



WHIDBEY ISLAND CHAPTER  
The Meerbrook  
Rhododendron  
Gardens  
A.R.S. 2000 P.C.

# ARS Whidbey Island Chapter

# NEWSLETTER

Website: [www2.whidbey.net/dapont/ARS](http://www2.whidbey.net/dapont/ARS)

Meets the 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday of each Month  
 Fire District 5 Headquarters Station  
 215 East Race Road, Coupeville, WA  
**Refreshments:** 7:00    **Meeting:** 7:20

February 2005



## Annual Chapter Plant Sale

**Saturday March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

**8:00am to 4:00pm**

**Coupeville High School Gym**

This is our *major fundraiser for the year*. Get out early to find the rhododendrons you've been looking for. Kalmias and Japanese maples will also be available.

**Help needed before the Sale:** Pickup trucks and muscle to transporting plants from Bill Stipe's to the school.

**Help needed during the Sale:** Cashiers; experts to answer customer questions (bring your Greer's); sales people; helpers.

\* Contact **Bill Stipe** 678-8740 if you can assist.\*

## Rhododendron Educational Month

**Bill Hamm** has again volunteered to put together a Rhododendron Educational Month at the Freeland Library. For the entire month of April 'All Things Rhododendron' will be displayed at the library. There will also be an educational rhododendron program given one evening in the month. Bill has asked if you have any ARS Journals from the last couple of years that you would like to recycle please bring them to the meeting. These will be made available at the library for anyone that wants them. If you would like to assist Bill in any way with this project, give him a call at 331-2214.

## Horticultural Scholarship Fund

*Bill Stipe*

The Whidbey Island chapter of the American Rhododendron Society has decided to establish a scholarship fund. The fund will be called "The Whidbey Island Horticultural Scholarship Fund". The original seed money for this fund was donations to the Carl Jacobson Memorial Fund, which totaled \$4014.50.

A scholarship committee has been appointed by the Whidbey Island Chapter Executive Board to administer the Fund. The committee will consist of three members, one of which will be the standing chapter President. The current committee is: Bill Stipe, chairman, Mel Wright, and John Marshall (chapter President).

The objective of the Fund is to provide scholarships to Whidbey Island Residents who are pursuing an education in the horticultural field. The goal is to maintain adequate funds so that only the accrued interest will be used for the scholarships.

Additional donations to the Fund will be solicited from members of the Rhododendron Society and other garden clubs on Whidbey Island.

All donations to the Fund are deductible on Federal Income tax returns as the Fund is authorized by the American Rhododendron Society which is a non-profit corporation with 501 (c) 3 status.

Comments and/or suggestions are solicited from chapter members on the final formation of this Fund. Please direct comments to one of the members of the committee.

**Next Meeting: Wed, February 23**

**Program: Grafting 101**

**Don Kohlenberger** will demonstrate and discuss various grafting techniques. He will guide you through some of the basic plant physiology necessary to promote successful grafts and provide samples of grafts that took and ones that didn't. Here is yet another way to add rhododendrons to your landscape.

### Calendar of Upcoming Events

Feb 26-27	.....	Mt Baker Orchid Show/Sale Mt Vernon, WA
March 12	.....	Annual Chapter Plant Sale
March 23	.....	Chapter Meeting Rhodie Care
April 6	.....	Board Meeting @ Marshall's 6:30
April 20	.....	Meeting/Potluck/Show/Auction
April 27- May 1	.....	ARS National Convention Victoria, BC
May 25	.....	Annual Meeting Election of Officers/Short Program
Sept 9-11	.....	ARS Regional Conference Newport, OR

## From The Prez

John Marshall

At the last Board meeting, though small in numbers, was great in ideas. Let me share some of them with you.



The March meeting will be our **New Membership Month** Meeting. The program will cover Rhododendron 101 basics given by our knowledgeable experts. This will be a great time to bring your neighbors and friends to learn about rhododendrons and become members. Next month's newsletter will have details regarding the three speakers and subject matter.

