



University
of Victoria

University Finnerty Garden Friends October 2011 Newsletter

Dear Friends, when I heard from our editor reminding me that I needed to write the next Friends' letter, I suddenly realized that the summer is almost over. And it has been a funny summer—no really hot weather, and what there was, had been very late arriving. Along with those of many other people, my garden has behaved rather peculiarly—the growth on many trees and shrubs has been much greater than usual; the flowers have lasted much longer; and the hot weather crops, like squash and tomatoes, are still feeling the effects of their cold start. On the other hand, my rhubarb has flourished—huge thick stems.

The hummingbirds were late arriving, and never did show up in their usual numbers. In 2010, I mixed 249 litres of syrup, this year only 178 litres. And there are still a number of birds remaining around, a month after they should all have gone. I hope that the numbers show signs of recuperation next year. The ravens had three babies this year, and it was quite a job keeping all five birds fed. The young stayed around a long time—until the first of August, and were a real nuisance in the garden. I discovered that they like pulling things up. Each day I had to go out to put the small sprinkler heads back into the ground. And they removed all the labels they could

reach—just like kids anywhere who did not have enough to do. They became very tame and followed me around telling me that they were positively dying from lack of food!

I have been in Finnerty Gardens several times this summer, and am always impressed at the wealth of bloom. Carmen and the Advisory Committee have done an excellent job. Every time I go into the Gardens, I am both pleased and surprised to see the number of people wandering around, and often taking notes about a favourite tree or shrub. The Gardens are one way that the University can reach the people of Victoria, and judging from the numbers I have seen there, they are doing it very well. I hope, over the years, more people will come to value the Gardens and use them as a place of beauty where they take a few minutes to restore their spirits.

I read the other day that the weather gurus are considering the possibility that the coming year may also be a La Nina year. We could do without it, but time alone will tell.

Happy Thanksgiving to you all—and we do have a lot to be thankful for.

— *Betty Kennedy*

Travails of a Hybridiser

M.J. Harvey

Looking back I have spent most of my life making plant hybrids, starting at the postgraduate level at Durham University crossing Eurasian and North American wood violets. The aim then was to work out their evolutionary relationships, not to produce ornamental plants. This old experience enabled me to recognize that in local gardens a plant often misnamed *Viola labradorica* is in fact a genetically modified version of a common European wood violet, *V. riviniana* (named for the German herbalist/scientist Rivinianus). I wrote this up in an article printed by the Victoria Rhododendron Society and the Victoria Horticultural Society.

After retiring in 1990, I became more involved with ornamental plants so in this article I will explain my reasons for choosing certain genera, why I abandoned some of them, and the rewards and tribulations these have brought.

To start with, why make hybrids? I like to push the boundaries, produce things that have not previously existed, with the hope that they might be an improvement (however defined) over what currently exists.

Another reason to make hybrids is availability: the hybrid exists but is not available locally. Victoria is on the edge of the horticultural universe, supply of rare plants is a problem (with a tip of the hat to Fraser's Thimble Farms) and tighter import regulations (with which I agree), slow down the importation of new plants. An instance of this is the hybrid skunk cabbage, *Lysichiton americanum x camtschatcensis*. This hybrid cropped up spontaneously long ago in European gardens where both species were being grown adjacently but hybrid plants were not available in Victoria. What to do?

A little dusting with a watercolour brush of the pollen of the white species (contributed by Carmen Varcoe) on the flowers of the yellow one, and the reciprocal pollination, produced seeds and as a result we have this spectacular hybrid growing in Finnerty Gardens along the Long Pond. The details were previously written up in this Newsletter.

Not everything is a horticultural success. My first



attempt with decorative plants, way back in the 1950s, was to cross the two common *Daphnes*: spurge laurel, *D. laureola* and mezereon, *D. mezereum*, the fragrant spring shrublet. I used both the pink and white flowered forms of mezereon. Spurge laurel is of course now a nuisance weed along the West Coast, birds spreading the seeds freely, but in England where I then was it is quite rare. The hybrid was easy to make and vigorous but the appearance was terrible, combining the worst features of each parent. The leaves didn't know whether to stay on or fall off during the winter and the flowers were muddy red from the pink form of mezereon and a dirty brownish green from the alba form. I showed them to Brian Mathew who was at the time the *Daphne* specialist at Kew and he had to agree that they were not exactly a horticultural triumph. A dark leaved plant dubiously purporting to be this hybrid is available in Victoria. Don't bother.

