

University Finnerty Garden Friends

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NEWSLETTER ● OCTOBER 2005



Dear Friends,

When our editor Sam Macey phoned to ask me for my letter for the October issue of the Newsletter, I suddenly realized that fall was almost upon us. It was a glorious summer, and the heavy rain we had in August 2004, caused all the shrubs to put out an enormous setting of flowers. It may also have been the cause of the very heavy bloom on the arbutus, which was spectacular. However, the effort seems to have seriously weakened some of the trees and there appears to be a substantial die back on many of the island's arbutus.

My garden—weeds and plants alike—has made a tremendous effort this year and has kept me busy trying to stay ahead of the growth. So many of the shrubs need a heavy pruning. My water supply has been much more ample (about 48,000 gallons) and it lasted until this week when we pumped 14,000 gallons from a neighbor's pond. My friends call my place "Betty's tank farm!" The water is all from rain which falls on the main roofs and then is pumped into the storage tanks. I collect from about 2700 square feet of roof, and this fills the tanks by Christmas in a normal year. It is truly amazing what we can collect from a relatively light amount of rain. (Galiano is the driest of the Gulf

Islands and gets only about 30 inches of rain a year.) Water has always been in short supply on the island, and many of the newer houses are now installing cisterns in the basement for the storage of rain for household water needs. Many of the existing wells have become useless over the recent years because they have been invaded by salt water.

Finnerty Gardens were much admired by the visitors attending the American Rhododendron Society Annual Meeting. By the time you read this, the trees and shrubs will be showing their fall colours, and they truly are spectacular. The fall blooming shrubs are looking great and the Gardens are worth a visit in the near future. Carmen and the Advisory Committee have done an excellent job. All of us who love the Gardens owe them a tremendous vote of thanks.

We will not be publishing a calendar this year, but are discussing a system whereby we can once again publish it—we need a distribution system in place before we enter into a new year of sales commitments. .

I would like to thank all of you for your interest and support during the past years. And, even though it is early, may I wish you all a great Christmas and a happy New Year.

Betty Kennedy



Dead Man's Fingers

Margaret deWeese

Around the time of Hallowe'en last year, I visited the UBC Asian Gardens. To my delight at that time of the season, admission was free, the day warm and sunny and—apart from industrious workers clearing mounds of recent prunings from the vast collection—I was practically alone walking under the Asian trees and rhododendrons. It was fun trying to figure out which species was which. But, while failing my self testing, I noticed hanging from an unusual tree some curious blue pods, a number of which had fallen to the ground. I looked for the label and found *Descasinea fargesii* or the “Witches Fingers Tree.” I thought they would add to decorations by the Hallowe'en cauldron at the front door of my grandchildren's house, already decked out with spider webs, and ghoulish ghosts made from sheets and gruesome latex masks. I picked up a few of the fallen pods, which are a long, deep blue with bumps that resemble bony knuckles and continued on my walk.

When I returned to the house, my granddaughter was fascinated by the pods. We broke one open to see it was filled with a soft goo and plenty of seeds, rather like a fleshy grape. In the Himalayas, the pods are edible and eaten raw or dried. Tavia decided it would be fun to plant the seeds and maybe she would have a witch finger tree for herself:



Tavia Planting Seeds

When I left for home, I brought along the little peat pots with their goo-encased seeds to put in my greenhouse. Over the winter, the pots dried out and were certainly exposed to below freezing in the otherwise empty greenhouse. Later I thought I noticed something light green in some of the pots, so I took them outside to let the rain water them. Nothing happened.

Eventually I had a major cleanup and I thought to throw the pots out, but really they were not mine to throw away, so I hid them in the propagating frame. In mid May, I looked in and to my amazement there were dicotyledons in most of the pots. *Descasinea fargesii* has bright green pinnate leaves! Just maybe Tavia would get her tree after all. I gave them a watering of a special “magic” growth hormone a friend brought back from Japan and the dicotyledons practically began to rise on broomsticks, tweaking out little pinnate leaves within hours.



Descasinea fargesii

My granddaughter's first trees from seed. I am proud of her! These trees tolerate most soil types as long as the soil is well drained but they need protection from cold winds and are hardy to -23° C.

So, if you are out one dark Hallowe'en night and you see blue bony fingers pointing in your direction from a deciduous pinnate leafed tree, you might be under the spell of the unusual Witches Fingers tree, *Descasinea fargesii!*



**Personal Vignettes of Finnerty, A Gardener's View
Rhonda Rose and Carmen Varcoe**

To get a different perspective on this Victoria landmark, I chatted with Rhonda Rose, Finnerty's senior gardener, on a recent sunny warm day in August. It was indeed a pleasure to hear all about the many visitors to Finnerty. Rhonda has a very personal connection, not only with the gardens but with the many people who have visited over the years. Since beginning to work in the gardens in 1990, she has shared their personal tragedies and daily worries.

