



University  
of Victoria

## University Finnerty Garden Friends October 2012 Newsletter

**D**ear Friends, what a summer! In May and June it was chilly and damp, but not a lot of real rain. And then in August—no rain at all, except for 3mm which arrived in a spectacular thunderstorm. The island is unbelievably dry, and we all worry about fire. There have been several small ones on the other Gulf Islands yet so far we are safe. But you cannot say the same about the native vegetation. The salal is on the edge of dying and another week of dry weather will probably finish off great patches of it where it has spread to rocky or drier areas.

My garden is surviving, but I came very close to losing a big *magnolia* 'Elizabeth.' The batteries in the watering control had gotten low, so the system did not operate. I did not notice it until a lot of damage had been done. Since then, I have soaked it and some green is showing. And yesterday, we changed all of the batteries in the various area timers.

And in addition to the drought, I had a big old doe break in. I am always interested in what they choose to eat. This one ate all the broccoli, the beet and carrot greens and the lettuce, but did not touch the beans which have always been a favourite. She did consume all the leaves she could reach on my new dwarf fruit trees. I suspect it is too late for them

to try to grow new ones. The other thing she appeared to enjoy was the fireweed—she ate all the leaves, but did not touch the arbutus.

The Rufous Hummingbirds have all left—there were not that many this year, but more than last year, judging from the amount of syrup they ate. They turned out to be very trap shy, so even if there were lots around, the banders caught very few. This will be the last year that I will permit banding here—I am not sure it is benign. We will see if it makes a difference in the number of birds in the next few years. Their numbers appear to be declining everywhere—I wonder why. There is still a limited number of Annas on the island, so I get only the odd one.

When you live in the city, you really are not as aware of the weather as in the country, so it is a topic of interest here. I hear that some wells are running dry, especially those belonging to city folk, particularly Vancouverites, who are not used to conserving water. It is a learning curve for many of them.

I hope you all have a good fall and probably I should now wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

*Betty Kennedy*

# Good bye and wonderful wishes of good luck

*Carmen Varcoe*

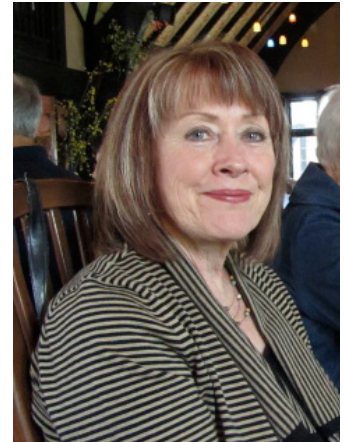
As you read this newsletter, one of the persons responsible for its continued success is probably on a cruise somewhere exotic enjoying her much earned retirement. Over the many years, approximately 25 or so, Shirley Lyon has been a stalwart cheerful supporter of Finnerty Gardens. If there was anyone on campus who knew the wheres, hows, whys of anything to do with the gardens, Shirley was that person.

As a long-time part of the Advisory Board, Shirley was always there to check on details, and make sure all plans were in place for any event associated with Finnerty Gardens. Not only was she instrumental in helping with every Finnerty event, but she was always there in person to help in any capacity that was needed.

Her face was definitely a familiar one at every plant sale that I can remember and she was always willing to help with sales etc. She was a core organizer for our website. Shirley worked very closely with Daphne Donaldson and Betty Kennedy in the setup and publishing of the Finnerty Calendar.

I am sure we can safely say that it's rare to have such dedication and passion for one's job, but Shirley definitely showed it in every way. We shall miss her but look forward to seeing her help with future plant sales. We wish her all the very best in the next phase of her life and one of the most rewarding—retirement.

On that note, the advisory board is looking forward to working with Sue Doutre who has taken over Shirley's huge load. I know she will be up to the task and look forward to working with her in the future.



Shirley Lyon



L-R: Ann Schau, Shirley Lyon, Aline Mortimer, Leslie Brooks and Daphne Donaldson at the 2012 Plant Sale.