The April potluck/truss show/auction meeting date is **changed to Wednesday, April 20**, one week earlier than normal. *Mark you calendars now!* This date change will relieve any conflict for all who want to attend the ARS Annual Convention in Victoria B.C., April 27-May 1. Now all our members can attend the meeting on the **3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday** and visit Victoria on the week after.

Our chapter's Annual Rhodie Sale will be Saturday, March 12 at the Coupeville High School Gym, 8am-4pm. Setup starts at 7am. Our sales area will be just inside the door to the gym with bigger rhodies outside by the steps. A signup sheet will be passed around during the February meeting for helpers. We need pickups to transport plants to the sale, sales people, experts to answer questions, helpers and cashiers. A reminder that this is the *Chapter's main fundraiser*. Come out early to choose from a large selection of 1 and 2 gallon and larger plants.

Need a winter break? What to see lots of color and beautiful blooming orchids? Come to the Mount Baker Orchid Society Annual Show and Orchid Sale, Saturday and Sunday February 26 and 27, 9am-5pm, at the Skagit Valley Garden 18923 Johnson Road, south of Mt. Vernon, off I-5 at Exit 221. The nursery is the red barn with the electronic bill board.

Speaker for February is our own **Don Kohlenberger** on grafting. Come enjoy the fellowship, cookies, coffee, great talk and demonstration.

See you all at the Meeting!

## In Memoriam

### James Ramsey 1924 – 2005

Jim was born and raised in Yakima Washington. He served in the Army in the South Pacific during WW2. He graduated from the University of Washington in metallurgical engineering and worked for the Boeing Company for 35 years.

Jim married Suzanne in 1948 and lived in Bellevue Washington with their 3 daughters until 1978 when they moved to Whidbey Island. Jim retired from Boeing in 1987. They built a new house and garden on Eagle Buff Road and started collecting rhododendrons. He was instrumental in starting the Whidbey Island Chapter of ARS, and served as President, board member, plant sale chairman, and he was a mentor to every new member. He served as the ARS District 2 director and was awarded the bronze medal.

I first met Jim at Boeing when we bowled in a company sponsored league for which he was the Secretary. We also had another common interest, Rhododendrons. Jim started planting Rhododendrons in every available spot in his Whidbey Island garden. His interest was in both species and hybrids, and particularly Frank Fujioka's hybrids.

Jim was a regular at all the ARS conventions and made many Rhodie friends across the US. During his tenure as District 2 Director, he regularly visited all of the District 2 chapters. He was a regular volunteer at Meerkerk Rhododendron Gardens, and sponsored a rock garden that bears his name.

Jim was a great communicator and kept in touch with his many friends, calling many on a regular basis.

Whenever we got together, which was almost daily, our discussions centered around two things: Rhododendrons and tractors.

I am proud to say he was my friend.

Bill Stipe

## The Golden Quince

Kristi O'Donnell

Ramsey made jelly from the last fruit of the aged tree, growing where an orchard once lived. The quince, a garden matriarch, stood as a memory of times past.

He pruned it up beautifully. We had all hoped those flowers would be kissed by giddy bees to make the branches heavy with fruit. Alas, the tree knew she could no longer bear the weight.

That last fruit; a golden quince.

Each spring her leaves would unfurl the brightest chartreuse. They themselves looked like delicate nosegays strewn among craggy stems. Then, delicate pink rosettes would glorify the canopy; an umbrella that cast a bit of shade on the bench below.

A little rhododendron nursery sprang upward all around the quince. Tiny nodding daffodils and lavender primroses dance at her feet, skirting the cedar friendship bench.

A good name for a bench; friendship. And that is what grew and prospered.

Good old Jake would arrive early every morning, to sit amongst the beauty. He was assured then of a hot cup of coffee and a homemade cookie; fuel to kick-start his day. With pipe in hand, he'd draw the aromatic smoke in slowly, keenly watching all around. Sometimes a young plant enthusiast would sit down and ask him a botanical question. Jake's eyes would twinkle and the quiet man would reveal secrets of stamens and treasures.