While sitting in Finnerty, one long-time visitor greeted Rhonda by name and

proceeded to recall the many years she had walked in Finnerty Gardens. Her main purpose was to walk all the dogs she had acquired or adopted from her daughter's Samoyed to her great granddaughter's shepherd mix called "Cassidy". She regards Finnerty as her own "personal estate" and feels that the gardens have given her solace and joy over the past 25 years. Rhonda commented that all the regular dog visitors are known to the gardeners by name, even if their owners are not.

Another neighbour walked by and also greeted Rhonda by name. She has frequented the gardens for over 13 years and finds it the most peaceful place to walk and think through her daily problems. At Christmas, Rhonda and her gang are often given fudge from an employee of the Elliott Building, as well as hand-painted Christmas ornaments.

Other neighbours frequently stop and seek out Rhonda and the gardeners there for horticultural advice. One couple was enthralled with some bamboo growing in the gardens and Rhonda offered them a piece. A year later, they showed up with a different variety and donated it to Finnerty. Another woman went home with a "piece of Finnerty" and remarked that she had spotted a large clump of *Macleaya* (plume poppy) in the gardens which had brought back memories of her childhood in her grandmother's garden. Unable to find it in the nurseries she was very appreciative for this small souvenir.

Finnerty has appealed to a broad spectrum of interest groups and Rhonda has been able to note these regularly while working in the gardens. Large numbers of seniors from neighbouring rest homes are frequent visitors, grateful that the paths are level and easily negotiable with many places to sit and enjoy the views. A retired math professor often rides through on his scooter. David Turpin jogs daily through the gardens. Gerry Robson walks his mother through when she visits. Also, many other employees of the university use Finnerty as a great place to

enjoy their lunch hour. Daycare children from UVic and people with small children find the gardens a delight. For them, Finnerty is child friendly with all kinds of cute rabbits to pursue and ducks to watch in the ponds.

Another frequent visitor is our famous bird artist Fenwick Lansdowne who probably gets lots of views of the many birds inhabiting Finnerty throughout the year. Other artists often visit in groups to picnic and paint as there are so many beautiful vistas to copy. Avid birdwatchers have also been rewarded with seeing the baby Coopershawks being banded. The gardeners too were part of this and had the opportunity to hold baby chicks while they were being banded. They were carefully lowered in a backpack and then gently returned to their nest. An American couple was passing by while all this was happening and looked up to see in addition their very first sighting of four Bald Eagles circling about. They were ecstatic and immediately asked about real estate in Victoria! In August, the doves were busily and drunkenly feasting on the cascara berries. All through the winter the Ana's hummingbirds are kept well fed with the nectar from Mahonia and winter-blooming honeysuckle. Also, the tall very heavily berried Sorbus keep the flickers and robins totally happy in the late summer and fall.

From early spring onward, photographers are always in the gardens using Finnerty as a backdrop for graduation, wedding and other family events. Daphne Donaldson has really furthered the awareness of the gardens with her superb shots of Finnerty in the UVic calendars.

Local and international families frequently use Finnerty Gardens as a destination. One recent tribute was to "the best mother-in-law in the world,"

whose reward was to be "taken for a stroll through the gardens and surprised and greeted by all her grandchildren wishing her a 'Happy Birthday.'" Families have also bought plants or benches in memory of their loved ones and Finnerty has come to be a place to remember these special people.

The Drama Faculty has used the gardens as a backdrop for late summer performances. In late August this year, they will have performed *Alice In Wonderland*. Musicians and actors often employ Finnerty as a place to rehearse. Meditation, Tai Chi and Yoga groups have all used the gardens as somewhere in which to connect peacefully.

Above all, the plants in the garden make this a very special place. Trees draw the Victoria Heritage Tree Group as several of our trees are on the register. Collections of maples, magnolias and rhododendrons have also brought people to Finnerty from all over the world. A recent Australian visitor was disappointed that she had not been able to visit during rhododendron time. However, there is always something to see and remember. In the fall, the outstanding colour is provided by the *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* (katsuras) along the Henderson Road where, in early October, they will turn a bright butter yellow and scent the air with burnt sugar as they fall.

This summer Rhonda, thanks to Tony, has had ample help in the gardens from two certified gardeners. She has been nicknamed by her co-workers the "Finicky Gardener" of the "Shangri La De Da" gardens. As a result of the extra help, Finnerty was looking superb on this warm August day. Much weeding, summer pruning and cutting back have made the gardens look particularly well maintained.