The Finnerty Gardens calendar

# Around the Garden in November

George Radford

The rains of fall refresh the soil. The rocky knolls are mantled again with moss in many shades of green. Flower buds swell on mounds of the evergreen foliage of *Viburnum tinus*. Pink flowers are opening on the upright and rather stately branches of *Viburnum x bodnantense*. A twig with flowers will scent a room and remind us how fortunate we are to live in Victoria—Vancouver Island. A particular favourite of mine is *V. x burkwoodii* with glossy evergreen foliage, red tinted in fall and forming the perfect enhancement for the flowers. Nurseries and Garden shops stock these plants, in flower, in fall and winter. They may seem expensive but, smell the flowers and realize that these plants are longlived and an enduring investment. It is important to remember, when planting, that Viburnums are shrubs of deciduous woodland or adjacent to it. Our clay soil should be amended with organic material rotted leaves, compost or a bag of planter mix. We expect the joy of flowers in the worst of winter weather so be sure to plant in a location with excellent drainage for the roots.

I never seem to notice when the flowers bloom on the Beauty Bush—*Callicarpa bodinieri* ‘Profusion’. This shrub is insignificant for most of the year and then ‘Wow’—purple berries shining in the fall and winter sun. A flower arranger’s delight in fall this shrub is not demanding of soil. It settles into a sunny location and seems to produce more berries with moderate summer water and fertilizer. This is an important point with some of our winter flowering shrubs such as Witch Hazel—*Hamamelis* species. I have been observing a number of old plants around town. Never watered, no mulch, their own fallen leaves raked away by the maintenance gardener. They are settled into hard clay. ‘Short Rations’ is their fate. They flower profusely year after year. All their energy goes to form flower buds. Watered and fed in summer they grow lush soft leaves. These are often retained in winter instead of falling naturally and look unsightly.

The blustery winds of fall are rattling the branches of *Cotoneaster salicifolius* against the window as I type. I think again of pruning it and am overwhelmed by the thought of a robin who sits there and observes me. We commune, and I relax from the computer screen. If I look out a towhee is probably scratching around in the mulch below. The loppers

will stay in the shed. The shrubs are dense now in several areas of the garden and I am rewarded with birds which seem at home. They drink and bathe in the birdbath under the apple tree. A flock of tiny bushtits arrive, bathe and then diligently scour the apple tree branches and shrubs for insects, aphid eggs, etc. This year robins nested in the thick growth of honeysuckle on the top of the courtyard trellis. I am filled with respect for their vitality supplying food for their demanding young. I wish more people would give thought to habitat for birds in their gardens. I have been observing on my walks the new owners of a house and beautifully established garden. Before the curtains were up a small bobcat was at work ripping out shrubs and a hedge. There is a pile of bark mulch in the drive. If they do what I expect I may change my walk.

The cooler fall weather encouraged a splendid new flush of blooms on the David Austin roses in the sunken rose garden at Government House, in time for Queen Elizabeth’s visit. These Austin roses took time to settle in and grow new wood. They require careful culture from the first planting in deeply prepared soil. David and Crenna Elliott have carefully followed a program of fertilizing, pruning, mulching and deadheading. There will be roses until heavy frost, perhaps to Christmas. Visit the garden, smell the roses. There is a map on the pergola of the rose names and their location.

The scent of winter pansies, wallflowers, Brompton stocks etc. in a container near the front or back door will refresh your senses on cool fall or winter days.

(We now have a Viburnum Leaf Beetle attacking these shrubs. There is a study: “Susceptibility Ratings To Viburnum Leaf Beetle Of Common Species Of Viburnum” out of the Department of Entomology, Cornell University showing that *Viburnum x tinus* and *V. x burkwoodii* are moderately susceptible. *V. x bodnantense* is most resistant to this pest.)

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*At the time of writing, the late George Radford—a well known and admired Victoria horticulturist—was Garden Consultant to Government House Gardens.*

# Tree Peonies 4: The wild species

*M. J. Harvey*

It is now becoming grudgingly accepted that the cultivated largeflowered Chinese tree peonies, "*P. suffruticosa*" are of hybrid origin and out of curiosity gardeners and scientists want to know which were the original species from which the group is derived.

