

the GAZETTE

BIRCHWOOD GARDEN CLUB

www.birchwoodgardenclub.org

CHARTERED 1931

February Topic: Fruit Selection and Care

Submitted by Tamara Hall

The Birchwood Garden Club will hold its February 2017 meeting on Wednesday, February 1, at 7:00 p.m. in the Whatcom Museum of History and Art. Tom Thornton, Executive Director of Cloud Mountain Farm Center, will offer guidance on the best varieties of apples, cherries, pears, plums, peaches, quinces, and grapes for our area.

So you want to grow your own tree fruit or grapes? Your purpose might be control of the fruit (chemical exposure), improved fruit quality, unique varieties, or pride of ownership. But there are important warnings: poor varietal selections and poor growth techniques can make your venture into home fruit production a frustrating endeavor.

With expert advice from Tom Thornton, you will avoid these issues and your garden will yield bountiful fruit harvests. His presentation will provide an overview of how to select the best varieties for maximizing fruit quality and quantity and minimizing problems with pests and poor growth.

Winter Foliage and Flowers

Few shrubs reach their peak in the middle of winter, but that is precisely when *Sarcococca ruscifolia* begins to shine. Tiny white flowers hidden amongst its glossy, dark-green foliage,



open to release a delightful perfume of sweet vanilla. The perfume wafts in the winter air from January through February. Following flowering, small scarlet berries appear.

Sarcococca originally comes from China and the Himalayas and is related to the common boxwood. *Sarcococca* is deer resistant, evergreen, gets about 3-4' tall in time (a lot of time, it's a slow grower!), and is one of the few plants that will

tolerate deep, dark shade. The plant is easy to prune to keep to size and naturally forms a nice compact mound with arching branches.

Sarcococca is easy to grow, not susceptible to disease or pests. The plant prefers well-drained soil and is drought tolerant in the Pacific Northwest. *Sarcococca* thrives in USDA Zones 7-9. A possible negative aspect of the plant is spreading through underground runners; this usually is not a problem as the runners are easy to snip away and spreading does not occur until the plant is fully mature (after 10 years of slow growth).

Because of its fragrant flowers, *Sarcococca* is a good choice to plant near a walkway, porch or foundation. This shrub is especially useful for woodland gardens and as a structural plant for the shady border. Because of its dark green foliage, it acts as a foil for plants with brighter foliage and flowers.

Great Pollinator: Orchard Mason Bee

You too can become a bee keeper with mason bees! It's easy to get started with this native pollinator. The orchard mason bee (*Osmia lignaria*) is a small solitary bee which lives in thin reeds or holes left behind by other insects.



This is the time of year for getting mason bees and supplies which are available at garden centers and farm cooperative stores. Some gardeners install “mason bee houses” to encourage mason bees to visit and stay in their gardens.

Mason bees are typically non-stinging and since they don't live in swarms these bees are easy to keep, providing excellent pollinating services in early spring. Anybody with apple or pear trees would especially benefit from a population of orchard mason bees close by.

The mason bee is smaller than a honey bee, but they have stout bodies and are usually a metallic green or bluish in color. This is one of the main reasons why the

mason bee is so sought after – the colors on this bee are simply amazing.

Mason bees can only be found in the spring time as the bees will break out of their cocoons at the first sign of spring. First the males will come out and then the females will remain until the weather completely breaks. Once the females break out of their cocoons, the first thing the mason bees will do is mate. The males will then die and the female bees will begin looking for a place to build their nest and lay eggs . . . and the cycle begins again.

Orchard mason bees are amazing pollinators. Unlike honey bees that have leg pockets for pollen storage, a mason bee must stuff pollen into stiff hairs on her abdomen. This less sophisticated method leads to much better pollination because on each flower she tries to stuff pollen into the hairs, but some inevitably falls out, likely pollinating the flower.

While a honey bee typically pollinates about five percent of the flowers it visits in a day, it is estimated that a mason bee pollinates ninety five percent. And on top of that the mason bee visits more than twice as many flowers every day!

Time to Plant Bare-Root Roses

Now is the time when nurseries and garden centers feature bare-root roses.

Bare-root roses survive planting in winter because they are dormant. But if left too long in warm temperatures, they will begin to sprout. Only buy plants that are still dormant or those that the nursery has planted in pots.

Before planting bare-root nursery stock, soak the roots in water overnight. If you're not ready to plant, cover the root system with moist soil or compost, and store in a shady location.

When ready to plant, set the plant in the hole only as deep as it was growing in the field or container (look for soil stains on the trunk). Grafted roses should be set so that the graft union is about an inch above the soil line. Then wait for summer beauty!

Save the Date!

The 25th annual plant sale will be held on Saturday, April 29th from 9:00 a.m. until noon at the Bellingham Public Library. The March Gazette will provide details on preparing plants for the sale, and volunteer sign-up sheets will be available at the next meeting. Time to get ready!

