



University
of Victoria

University Finnerty Garden Friends January 2012 Newsletter

Dear Friends, first, let me wish you all a good and happy Christmas and a peaceful and healthy new year. I know it will be January before you see my greetings, but I felt I did not want to omit them.

The season of wind, rain and storms is now with us after an extraordinarily calm fall, and the wind is bringing down leaves and needles. I am always amazed at the amount of needles dropped by the fir trees, and over a long period of time. The oak and maple leaves seem to come down quickly so I can get them cleaned away, but the fir needles keep dropping over about a three month period. And the trees produce so many—of course I know that they make great mulch (if you want acid soil) and are the prime source of the soil one finds in coastal forests, but I do wish they wouldn't cover the decks around the house!

This year has been an odd one in many ways. The spring was slow and cold, and any crops wanting warm conditions—like tomatoes, squash and pole beans—suffered. They all finally produced bumper crops, but much later than usual. On the other hand, crops like lettuce thrived. The hummingbird population was way down, and they were very late arriving, but then they hung around until well into August. We also are seeing an increasing number of Annas on the island. There has been more growth than usual on the rhododendrons and fantastic blooms on the roses. In

common with several other people on the island, a number of my rhododendrons missed blooming almost completely. It will be interesting to see how they do in 2012.

The deer population is very high—we have avoided cold winters now for several years, and what we have had in the way of cold spells have been of short duration. As a result, there has been little winter kill. But at the same time, the deer are finding it more and more difficult to find adequate food. We therefore have an unhealthy population, and a number of them stay very small. They are going to great lengths to break into gardens, and are eating a very odd collection of foods. In the late spring, a friend had them completely eat the leaves off her rhubarb plants—they are poisonous to humans but deer? This fall, a doe got into my garden and completely stripped every leaf and head off my broccoli plants. Fortunately broccoli are tough and the buds at the leaf joints are starting to produce small heads. The does and fawns are the biggest problems since they flatten themselves down onto the ground and push their way under any fence where there is a small gap. The bucks, because of their antlers, have to jump over a fence or push it down using brute strength.

I am reading plant catalogues and dreaming about next year—I think this activity keeps me young!!

Betty Kennedy

Tree Peonies—1

M.J. Harvey

I was introduced to gardening before the age of five, later I became interested in science, especially chemistry, ending in botany. As a result of this unfortunate upbringing, I tend to use multi syllabic words unfamiliar to most people, sometimes to the point of being incomprehensible. I hereby resolve to explain my language better in future.

Many plant names are derived from personal names and there are usually fascinating stories behind each one. When you think of it, the great gardeners and explorers have one thing in common—they were eccentrics.

Take a few famous gardeners: Louis XIV (ordered LeNotre to build Versailles), or Capability Brown (invented the English Landscape garden), or Vita Sackville West and Harold Nicolson (developed Sissinghurst—their son Nicholas wrote an entertaining biography about them).

Locally in Victoria we have had the Butcherts and the Abkhazis, all with back stories not apparent on walking round the gardens named for them—but fascinating.

Even more than gardeners, explorers have to possess extreme dedication and determination. Put another way they have to be crazy in some degree. Before the invention of the airplane, a trip to collect seeds in remote lands often took one to several years. Frank Kingdon Ward writes about exploring the great valleys of the Himalayas in the spring, then returning in the autumn to collect seed. He supplemented the money he gained from selling seed shares in his trips, by writing books and giving talks about the terrain, the indigenous peoples, the privations of landslides, sickness, monsoon rains, the way leeches get under the tightest puttees and about finishing the last jar of *patum piperium* from Fortnum and Mason. This was the “gentleman’s relish” and used to add flavor to a bland diet of rice.

The profession of plant collecting was dangerous, many never made it back. I don’t read novels—there is more drama in gardening history alone than in all of Dostoevsky’s stories. On to peonies.

Tree peonies. First question: are they trees? Answer: no. They are herbs that happen to keep their resting buds on the tops of stalks. These stalks are not formed of true wood, not in the sense that one could make say, furniture, from them.

I suspect that the aerial stems are the evolutionary result of grassland peonies anciently adapting to shading from shrubs and trees. To discourage deer from eating the buds they contain repellent chemicals. Perhaps this is why peonies are important in Chinese herbal medicine. The unfortunate result of these chemicals is that the persistent collecting by herbalists is exterminating peonies from large areas of their natural range.

Tree peonies are native to China and adjacent territories. The group divides neatly into two sections: the lousy ones and the good ones. I shall deal here with the lousy ones.

The lousy tree peonies, Subsection *Delavayanae*

The rule for giving names to sections and subsections is that they have to be based on the very first species in that group to be described. In this case the first was *Paeonia delavayi* named by Franchet in honour of the collector Jean Marie Delavay.