What is a species? Many definitions: one is, a group of individuals adapted to a particular habitat and interbreeding in nature. But my favourite definition is: a species is anything so defined by a competent taxonomist. This latter, while jocular, does bring to mind that gardeners and nurserymen are inherently bad taxonomists because they give undue emphasis to the flowers, whereas one has to take into account all morphological, chemical and genetic characteristics more or less equally.

Other reasons for wanting to know the origins of the group apart from curiosity are that some of the species might make good garden plants in their own right. Additionally we would have the ability to produce hybrids on a planned basis rather than accept the results of a thousand years of chance crossings, although what we have is not bad.

It is now apparent that the various regions of China are the native home of several species, some widely distributed, some narrowly confined geographically. Five species are gradually coming to the fore: *P. rockii*, *P. ostii*, *P. decomposita*, *P. quii* and *P. jishanensis*. I shall mention a sixth later.

## 1. *P. rockii*

This is the most famous and currently the most prized of the wild species because it makes such a good garden plant without the need to be crossed with anything else. The large white flowers with bold black, actually deep maroon, blotches are instantly recognisable. I say 'white' but the petals vary plant to plant from almost pure white to a distinct pink. Those with a pale pink fade to white given a couple of days sunshine but the deeper pink forms retain a pink cast until they drop. Some people take this as evidence that the plants with pink are hybrids, but I think not; it seems to be just a part of the natural variation within the species.

The above point is slightly contentious. If you define *rockii* as the peony with white flowers and black blotches, then, by your own definition, the pink ones must be hybrids

and there are some who maintain that this is the case. That is of course circular reasoning. But I can let you in on a little taxonomic secret—the flowers are not really very important in distinguishing one peony species from another. This is the direct opposite of the way gardeners and horticulturists view them.

So what is important? For peonies it is principally the leaves. Peonies have large compound leaves and the number and shape of the leaflets is very useful in distinguishing one from the other. *P. rockii* is instantly recognisable in or out of flower by having most of the leaflets, especially the terminal ones, with three lobes (or teeth depending on what you want to call them). The pink petalled ones are *rockii* because they have *rockii* leaves. I have both pink and white flowered plants from Halda's wild collections in China and they all have the characteristic *rockii* leaves. There are no other characteristics that would make me suspect some accidental cross pollination.

I can add that a situation arose in the 1990's when *rockii* was in short supply in nurseries and its nature was not yet understood. The deduction was made that since *rockii* had dark blotches at the base of the petals that therefore any plant with blotches was *rockii*. I take a charitable attitude to this but several nurseries were selling as '*rockii*' plants which were old hybrids. Of course hybrids of *rockii* inherit a degree of black blotching as I have shown with my own crosses but there is no way that those plants should have been sold as *rockii* itself.

## 2. *P. ostii*

The recognition of a group of plants as a distinct species and naming them *P. ostii* was a great surprise to many people including, I might add, Mr. Osti himself. You may remember from a previous article that Mr. Osti is the Italian corporate director who became fascinated by peonies and, with no scientific training, decided to go to China and investigate the group. This was at a crucial window of opportunity in 1990 just as China started to open up to western travellers after the end of the Cold War.

Among the ideas that Osti took to China and discussed with Hang Tao was that, among the thousands of cultivars

grown in gardens, some might be wild species that had somehow escaped cross-pollination with other peony species. The geneticist in me would put it that they had to be self-fertile but Osti would not have thought of it that way.

As it happened one particularly vigorous tree peony is grown in China not for its flowers but for its abundant crop of roots which are used in Chinese traditional medicine. This plant is Feng Dan Bai or White Phoenix and it has large white flowers with no basal blotch but there are a few pink basal veins. Relegated to the herb garden by the Chinese it is actually a very nice ornamental in its own right, which is also found wild. Although cultivated for centuries for the pharmacopoeia, it has maintained its own gene pool unsullied by its garden companions. Quite easy to find in nurseries, I actually acquired my first one at a University of Victoria Finnerty Garden plant sale.