After I moved to Halifax in 1963, I joined various Rhododendron and orchid societies. These societies cover large groups of plants which attract worldwide interest and must have memberships totaling in the multi-thousands. This degree of organization brings great rewards to the membership but presents problems to the amateur breeder since not only is there a couple

of centuries of breeding in these groups but there is an active commercial interest in producing hybrids which makes it difficult for newcomers to break into the market. I eventually dumped my orchid collection of tropical ladyslippers (*Paphiopedilum* and *Phragmipedium*) but found a small niche in the Rhododendron field which may form the subject of a future article.

So to be effective in plant breeding one has to concentrate on groups which are popular—I never sold a single skunk cabbage hybrid—but not so popular that the big commercial guns are trained on them. It helps to have some knowledge of genetics and plant physiology which will get around certain problems such as exactly when to pollinate a flower and how to germinate the seeds, and since I am an amateur breeder with no pressure to produce quarterly profits I can concentrate on plants with slow growth and long life cycles. In fact several of the genera I am currently working on have a two year requirement for the seeds to germinate in addition to needing a number of years to produce flowers. Thus I am actively pursuing groups such as Japanese maples, Clivia, Magnolia, peonies (tree and herbaceous), Podophyllum, yews and Trillium.

Let me use hellebores to illustrate the evolution of a formerly minor garden feature into a major offering in nurseries and the role that exploration, genetics and technology have played in producing the great diversity of hellebores now available. My own experiences will show the changes and why I have now largely left the field.

My parents grew two hellebores in their garden in the 1930s and these were probably splits from their parents' gardens. There were few nurseries of any size at the time. The two were the Christmas rose, *Helleborus niger* and a Lenten rose then called *H. purpurascens* but now recognized as *H. orientalis* subsp. *abchasicus*. The latter is derived from woodlands to the east of the Black Sea in the region of Georgia named Abkhazia (from which the Abkhazi Garden in Victoria is named). I remember the annual ritual of placing a sheet of glass supported by a couple of bricks over the Christmas rose to keep off the winter rains and black spot fungus. In the 1950s, exploring on my bicycle, I found the stinking hellebore, *H. foetidus* growing wild in a limestone valley nearby and the green hellebore, *H. occidentalis*, in the dry moat of Conisbrough Castle, the remains one presumes of a medieval herb garden. The world was very small then.

Prior to this in 1931 and unknown to most people, J.E.H. Stooke crossed the Christmas rose with pollen from the Corsican hellebore then called *H. corsicus* but now corrected to *H. argutifolius*. He called this hybrid *xnigercors* and it got an RHS Award of Merit in 1971. This easy to grow plant is highly desirable, looks like a Christmas rose on steroids but remained a curiosity unknown to the vast majority since it was seed sterile and slow to multiply by division.

In the 1940s Sir Frederick Stern at Highdown in Sussex noticed that his Corsican and Majorcan (*H. lividus*) hellebores had by themselves formed a bunch of hybrid seedlings, these were named *H. xsternii* for him and being seed fertile became slowly available to the public. Several seed strains were developed and have been available in Victoria for many years.

Then Eric Smith, who jointly ran The Plantsman Nursery, put *xsternii* pollen on a Christmas rose producing a series of plants somewhat like *xnigercors* but with varying pink and greenish flushes on the flowers. These were appropriately named *H. xericsmithii*. Alas these gorgeous plants were, like *xnigercors*, seed sterile and only available to the fortunate and moneyed few from the limited supply of vegetatively propagated plants.

This left the last remaining combination of the three then available plants to be made: Christmas rose crossed with the Majorcan hellebore, *niger x lividus*, and this was accomplished by Helen Ballard in the 1970s giving us *H. xballardiae*. This less vigorous combination is a little touchy as regards our local climate and makes a better pot plant protected in the winter. I met Helen Ballard a couple of times at the RHS Spring Shows in the Exhibition Halls at Vincent Square, London. Her exhibit was immensely popular and she was always surrounded by an aura of admirers but I managed to snap a couple of photographs of her. Before she died she entrusted her collection of plants to Gisela Schmiemann who continues to distribute open pollinated seed of her plants.