Father Delavay was a French missionary who spent many years towards the end of the nineteenth century in southern China, especially in Yunnan. Let me digress a little on his career.

Delavay was probably the most active western collector ever to explore China. During his first mission he was stationed near Canton (Guangzhou) and being a keen natural historian collected many plant specimens giving them to Dr. Henry Hance of the British Consular Service, who sent them to London.

In 1881 Delavay went on home leave and while in Paris met Father Armand David, another collector, who introduced him to Adrien Franchet, Director of the Natural History Museum. Learning of Delavay’s interests Franchet said in effect, “Why waste your time giving specimens to the maudit anglais when we really, really need specimens here in France.”

Alice Coats in her book *The Plant Hunters*, remarks that this meeting was the equivalent of the sorcerer’s apprentice breaking the broomstick. On his return to China an invigorated Delavay collected plants like a madman. Each specimen was neatly prepared and labeled with date and place of collection. These are still in Paris and you may ask to see them.

Over the nine years that Delavay was stationed in Yunnan, he sent a deluge of over 200,000 specimens. The sheer number of crates overwhelmed Franchet and at the time of his death in 1900 many cases had never been opened. Eventually over 1,500 species new to western science were described from Delavay's collections.

Unfortunately Delavay contracted bubonic plague in 1888, recovered, but this left him weak. After a time in France, 1892–93, he returned yet again to China reaching a mission in the interior and died in December 1895. It may have occurred to you to wonder why someone sent to convert souls should spend so much time studying natural history. This activity was sanctioned because it was regarded as studying and cataloguing the work of God.

The fact that Darwin had written a book on evolution would not have come to Delavay's attention—it was not on the approved reading list, but Delavay's work was extremely useful to science and we gardeners can be grateful for his discoveries.

After all this history how many species are there in subsection *Delavayanae*? The answer is simple: nobody knows. Over millions of square kilometers there are scrubby plants of this subsection, some have red flowers, some orange, some yellow; some are tall, some short; some have leaves with long teeth, others have smooth edged leaves.

One suggestion is to say they all belong to a single variable species. In that case they would have to be called *P. delavayi* since that was the first distinguished. I am defiantly opposed to this course, sensible though it may be, since it would cause chaos in nurseries and make communication difficult.

The best compromise is probably the three species solution. I shall start with the tallest, *P. ludlowii*.

***P. ludlowii*, the tall yellow tree peony**

This is a common plant in Victoria gardens and has medium sized 5–7 cm diameter yellow flowers hidden among the lush foliage. Given a little moisture it readily grows 3 m (10 ft) tall and the black seeds are the largest of any peony. Peonies are distinguished largely on their leaves, not flowers and *ludlowii* has lobed leaves with the lobes having long, attenuated teeth along the margins.

People love the yellow tree peony, it is self fertile, the abundant seeds germinate readily and it is passed from gardener to gardener. Personally I hate it, but that is just me. I resent the space it takes up that could be devoted to better plants.

***P. delavayi*, the deep red tree peony**

This is a large plant but never as rank as *ludlowii* and in the common form grown has mahogany red flowers maybe up to 8 cm diameter. Many of our specimens are probably influenced by 'Black Pirate', a large flowered strain selected by Prof. Saunders in 1935 and much passed around as seed derivatives. It is self fertile and a single plant will produce plenty of seeds. The leaves have deeply divided lobes with smooth edges.

One problem with discussing these plants is that we only have a tiny sample of what is out in the wild. A missionary collects a few seeds in the 1800s, these are sent to Europe and grown, then a few seeds of one of these plants are sent to North America. When you think about it that is a very poor sample of the wide diversity of what is, or was, available in China. Guess what? I hate *delavayi*, it sprawls and the flowers have no oomph.

A few years ago Gordon Mackay of Alba Nursery, east of Duncan, sold me a yellow flowered tree peony grown from seed of fairly recent Chinese origin. Yellow flowered but certainly not *ludlowii*, the plant is diminutive with deeply divided smooth edged leaves. Flower colour does not identify peonies so it could be a yellow flowered *delavayi* and at this point I should mention that there is a *P. lutea* (*lutea* means yellow). On the other hand it may be the next species. Who knows!

***P. potaninii*, Potanin's peony**

Named for Grigori Nicolaevich Potanin, a colourful Russian explorer (but I think I have used up my biographic allocation for this article) who explored eastern Asia getting into western China occasionally. Now this one I really like and I think it deserves recognition at the species level and not as a

Finnerty Gardens— Looking back at 2011 and forward to 2012

Carmen Varcoe

This past year has been a productive and busy one for Finnerty Gardens. Tours and recognition events have been at the forefront of our calendar. Back in May, we had the Board of Governors tour the gardens. Hopefully, we added new converts to those who were already stalwart believers that the Finnerty Gardens are an important place to visit on campus.