### 3. *P. decomposita*

Joseph Rock, born in Austria, became an American citizen, spent many years exploring and was a hardworking and much liked eccentric. He lectured and wrote articles including for the National Geographic Magazine such as “Hunting the Chaulmoogra Tree” (the first cure for leprosy). On expeditions he took a folding canvas bathtub which he would have his assistants fill with warm water so he could enjoy a good soak at the end of the day before he had dinner using flatware from his canteen of silver cutlery. He got a peony named for him.

However, there was another contemporary Austrian botanist who was much harder working, in fact a workaholic, stayed Austrian and yet is hardly known. This is Heinrich Handel-Mazzetti, 1882–1940.

After writing his thesis on *Taraxacum* in 1907, he explored various countries and was in SW China when World War I broke out. He decided to stay in China until the war was over and kept on working ending up with 13,000 plant specimens. These he had put into tin boxes soldered tight (presumably to keep out insects) and they arrived back in Vienna a year or two after him. He would spend much of the rest of his life analysing these specimens. It turned out that there was a total of 8,015 species of which 1,307 were new to science as well as

35 new genera. By any accounting this is exceptional, far more than Rock accomplished.

But Handel-Mazzetti fell afoul of the Germanic academic system then current in Austria. Graduates were expected to spend years and years as low-paid teaching assistants while conducting their research. Promotion was in the hands of the head of the department who was equal to God. Handel-Mazzetti hated teaching and was frustrated by lack of promotion. This brought him into conflict with Keissler, the head of the Natural History Museum in Vienna where his specimens were. There was a quarrel during which Handel-Mazzetti threatened violence and he was consequently banned from the Museum and sent to see a psychiatrist (in Vienna!). Eventually a compromise was worked out: when the Director left at 2:00 p.m. Handel-Mazzetti could enter the Museum.

While in China Handel-Mazzetti discovered a pink-flowered tree peony distinguished by very large compound leaves divided into many small leaflets, far more leaflets than any other peony, up to 63.

Being a multilingualist and classical scholar Handel-Mazzetti knew that the Latin for being divided into many pieces is *decompositus*, so in 1939 he named his new peony *P. decomposita*. Some people think this is a rotten name but I think it is cute and it does have the merit of pinpointing one key characteristic of the species—the highly compound leaves.

Osti comments, “*decomposita* is one of the most beautiful peonies and is one of the jewels of the Chinese flora that has been ignored far too long in our gardens”.

So can you buy a specimen at a nursery? No way! Wild collected seeds are reported to not germinate (peony seeds take two years anyway) and plants that are in cultivation seem not to set seed. I suspect the latter is due to self-sterility. But Josef Halda states that he has it in his garden in the Czech Republic so there is hope.

Handel-Mazzetti met Joseph Rock when the latter visited Vienna in 1933–34. Rock’s biographer, Stephane Sutton comments that “they sat together in the dining room at the

Tree Peonies, continued on p. 7

## A recent visit

*Carmen Varcoe*

On a somewhat drizzly day in June, we, the Advisory Board, had the pleasure of a visitor who has contributed much to Finnerty Gardens. Norm Todd along with Jean, Jean's brother and niece from Glasgow came up to the gardens. Rhonda chauffeured Norm around in the Gator and was able to take him on a complete tour of the gardens.

A few months ago, the board singled out a wild overgrown area in the southern part of the gardens. It was inside the deer fence but uncultivated. Jeremy and Karen worked their muscle power and cleared the area of all weeds, ivy and snowberry. As it is in the outer extremity of the gardens they were careful not to compromise the barrier of growth needed for reducing traffic noise on Cedar Hill X Roads.

The area has some interesting and attractive Garry Oaks that now can be seen. The Board picked out some rhododendrons suggested by Norm Todd that would be suitable for this area. Hence the invite was fitting as these rhododendrons were some of Norm's favourites from his Firwood Nursery that he is closing down.