Meanwhile, in Victoria, in the 1950s, Doris Page was importing improved strains of the Lenten rose, then called *H. orientalis* but later designated *H. xhybridus* acknowledging the later incorporation of several other species into the gene pool. Doris Page was one of Victoria's gardening pioneers who ran a TV gardening

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New Zealand—a Garden Wonderful

Eryl Morton

When Polynesians first settled this remote land almost a thousand years ago and developed their own distinct Maori culture, they called it Aotearoa—the land of the long white cloud. So remote was it from other continents that unique flora and fauna evolved. The country's varied topography, shaped by the uplifting of tectonic plates and volcanic eruptions, is blessed in many areas with a rich sandstone soil. Dramatic mountain chains provide a barrier for the prevailing westerly winds creating diverse climate zones, from sub-tropical in the north, to mild temperate in the east and south and alpine at higher elevations. These natural settings, along with the lush soil and long growing season, have been exploited to the full by the avid gardeners of this nation. In the last few decades, they have created a wonderland of stunning gardens.

These incredible gardens are as diverse in character as the natural landscapes of one of the most beautiful countries on earth. The art and artistry of the creators is displayed in this wondrous setting using the plentiful palate of plant materials that thrive in the perfect growing climate. Their imagination has no bounds. There are gardens ranging from classic elegance to bold contemporary design, public botanical gardens, garden estates, miniature gardens, art and sculptural gardens, sub-tropical gardens, alpine gardens, native gardens and

combinations of them all. Not only do they put their imagination and their hearts into their gardens, they create them with their own hands whatever the size or shape of the land. But most noticeably they ebulliently share the joy of their creations with you. They personally escort you around and willingly discuss all the aspects of their gardens. Not only did they often provide lunch, tea and wine, but their natural hospitality was evident everywhere.

The garden tour I designed for November/December 2010 (spring and early summer in New Zealand) with the aid of Kiwi contacts, visited gardens displaying all of these characteristics. We had a direct overnight flight from Vancouver to Auckland, and so were able to get some sleep during the flight. On arrival, taxis took us to our hotel for breakfast and some freshening up before embarking on our first garden visits. We were a small party that fitted into a Mercedes Benz minibus. My husband was the driver. Another tour member became the navigator as she was deemed to have the technical skills necessary to operate the GPS and interpret the maps showing the locations of the gardens, taken from the Internet by yet another tour member. Though some of the gardens were in remote rural areas, these combinations brought us to our destinations safely and without becoming lost.



Paloma Garden. Photo by Eryl Morton

But the tour was not all about gardens. There were opportunities to take in some of the Maori cultural traditions, visit museums, wineries, hot springs and lake tours, stroll along almost deserted sandy beaches and enjoy the ambience of restaurants incorporating different ethnic origins. In three weeks we covered almost 3000 kilometres in total on North and South Island, eventually returning to Auckland from Queenstown in the south by air for the return flight home.

It is difficult to pick out favorites because each garden had its own individual appeal. But the private gardens created by their owners amazed us most.

Ayrlies, south of Auckland, was a sheep farm of thirty-five acres when the owners purchased the land over forty years ago. They horrified their farming neighbours when they immediately planted a mixed shelter belt of fifteen thousand trees to create a backdrop for the gardens. They built lakes, waterfalls and streams and created eleven acres of ornamental gardens with diverse themes. The sophistication of the plant combinations and colours was clearly evident as was the way it blended with the natural

landscape. Bev McConnell is still creating—transforming the wetlands leading into the ocean. The whole estate, tended by just three gardeners, is immaculate.

By contrast, the painter Robyn Kilty's tiny Victorian worker's cottage in Christchurch, known simply as Number Eleven, has a miniature garden which illustrates the artist's boldness by the fusion of the building and plants into a vibrant kaleidoscope of rich colours. We hope her property survived the latest earthquake.

Huguette and husband, George Michel, were born on the French tropical island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean before migrating in 1998 to the Marlborough wine region where George now tends his vines and runs a restaurant whilst Huguette continues to expand her romantic garden. It was Huguette's attraction to the New Zealand hydrangeas that drew them there and both house and garden share the same pastel shades of blue, yellow and white, enhanced by the dramatic backdrop of the Southern Alps.