Plant of the Month: *Mahonia x media* 'Charity'

For a spectacular winter-blooming shrub, try Mahonia Charity. Different from our native variety (*Mahonia aquifolium*), this hybrid was cultivated specifically for garden locations. It is a well-behaved plant with abundant flowers and berries and a statuesque growth habit that make it a stellar specimen for the winter garden.



Admittedly, all Mahonias suffer the Achilles heel of those spiny leaves, which require stout gloves for cleanup, but the virtues of this plant far outweigh the discomfort

of the occasional puncture wound! Lush, bold, evergreen foliage flushes in bundles of red and plum in the spring.

From November to March, foot-long stalks of pea-sized, honey-scented flowers of a cheerful canary-yellow hue light up even the most dismal winter day. The blossoms are loaded with nectar which attracts wintering hummingbirds.

The blossoms are followed by shiny, currant-sized, blue berries lightly dusted with a waxy, whitish coating and hanging in grape-like bunches from mid-summer through fall. These are greedily gobbled by all kinds of birds.

Mahonia Charity is a slow grower reaching a height of 6-10 feet after 10 years. It is low maintenance and thrives in part to full shade. This shrub does spread

by suckering so be careful and remove any suckers that move into areas where you don't want more to establish. Prune the tips in early spring, while the plant is young, to make a fuller bushier specimen.



Mahonia Charity has several tolerances worth noting such as pollution and drought resistance. It tolerates sandy sites and clay.

With four seasons of interest in a fairly compact package, Mahonia Charity is a great way to bring color and structure to the winter garden.

Wood Ash in the Garden

With the onset of winter and colder temperatures many of us have started using our fireplaces. Many gardeners like to use the ash from their fireplaces or wood stoves in their garden. While this practice is quite common, gardeners should be aware that wood ash will raise the pH of the soil (for 15 lb/100 sq ft application the pH can change from 4.0-6.5). If the soil pH is already 7.0 or greater adding wood ash is not recommended.

Wood ash does contain some nutrients; in general hardwoods contain five times the nutrients as softwoods. Wood ash contains 20-50 percent calcium carbonate (a type of lime), 3-7 percent potash, and 8-20 percent phosphorus. Ashes also contain trace elements of sodium, magnesium, iron, copper, zinc, manganese, boron, silicon, and sulfur.

Wood ash will also promote nitrogen loss from ammonia-based fertilizers such as ammonium sulfate or ammonium nitrate. If you plan to add high-nitrogen fertilizers to your lawn or garden, stop applying wood ash approximately one month before application. Ash from burned trash, cardboard, and painted or stained wood can be toxic and should not be used in the garden.



President Judy Boxx welcomed thirty-eight members. In addition, four guests attended the meeting. Minutes of the December meeting were approved.

Kathy Sparks gave the Treasurer's report.

Old Business: There was no old business

New Business: Garden Tour Committee chairs Sheri Lambert and Carol McBride have requested suggestions for possible gardens to tour this coming summer.

Judy Boxx announced on behalf of Dianne Gerhard that the 25th annual plant sale will be held on Saturday, April 29th from 9:00 a.m. until Noon.

Program Coordinator Tamara Hall announced that next month's speaker will be Tom Thornton from Cloud Mountain Farm. Tom will be discussing the varieties of fruit-bearing trees that are best for our area and showing us pruning techniques.

Tamara also mentioned that next month she will be bringing in some of her mason bees for anyone who is interested in starting them in your yard. She indicated they only need to be in the refrigerator until you can get the box needed to install them.

Our speaker tonight was Laurel Baldwin, coordinator for Whatcom County Weed Control who spoke about the area's noxious weeds.

Thank you to Bonnie LeVan and Chris Mohnkern for our snacks tonight and to Sheri and Russ Lambert for our great coffee.

Welcome New Members

We are pleased to introduce two new members who joined Birchwood Garden Club this month.

**Mary and Peter Young,
Jane Smith & Larry Guevara
WELCOME**

Snacks

This month's meeting snacks will be provided by Carol McBride and Zapote Gregory.

Thank You

The Birchwood Garden Club (BGC) is open to everyone in Whatcom and Skagit Counties who supports the objectives of the organization. BGC meets the first Wednesday of each month from September thru May. Annual membership is \$10 for an individual, \$15 for a family, due in September. Membership applications are available from the website: www.birchwoodgardenclub.org.

The Birchwood Garden Club Gazette is published monthly, September thru May, by the BGC. Articles, inquiries, letters to the editor, or other comments should be directed to the Editors, Ken and Stephanie Salzman, at the above address or via e-mail to: sasalzman@comcast.net

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Plant Sale – Dianne Gerhard

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