and kidney problems. The name *Equisetum* is derived from the Latin roots *equus*, meaning 'horse,' and *seta*, meaning 'bristle.' "

Today, horsetail continues to have medicinal value. The plant's stems are rich in silica and silicic acids, which help mend broken bones and form collagen, an important protein found in connective tissue, skin, bone, cartilage, and ligaments. Therefore, horsetail is used as a supplement to treat and prevent osteoporosis.

So, the next time someone shudders when they see horsetail in your garden and begins to sympathize, think of its potential and its beauty and hold your head high.



## 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/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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## Traditions

*Margaret deWeese*

Nearly forty years ago a bolt of green felt, a length of red fringe of bobbles and squares of coloured felt began our traditional family cloth for the Christmas table. Since then, each year a new accomplishment, marriage, birth, adventure is added. No matter what traditions you espouse there is a lot of decoration in the month of December. And much of the decoration involves green and red, pink and white flowers and branches, mistletoe, holly, evergreens, orchids, hellebores, poinsettias, cyclamen and azaleas.

In our house a pink double azalea blooms every Christmas and has done so for the past fifteen years. It blooms heavily in December through to light flowering in March. I take the potted plant out into the garden in late spring and let it feel the rain and the sun. In fact, one summer, the leaves with the sprinkler droplets magnified the sun's rays which resulted in brown scorched leaves. Before the festive season came upon us, I took the shears to prune and shape it, gave it a liberal sprinkling of 6-8-10, placed beneath it a large green saucer of water and brought it into the house where it didn't fail giving us its wonderful display. Poinsettias, the ubiquitous December potted plant, now come in designer pots with shiny reflective foil, various shades and sizes, and their length of blooming rivals my well loved azalea.

Seeing poinsettias in Hawaii growing in the byways is a treat, like seeing the grocery store oranges actually growing on trees or the Tsutsusi azaleas growing pink on the slopes of the volcanoes of Kyushu, Japan. To date on the tablecloth we have sewn a tiger lily, mistletoe, azalea flower, poinsettias, pansy, and holly. I would say we have a lot of years to fill with the plant world! And although there are now names on the tablecloth of family no longer alive, they are still with us every Christmas time.



## Upcoming Events

Victoria Flower Arrangers Guild presents:  
**Christmas Floral Fantasy**

Friday, November 14: 12:00 noon – 8:00 pm  
Saturday, November 15: 10:00 am – 5:00 pm  
Cadboro Bay United Church Hall  
Admission: \$5  
Christmas Tea: \$3



## 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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