Paloma Gardens, north of Wellington, was started by frustrated sheep farmer, Clive Higgie, in 1990. This

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Huguette and George Michel



Ayrlies Garden (above) and David Hobbs Garden

Our Finnerty Gardens Heritage

R. Bentley Sly, Curator, Finnerty Gardens

How often do we take time to reflect on our accomplishments or, in particular, the achievements of others who have made a significant impact on our lives long after the occurrence? Where am I going with this you ask? The answer lies in an American Rhododendron Society article, Volume 33, Number 1 dated 1979 that I recently read in a Virginia Tech University Digital Library and Archives electronic journal. The title, “Rhododendron Garden, University of Victoria, BC” and authored by Rex Murfitt and Alleyne Cook eloquently describes what was encountered when they initially entered the Simpson property at Lake Cowichan in March of 1975 to begin the arduous task of moving the rhododendron and azalea collection to UVic. Rex of course was the Superintendent of Grounds at this time, who, along with Alleyne Cook, oversaw the move of the Simpson collection from Lake Cowichan to Victoria. Given that the property had become overgrown and with only hand sketches drawn by Mrs. Simpson to follow, they were able to decipher planting patterns and anticipate what material they found as they came upon it. Fast forwarding in time to 2011, we realize now that they not only rescued a valuable plant collection and ensured a legacy but also provided a base on which to continue to enhance it. We cannot express enough our gratitude to Rex

and his staff, Alleyne and all those involved in this initiative. I invite you to read the article in its entirety at <http://bit.ly/raiDr1>.

It has been another busy year in the Gardens and we have Rhonda, Karen and Jeremy to thank for their ongoing dedication to maintaining the continuing high standards. Completion of the alpine bed makeover and dedication to Dr. Ian McTaggart Cowan concluded the enhancements planned for 2011 but worry not because the Friends of the Gardens Advisory Committee members are currently busy reviewing potential projects for 2012. We look forward to the results of their deliberations.

Elsewhere on campus, the Board of Governors recently approved construction of the new Centre for Athletic and Recreational Special Abilities building and an associated parking facility. At a cost of almost 60 million dollars, it will be the most ambitious capital development project to date and promises to provide a much needed boost to UVic’s physical education and varsity sports. In closing, the 2011 / 2012 school year is now only weeks away and we on campus can feel the energy building as plans for yet another busy academic year are being finalized and set for rolling out on September 6th.

New Zealand cont. from page 5

frost free amphitheatre has since been transformed by the creation of a lake whose banks have been filled with ten acres of exotic flora. Palms, cycads, bamboos and trees from the Pacific, Asia and Africa sit near the hill crests whilst the banks are devoted to an assemblage of aloe, agave, yucca, cacti and succulent plants.

David Hobbs built his own merchant banking empire and now allows himself at least two days a week in his eleven acre garden. Broadfields, near Christchurch, was carved out of flat grazing land beginning in 1993. The formal layout comprises of high hedges and canals of water whose adjoining borders are filled with an eclectic mix of native species. There remains one open space—for the house he promised to build his wife. We never met her!

Then in the south, overlooking the Otago Peninsula close to Dunedin, Margaret Barker and her late husband purchased in 1967 the long neglected Larnach Castle. This 19th century neo-Gothic Scottish style castle set in 35 acres has since been transformed into a magical wonderland of distinctive theme gardens using plants from many different climatic regions of the world. Indeed, the joy of nature’s beauty, which she shares willingly with everyone, is manifested in the delightful bronze sculpture of Alice in Wonderland. Alice dances on a lawn whilst other characters from Lewis Carroll’s book add to the overall sense that the masterpiece that Margaret Barker has created transports us all into a Utopian world of bliss.

Hybridizer cont. from page 3

show for many years and kept up to date especially from the publications of the RHS whose journals she had bound. I visited her about snowdrops in the 1990s and saw her library. Her tiny cottage off Haliburton Road had not been renovated for years and was subsequently demolished after her death and the land turned into the Doris Page Park as requested in her will.

The Doris Page Winter Garden at Glendale Gardens was set up while she was still living and contains especially her snowdrops and hellebores. Her Lenten roses are improved over what was available to my parents and contain clearer reds, pure pinks and whites with spotting of various degrees on the sepals.

But, back in England, yet more breeding work was being done on Lenten roses especially by Helen Ballard in the 1970s and 80s who incorporated genes from several of the wild species then becoming available from Italy and the former Yugoslavia. By this means she developed a range of colours including blacks—actually very deep reds and glaucous blues and good yellows both clear and spotted. Flower size was increased substantially but she hated doubles and composted any that cropped up in her rows of plants. Doubles later became a fad.