Early in the year or even in the fall before, Advisory Committee members spent time in potting up the many excess perennials that Finnerty Gardens is now able to divide. These one gallon perennials were labelled and sold very well at the May Plant Sale. As well, the greenhouse was used to capacity for propagating less hardy plants such as fuchsias and geraniums for the sale. Two very stalwart volunteers, Bryce Fradley and Michael Langkammer, go up each weekend to check on watering and repotting. Providing these two sources of plants at a low cost to the gardens is proving to be a most worthwhile endeavor for making profits at the yearly sale. We are hopeful that these two areas will continue to grow and provide more income for the operation of the gardens.

In June we dedicated the Alpine Bed to the memory of Ian McTaggart-Cowan who has given much to the gardens over many years. It seemed a fitting place to honor his memory as his sister, Joan Zink, was the original designer of the Alpine Bed. Back in March, the dedicated crew of the gardens began to edit and clear out some of the inappropriate shrubs and groundcovers. Ian's love of all plants was apparent when speaking with him or visiting his garden. One of his particular interests was dwarf conifers. Colin McCrea of Horizon Nurseries and Gordon McKay of Alba Plants suggested some choice varieties of dwarf alpiners. Dwarf rhododendrons were also considered and added to the area. His daughter, Ann Schau was able to donate some dwarf conifers from Ian's personal collection. Dwarf rhododendrons were also added to the planting scheme.

A basalt bench was placed just across the path and looking toward the bed. The placement was fortuitous as it is right beside Rhododendron 'Buchanan Simpson', named after one of the original contributors of plants for the garden. The

young Ian McTaggart-Cowan wrote his thesis on deer in the Cowichan area in the 1930s. He met Buchanan Simpson and his wife at that time, as he would drive up and park the car near their property! Ian was also here in Victoria when the initial group of rhodos arrived at UVic from the Buchanan Simpson place. The day was chancy for weather in June but we managed to have everyone meet at the bed to see it and just in time, we beat the downpour of rain to continue to visit at the University Club. It's people such as Ian who make the gardens what it is today.

Also in June we hosted a tour of the gardens for the International Iris Convention. This is a very active group who had in the previous years planted out bearded and siberica irises in public gardens to trial their worthiness. For Finnerty Gardens, it was the berm or grass bed that provided enough sun and exposure for these irises. After the tour and assessment, Finnerty Gardens was given a collection of these plants.

Looking ahead to 2012, the Advisory Committee wishes to acknowledge Norman Todd's many contributions to the gardens. He is the reason why many of us in Victoria became involved with rhododendrons. Norm served many years as an advisor for the gardens and it seemed fitting to acknowledge him at this time. The Advisory Committee chose an undeveloped space at the outer edge of the gardens but within the fenced area. A collection of rhododendrons have been purchased from Norm and will be placed. Since this area is at the outer edge of the gardens it will round out the already developed beds. A mixture of tall, medium and dwarf varieties of rhododendrons have been selected. The importance of foliage was considered and future companion plants could be added. At this time, the crew is clearing out the ivy and brush to ready the bed for planting. All being well, as you read this article it may just be completed.

Another iris convention is being planned in the next few years and this group of plants will be the Japanese or ensata irises. Again, Finnerty Gardens has some of these being trialed. Hopefully there will be some beautiful varieties to add to our plantings around the ponds.

In fall 2012, there will be a rhododendron convention held in Nanaimo. The theme will be “Treasures of Vancouver Island.” We have been asked to do a presentation on Finnerty Gardens. This should prove relatively easy given the many wonderful images produced by Daphne Donaldson and others.

Finnerty Gardens continues to flourish and grow thanks to the many people on and off campus who are dedicated to its well being. This is especially notable with the work of Jeremy and Karen and Rhonda.

I would also like to note that there are other people who continue to be always there to help with the importance of Finnerty Gardens. Shirley Lyon is a constant treasure and has made sure the community at large keeps informed through

such means as the website and functions on campus. Shirley has also been responsible for lining up any events planned for the gardens. Bentley Sly is the man at the helm for budgeting and directing the staff. Sam Macey has given so much of his time to making sure the newsletter is up and running for each issue. Judith Terry continues to be an excellent organizer for the yearly plant sale. The members of the Advisory Committee continue to be passionate supporters for the well being of the gardens and are always there to give constructive criticism and suggestions.

The above seems to be a thanksgiving message and it's being written on the American Thanksgiving holiday—I think we should be very thankful for all the people who make this a very good garden to visit whatever the time of year.



Dedication of the Alpine Bed in memory of Dr. Ian McTaggart-Cowan.

The irises of Finnerty Gardens

Ted Baker

Finnerty Gardens have had a collection of irises for many years including Siberians, *Iris pseudacorus*, and Versicolor. These lovely plants have given drifts of colour to the Finnerty Gardens in late May through June.