The quince holds many a story, but no longer would bloom. After consulting Ramsey and Jake on the fate of that wise ancient, we decided to fill the tree with new hope.

A hand-painted chickadee house now hangs from her branches, and Mel and Marilynn tend to a new family each spring. To replace the blossoms the quince no longer created, we planted a powder pink clematis to climb her sculptural trunk. Thick curving stems rise through her branches, curling this way and that. And last spring, Ramsey looked up to a rosy veil of new delight.

Our two friends, Jake and Ramsey, now get together to talk about the good times they shared in the gardens. And when you sit down with a steaming cup of coffee and a homemade cookie, you can sometimes smell the sweet pungent smoke and hear a bawdy joke wafting in from the farthest shore.

This tree no longer forms the fruits of golden quince. No, it nourishes the fruits of golden friendships.

The Golden Quince, is a story about two friends of Meerkerk Gardens, Jim Ramsey and 'Jake' Jacobson, from the soon to be released book of poetry: *The Golden Quince and Five Seasons of Friendship*.

© Kristi O'Donnell January 23, 2005



# Meerkerk Notes

Kristi O'Donnell

## Greetings from the Gardens:

Already the first Iris reticulata and Narcissus 'February Gold' are in bloom, along with Rhododendrons 'Tabitha', ririei and arboreum. Jake's favorite 'Cornubia' is in full bloom, and the buds on Elsie's 'Pink Prelude' and 'Chief Sealthe' are as gorgeous as rosy ornaments!

Several Friends of Meerkerk are now working in a new Garden, perhaps on new cultivars; such as Rhododendron 'Heaven Sent' or 'Gabriel's Horn'.

I am glad for the sunshine and flowers, as they help soothe parts of hearts that are mending. As we say good-bye to our friends on earth, I thank them for making my life and the Gardens a better place. Blessings to Jim Ramsey, Ken Sasson, Marge Baird, Wes Tarpley and the members of their families. Our friends shall be missed; not forgotten.

Here's to spring! I look forward to seeing you soon.



Meerkerk Gardens is cared for by a dedicated group of volunteers. Friends from the American Rhododendron Society, local garden clubs, Island County Master Gardeners and our community assist the year 'round. There are many ways you can volunteer to assist at the Gardens:

**2nd Saturday: Work Party, 8:45 - noon**

Join gardening friends for monthly work parties the 2nd Saturday of each month. We share a pot luck lunch at noon.

**Thursdays: Hands-on-Horticulture, 9 - noon**

Garden volunteers work with the staff on horticultural projects in the Gardens. Join the Island County Master Gardeners, Greenbank Garden Club and American Rhododendron Society members in the Gardens. We meet in the Volunteer Cottage.



For more information about volunteer opportunities:

Phone: (Susie) 360-678-4431

Email: meerkerk@whidbey.net

Web form: www.meerkerkgardens.org

Mail: PO Box 154, Greenbank, WA 98253

Volunteer & earn Guest Passes. Treat a friend & show off your efforts! Check the Volunteer sign-in-box for details.

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## Meerkerk Gardens 2005 Events

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March 19, 20	<b>Spring Opening Sale</b>	9-4
April-May	<b>PEAK BLOOM!</b>	Open Daily 9-4
April 9	<b>Early Blommers Sale</b>	9-4
April 23	<b>Meerkerk Magic Festival of Flowers</b>	Noon-4
April 30	<b>Whidbey Island Garden Tour</b>	
May 8	<b>Mother's Day Harp Concert</b>	Noon-4
May 14	<b>Purple Passion Rhodie Sale &amp; Whidbey Island ARS Rhodie Show</b>	9-4
July 30	<b>Meerkerk Medley</b>	5-9

# Fertilizing Whidbey Island Rhododendrons

Bill Stipe

There have been many articles released purporting to instruct how to fertilize rhododendrons for optimal results. Because these articles seem to be contradictory, I have been asked to try to clarify how this information applies to our gardens on Whidbey Island.