Many of us in the rhododendron world owe Norm a great debt of gratitude for showing us his passion for these plants. It's because of Norm that I became involved with this genus and Finnerty Gardens and the Rhododendron Society of Victoria. He has such a wit when describing these plants and helped us either love or hate certain cultivars: For example, when I was waxing on about *R. 'Van Nes Sensation'*, his comment was "Why do you want that old straggly thing?" He talks about these plants with personal human associations which make them all the more attractive.

A tidbit he shared with us on that day was the origin of *R. 'Mrs Josephine Firth.'* All of us present had no idea why this plant was so named until Norm told us about Colonel Firth who had served on the Advisory Board in its early days. When Col. Firth decided to downsize and move from his property, one plant was his wife's favourite. Because he didn't know what it was called, he named it after his wife: Mrs. Josephine Firth. As this has become one of our signature plants in Finnerty Gardens, we were all delighted to hear about it in such detail.

Thank you Norm, for your visit and your continued store of knowledge about rhododendrons and especially for inspiring us all.



Norm Todd

## Tree Peonies, cont.

Hotel Sacher over Naturschnitzel and conversed amicably”. Handel-Mazzetti’s life ended in 1940 when he was knocked down in a blackout by an unlit German military vehicle while crossing the Rennweg. There is no doubt that he was a genius but he did not fit the system. A peony is named for him, *P. Handel-Mazzettii*, but it is ill-defined being one of the *delavayi* complex. I had seed so labelled from Halda, the plants were shorter than *delavayi* but otherwise identical—*P. delavayi* var *angustifolia*?

### 4. *P. quii*

I am not familiar with this species but it is distinct in that its leaves have very few leaflets, nine maximum, quite the opposite of *decomposita*, the flowers are an unblotched silky pink or red and the plants are stoloniferous.

### 5. *P. jishanensis*

This was recognised in 1992 by Hong and Zhao and is a smallish, stoloniferous species with white, unblotched flowers and a red disc. The flowers are smaller than any of the other species and the leaves have usually more than nine leaflets which are deeply lobed and dentate. Osti comments that it seems to correspond to the old *P. spontanea* and the name may have to be adjusted to that under the rule of priority of publication. It is another plant whose seeds are difficult to germinate.

So there are the five more or less recognised species of the larger flowered tree peonies. I regret that I did not go to China in the 1990s and take part in one or more of the various expeditions. Nowadays my joints grumble just going upstairs and an expedition is out of the question so I can

never discover a new species—or could I?

### 6. *P. linyanshanii* *ined.*

*P. rockii* is fairly widespread in the interior mountains of China. One form recognised is subspecies *linyanshanii*; the name I presume means that it comes from the Linyan mountain(s). This subspecies has proven to be an easy to grow plant in Victoria, upright, with greater annual shoot growth than *rockii* and somewhat larger flowers. Brothers Peonies of Sherwood, Oregon in their catalogue are very enthusiastic about it saying it is “a great improvement over the original”, ie. *rockii*. The flowers resemble *rockii* in having conspicuous basal blotches with the rest of the petal white or with a hint of pale lavender.

From a taxonomic point of view the flowers do indeed resemble those of *rockii* but the remainder of the plant shows many differences. Bearing in mind that with tree peonies one must not get too entranced by the flowers this plant has more than sufficient features to represent another distinct species. In particular the leaflets are quite distinct in being lanceolate and smooth-edged with no teeth. As a reasonably competent taxonomist, I can declare with confidence that here we have a sixth wild species. You read it first here.

The abbreviation *ined.* means unpublished. A scientific name has to be officially published in a journal in order to become recognised. Meanwhile any use of the name at the species level is informal.

The next article will explore the connections between habitat, flower size, genetics and how much you pay at the nursery.





## 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.

I close the present newsletter with a much-deserved word of thanks to Shirley Lyon without whose unstinting support over many years the production and distribution of this work could never have progressed as successfully as it has done. Every good wish Shirley for a well-earned happy retirement.

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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/](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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