Rhonda sees Finnerty as a wonderful place to work and continually enjoys the passing of the seasons. In winter, the low light makes the plants appear to be almost illuminated. Her vision for Finnerty would be to see more planting on the Ring Road to tie in with the Henderson borders, thereby

providing a more continuous view as the drivers enter and leave UVic. Many drivers are often not aware of this oasis on campus until they are leaving it. So, it continues to be "Victoria's Best Kept Secret." Thanks, however, to dedicated people like Rhonda we hope that the gardens continue to attract a wide variety of delighted visitors.



Growing Older Margaret deWeese

Many people hate growing older and with all the infirmities that come with aging, their dislike of additional years is justified. Gardeners are particularly vulnerable because they are used to planting on steep banks, balancing on a heavy shovel, and wheeling much heavier loads than are sensible. I know some wonderful gardeners who have taken nasty falls in their planting beds as opposed to those who fall from their own beds.

The gardening clothing industry should take note and design protective gear for the aging hobbyist. Personally, I would like a light-weight racing bicycle helmet with a brim to shield the face from damaging ultraviolet rays, since no gardeners seem to go inside at the height of the uv count. I know there are knee pads and elbow pads but perhaps there needs to be waterproof, aerated, protective work pants for hips and knees, with plenty of pockets or tabs for various lightweight tools, which would eliminate the incongruous sight of skateboard elbow and knee pads on seniors.

Gardeners, however, are compensated by the upbeat side of growing older. To watch, year by year, one's favourite plants growing or one's

plan developing into a place of riotous colour or green serenity is the best antidote for aging. What will it look like next year? What will it look like in five years? How tall will the trees grow?

Then the only fear is what happens when you can't look after it anymore. And that is what I shall hate most of all.



The Last Crypedium in England Margaret deWeese

Gardening shows on television range from the boring, and predictable to the exciting and revelatory. The series, "A Year at Kew Gardens" was the latter, and one which couldn't be missed. One section dealt with planting some Crypedium in an unmarked part of England in the hopes that these little gems would grow undisturbed and become once more a factor in the wild flowers of the countryside.

Last year, I purchased Crypedium calceolus—known as the Yellow Lady's Slipper, or the Yellow Moccasin Flower—from the Island Specialty Nursery in Chemainus. Its golden yellow pouch seemed to me more like an elegant purse than a shoe.

When I planted it in my wild flower bed, alongside the Dodecatheon, Erythronium and Camas we saved from the mountain suburbia bulldozers, I wasn't very hopeful it would survive. Among other things, it has to have the symbiotic association of the mycelium of a fungus with its roots and I wondered whether my forest floor would supply its mycorrhizal needs? Would it be damp enough, as the other wild flowers get little watering throughout the summer months?

I thought of the t.v. show and how could it happen that the last wild crypedium in England had to be replaced with a nursery grown one! If thought transfers work, then that beautiful little orchid received a blast of love for it did survive and came up in time for

visitors to admire this Spring. It looked just as good as it did in the nursery the year before, undiminished in size or splendour, and it had been planted in very little soil, mainly forest bed. I asked Don MacWatt about where he had got his to propagate and he told me that his father-in-law had owned a thousand acres in Manitoba where the cypedium grew in the ditches by the fields and the wind carried the finest of seed so that they would appear in the ploughed furrows. Here the price is measured in gold but this dainty Lady's Slipper, as long as it isn't picked, seems as hardy as a Farmer's Boot.



Cypedium



**From our Administrator,
Shirley Lyon**

**University of Victoria
Finnerty Gardens Calendar**

Thank you for your wonderful support over the past three years in which the University of Victoria Finnerty Gardens Calendar has been produced and enjoyed by so many. Each year the calendar has generated substantial funds to support ongoing enhancements within the Finnerty Gardens at the University of Victoria.

As Betty Kennedy mentioned in her opening message, we will not be publishing a 2006 calendar because of distribution problems. The planning committee is, however, reviewing a variety of promotional options (including a calendar) and we hope to provide an update in the next newsletter.

**University of Victoria
Finnerty Gardens Website**

We are pleased to announce that the University of Victoria Finnerty Gardens website has recently been moved to UVic's website and is undergoing updating. Future plans include the addition of a photo gallery showcasing all the beautiful calendar images. We are very grateful to Gareth Shearman and Pat Fuller for doing such a wonderful job of looking after this site for the past several years.

For those of you who have access to the internet, you can find this website at: <http://www.external.uvic.ca/gardens>.

Please take a look—we welcome your feedback and suggestions. Contact information is included on the website.



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Autumn Scenes from the Finnerty Gardens Calendars

Courtesy of Daphne Donaldson

(photos are available for viewing in colour at www.external.uvic.ca/gardens)