First, you need to recognize that local weather, soil, even plant varieties, dictate the necessity for, addition of, the timing, application methods, and formulation of fertilizers. Due to these varying conditions, a fertilizer recommendation for Whidbey Island is notably different than for almost anywhere else. Whidbey Island is truly unique. Our soils were deposited by glacial action thousands of years ago. The weather and native vegetation have made the soil acidic. Our climate is determined by our location between Puget Sound and the Cascade Mountains. There are even different mini climates and soil conditions on the island that affect growing conditions.



Then recognize that some rhododendrons may not need additional fertilizer; in fact some species will not tolerate high nitrogen levels. You should only consider applying fertilizers when a plant shows signs of decline and/or poor shoot growth.

Plants need 17 elements for normal growth. Carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen are found in air and water. Nitrogen, potassium, magnesium, calcium, phosphorous, and sulfur are found in the soil. These six elements are used in relatively large amounts by the plant and are called *macronutrients*. There are eight other elements that are used in much smaller amounts and are called *micronutrients*, or trace elements. The micronutrients, which are found in the soil, are iron, zinc, molybdenum, manganese, boron, copper, cobalt, and chlorine. All 17 elements, both macronutrients and micronutrients, are essential for plant growth.

Many factors are important in the utilization of plant nutrients by Rhododendrons. These factors combine soil physical and chemical characteristics and microbiological activity. Plant nutrients become available only when they are dissolved in the soil solution. Fertilizer salts separate into positive and negative ions before they can be absorbed and taken into the roots.

The health of the soil is dependent upon many factors including fertility, pH and adequate moisture to support microorganisms, mainly bacteria, fungi and actinomycetes. Vigorous microbial activity is the best indication that the soil will provide the resources required for rhododendrons to thrive. If well managed, the subsurface microbes will likewise benefit in a symbiotic relationship with the Rhododendron roots.

The microbes that work to decompose organic matter are also responsible for converting organic and slowly soluble fertilizer nitrogen to ammonium (NH<sub>4</sub><sup>+</sup>) ions via of a two-step reaction of *mineralization*. The microbes initially convert the nitrogen to amino acids for their own cell structure, *aminization*. They get their energy from the carbon that is released in the process. Ammonium is then formed in the sequential breakdown of the amino compounds, *ammonification*. The rate of ammonification is proportional to the solubility of the compounds. Though Rhododendrons can and do utilize some ammonium nitrogen, they are more adapted to take it up in the nitrate (NO<sub>3</sub>) form.

The process of converting ammonium to nitrate nitrogen is known as *nitrification*. The microorganisms involved are not the decomposers, but a separate group of bacteria called

*nitrobacter*. Unlike the decomposers, nitrobacters derive their energy completely and directly from carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>). The process of nitrification is rapid in warm soils, and is proportional to the rate of ammonification. The slower the rate of ammonification, such as with organic or slow-release fertilizers, the slower the conversion to nitrate.

An entirely different form of nitrogen release is *hydrolysis*. Hydrolysis is a chemical reaction that converts urea into ammonia (NH<sub>3</sub>), ammonium and carbon dioxide in the presence of moisture, usually with the enzyme *urease*. Urease is known as the universal enzyme because it is secreted by nearly all life forms, plant and animal. Like nitrification, urease hydrolysis is very fast in warm soils, usually complete within seven days during the growing season.

It is important that the grower understands the relationship between mineralization, nitrification, and the nitrogen release from different forms of chemical nitrogen. The nitrogen in most commercial fertilizers comes from urea, ammonium sulfate, or ammonium nitrate. Nitrate is fast acting and will attach readily to water molecules and will move with the water. It has a high potential for burning (over fertilizing) and leaching. Proprietary formulations of fertilizer (Nutralene® and/or Nitroform®) have been developed that are slow-release and supply both carbon (for energy) and nitrogen (for food) to the decomposing microorganisms. As these microorganisms mature and die, the ammonium nitrogen is steadily and gradually returned to the soil. Rhododendrons can utilize the nitrogen that is supplied by the dying microbes. The rate of mineralization, (nitrogen release), closely corresponds to the Rhododendrons requirements. When soil temperatures are too cold or too hot for plant growth, the same will be the effect on microbial activity. But nitrogen from these leach-resistant formulations still remains in the soil for use by the Rhododendrons as needed, up to 4 months depending on moisture and temperature.