When I retired from academic life and moved to an acreage in Sooke one of my aims was to get involved in the rapidly developing field of hellebore breeding. I was further stimulated by a talk given by Gisela Schmiemann in Victoria and the seeds that she distributed from the Ballard collection from which I was able to extract double and anemone flowered forms.

But my big plan was aimed at that trio of rare Christmas rose hybrids. The plan was to resynthesise the hybrids and treat the seedlings with the natural drug colchicine (from *Colchicum*, the autumn “crocus”). At the right strength this has the effect of doubling the number of chromosomes in each cell. I wanted to accomplish this because hybrid sterility is often caused by the failure of chromosomes to pair in the process leading to the production of pollen and eggs. Doubling the chromosome number restores fertility, hence seeds can be produced and plants made available.

Things went swimmingly except I never discovered the right strength of colchicines to use and my plants were magnificent but sterile. I gave talks on the subject, most

certainly confusing most listeners by using some of the above names—plants they had never heard of and at the time had no opportunity to acquire. I like to think that one of my talks was of use to Marietta and Ernie O’Byrne when they developed their excellent series of hybrids at Northwest Garden Nursery. I was visited at Sooke by Jim and Audrey Metcalfe from Portland. Jim was a cardiologist who retired to breed hellebores and we had a common interest in developing *xnigercors*. We discussed my plans which, being a scientist, he could understand and he went the alternative route of having one of his plants ‘Honeyhill Joy’ tissue cultured by Terra Nova.

The process was expensive and it took a long time to get plants released to nurseries but it is now available in Victoria.

In the end my scheme to produce seed strains of the sterile hybrids was trumped by technology. Tissue culture enables millions of plants to be churned out cheaply. ‘Ivory Prince’, an *xericsmithii*, the first to be so propagated, was sold initially in Victoria at \$39.99 but a few years later I bought one at a hardware store for \$9.99. Other cultivars followed in quick succession. The contrast in supply with just a few years ago is startling.

Now, many people are working on hellebores. The reputation of the Christmas rose for being a good seed parent has continued; and hybrids with the Chinese hellebore, *H. thibetanus* which is only recently in cultivation; the bladder hellebore from Syria, *H. vesicarius*; and even some strains of the Lenten rose, *H. xhybridus* have been synthesized. None of these have been marketed very extensively and there are hints of problems with weather, vigour and slugs. My own experience is limited but my *niger x thibetanus* was exceedingly slow growing and died after five years without flowering.

The range of colours and the flower quality of the Lenten roses has been improved beyond the imagination of my parents or even Doris Page. I have largely left the field although I still produce a batch of seeds of doubles each year most of which are grown at Brentwood Bay Nursery. All my seeds are the result of careful hand pollination, nothing against bees mind you, they just don’t have much idea of genetics. Other genera call, I am getting excited by my upright growing cut leaved Japanese maples and then there are always new peonies . . .

Oh Deer, What Can the Matter Be?

Jeremy Quin

So far 2011 has been a wetter and cooler year than those we have come to expect. The Rhododendrons did not flower well. The Japanese cherries and heliobores, not to mention the weeds, have, however, been exceptional. We don't seem to be fully in control yet, so, unless the deer can do it for us, the deadheading and pruning will have to wait until the fall.

This year the deer seem to be everywhere around Victoria and not only one or two in isolation but in herds of three, five or more. The Gardens have had a fair share of the four-legged visitors. There isn't a day goes by when Karen and I haven't had to chase them out or have received a report of deer breaking in. There are six gates for them to enter and I recently watched as a doe literally jumped over the main chapel entry gates with the greatest of ease. Welcome to the tasty smorgasbord! But in an effort to control them from indulging in their favorite snacking material, Karen and I liberally spread meat meal every two weeks or so.

However, visitors also contribute to the problem. They



often leave the gates open. Some, who regularly use the Gardens pathway system to pass through on their way to other areas of campus, frequently comment that deer belong here and should be allowed to wander about in the Gardens. Rightly or wrongly, they hold the belief that the deer were here first. But it could equally be argued that cougars, a natural predator of the deer, were also here. Today we shoot cougars if they get close to urban areas and thus the deer population grows without a natural check.

Meanwhile Karen and I continue to don our Stetsons, let out our very best yippee-iyo-ki-yay as we go about rounding them up and heading them out.

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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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.

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