The opportunity to upgrade the iris collection came as the result of Finnerty becoming a Host Garden for the 2011 American Iris Society [AIS] National Convention which was held in Victoria this past late May, and early June. Hosted by the British Columbia Iris Society [BCIS], this annual event is the largest iris convention in the world. In 2012 it is being held in California.

The beardless irises, including Siberians, Species crosses and Pacific Coast were planted at Finnerty in 2008. Bearded irises were planted the following year in the same bed which is a south facing berm next to the Alumni Garry Oak Meadow. A total of 107 different cultivars were planted with very good survival. Kathryn Eitutus, a BCIS member, spent

many hours keeping the bed weed free.

The Guest Irises are cultivars which have been introduced in recent years or selected seedlings that the hybridizers feel will qualify for registration and introduction in the near future. The plants were sent primarily by United States hybridizers but also from England, Slovakia, Australia and Canada. Many of the delegates who attend the National are certified iris judges and this is the best opportunity for hybridizers to display their new irises. This event is the “Wisley Trials” of the iris world.

The Guest Irises remain the property of the hybridizers; however, most generously donate one rhizome of each named cultivar to the Host Garden to remain in the garden, and the rest are donated to the Host Society for sale as a fund raiser. As a result, Finnerty Gardens now has one of the best collections of recent cultivars in Canada. These plants have an excellent colour range, are generally vigorous and have



Delegates viewing irises.

IRISES CONTINUED

multiple buds per stalk. Truly wonderful to see when in full bloom.

After the irises were dug in July, added compost and a more robust irrigation system was installed in preparation for a new collection of Guest Irises. These are *I. ensata*, commonly called Japanese irises and were planted for the 2014 Society For Japanese Irises National Convention which is being hosted by BCIS. Plants have been sent from the United States and Japan.

The working relationship between Finnerty and BCIS has been excellent and beneficial to both. I have received many comments from those attending the AIS convention about how wonderful Finnerty Gardens are and how much they enjoyed their time there. BCIS will continue to provide new iris introductions during the coming years.



Grapetizer, top, and Wild Angel, below

TREE PEONIES CONTINUED FROM P.3

subspecies of *delavayi*.

For the garden it is slower growing than the others and can easily be pruned to 4 or 5 feet high. The flowers in the common form are a pleasant coppery orange, somewhat nodding but nicely visible and produced over several weeks. The reference books all agree that it is *stoloniferous* and forms a slowly spreading clump. I have grown it for nearly 20 years with ne'er a stolon poking up. What gives? It is an uncommon plant and are authors copying each other? I am suspicious. There is a yellow form and a white form existing but I have never been able to obtain either.

P. potaninii has different genetics from the others. It is self incompatible. I apologise for this lumpy phrase but it means that a single isolated plant will not set seed on its own. Many fruit trees have the same problem. This probably accounts for the rarity of *potaninii*, seed is not so freely available.

The above leads to a confession. I grow a lot of peonies from seed; it is a labour of love since it takes two years simply to germinate them and then several years to flowering size.

I have germinated seeds from my *potaninii* plant and sold these so labeled. Anyone who has one of my plants was sorely deceived. What happened was that my plant of *potaninii* was growing next to my deep red *delavayi*. The only seeds on the *potaninii* were the result of the bees carrying pollen from the *delavayi* so every seed was hybrid. Since deep red flower colour is dominant to the orange all the seedlings were *delavayi* look alikes. My apologies to anyone with these mislabeled plants.

For year 2011, I have hand pollinated my specimen of *potaninii* with pollen from Carol Dancer's *potaninii* and the reciprocal. These have yielded seeds and bona fide plants of *potaninii* should be available in a few years time. Carol, being a much better gardener than I, receives gifts of rare plants so that I can be sure at least one survives.

If the above account leaves you utterly puzzled as to what the heck I was trying to say and exactly how many peony species there really are—congratulations. You are now equal to the world experts.

Submit Articles

All Friends of Finnerty Gardens — including present and past Members of the Advisory Board — are invited to submit articles of interest to horticulturists for publication in the Newsletter. The purpose is to maintain the eclectic range of horticultural interests that the Newsletter has espoused in recent years.

Ideally, articles should be of 500–1,000 words in length, and should be emailed to the editor as soon as they are ready. When articles are accepted, they will be published as quickly as space becomes available. Since the editor is an English professor rather than a horticulturist, authors must hold themselves responsible for the accuracy of the horticultural content.

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Membership

Membership in the Friends of Finnerty Gardens is \$10 per year (single or couple). Membership includes an informative newsletter published four times a year. Funds raised through membership support enhancements within the Gardens which would not be possible otherwise.

This newsletter is also available on the University of Victoria's website at www.external.uvic.ca/gardens/. If you would prefer to view it electronically rather than in hard copy, please let us know and we'll update our mailing list accordingly.

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

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