There are other proprietary time-release fertilizers on the market that are based on polymer coated urea. The time release mechanism is the breakdown of the coating. This timing may not match the nitrogen requirements of the plants, and can be inefficient, even harmful.

There are many types of nitrogen sources. Most fertilization programs use a combination of these sources. The Rhododendron fertilizer that I recommend contains a blend of several nitrogen sources and other macro and micro plant nutrients. When purchasing fertilizer, look for both quick and slow-release nitrogen sources, while the quick-release source provides quick greenup, the slow-release component gives a long-lasting effect and adds a margin of safety from fertilizer burn and nitrate leaching.

Another factor, the pH of the soil, will affect the availability of many plant nutrients. Whidbey Island soil is typically acidic, in the 4.5 to 6 range. The ideal pH for rhododendrons is 5.5 to 6.5. The addition of lime, (calcium carbonate), will raise the pH and sulfur will lower it. Lime and nitrogen should not be applied at the same time or some of the nitrogen will be lost as ammonia gas. If a soil test indicates your soil is too acidic, apply lime in the fall. Dolomite lime is a good choice because it also contains magnesium

Due to our mild climate, rhododendrons may continue root grown during the winter, however most of the root growth will take place in the early spring as the temperature rises. If a slow release fertilizer is applied during the early spring (late Feb. and March), the nutrients will be available when the plants need them most. An application of a urea or ammonium based fertilizer is not recommended for Rhododendrons because of the potential for burn and loss due to leaching. Because Nutralene® or Nitroform® is timed release, another application

after bloom is not required. In fact a late summer or fall application of any nitrogen may cause rhododendrons to push new growth which could be harmed by cold temperatures. It is better to encourage shoot growth in spring or early summer.

#### TIPS FOR FERTILIZING SANDY SOIL

Because of its structure, sand does not hold on to nutrients very well. Many plant nutrients dissolve in water, so they tend to leach out of sandy soil fast. For this reason, it is important to use a timed-release fertilizer that won't wash through the soil before plants can make use of it.

Sandy soil dries out quickly, so it's important to use mulch to slow down evaporation from the soil's surface.

#### TIPS FOR FERTILIZING CLAY SOIL

Clay soil has many tiny spaces that hold on to water and nutrients. Because water that holds dissolved nutrients moves through clay soil slowly, it's important to mix fertilizer into the soil well.

If you have a problem site that stays wet and packed down all the time, consider planting rhododendrons in raised beds. Besides improving the soil's drainage and texture, people are less likely to walk in clearly marked beds. Footsteps squeeze the air out of clay soil, which makes it even more hard and dense.

This all may seem complicated to the average Rhododendron grower, but I wanted to explain why there are conflicting recommendations. Based on soil tests of my garden, the following fertilizer is what I use. I apply approximately 1 handful (4 oz.) per foot of height, at the dripline in early spring.

N .....	11.56%	Nitrogen
	2% ammoniacal nitrogen	
	6% urea nitrogen	
	4% water insoluble nitrogen	
P.....	9.35%	Phosphorus
K .....	15.03%	Potash
Mg .....	1.6%	Magnesium
S .....	9.54%	Sulfur
B.....	0.31%	Boron
Cu .....	0.14%	Copper
Fe .....	4.57%	Iron
Mn .....	0.35%	Manganese
Mo.....	0.0035%	Molybdenum
Zn .....	0.33%	Zinc

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## MEETING REMINDERS

### Bring...

- ❖ *Rhodie and companion plants questions*
- ❖ Blooming trusses!
- ❖ Plants for the dollar table
- ❖ Lots of money
- ❖ A friend
- ❖ Your enthusiasm

...and especially your warmth and friendship to share!

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Please submit articles of interest for Feb Newsletter by **3/11/05**

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