

RHODO HEAVEN

Rhododendrons draw international praise and visitors 100 years later

By Kyla Jardin

Long before a sleek sports car or sexy yacht defined luxury, chic socialites sipped imported Darjeeling and raised their eyebrows at a new variety of rhododendron. Adorned with trusses that swept and reached like the Victorians' own puffed sleeves, this bright-blooming shrub was a coveted fashion accessory in the 19th century.

The "rose tree" of the ancient Greeks was also the subject of serious study for George Fraser, inspiring this gifted botanist to plant his passion for rhododendrons in BC's own backyard. 100 years later, countless plants from Fraser's former nursery, as well as his delicate hybrids thrive as his living legacy for the island village of Ucluelet, BC.

Whether peppering hiking trails, posing majestically alongside historic streets or peeking between - and even *over* - local homes, Ucluelet's rhododendrons tell the story of a pioneer who transformed a young village into an artist's palette.

Between March and July of each year, ribbons of rich hues unravel from winter's knotted green buds, weaving their way through the coastal community. As this spectrum, ranging from apricot to mauve to pure white, spills across town, locals soak up the experience.

"It's a real thrill when spring arrives," smiles Julie Bird, a 10-year resident with a sizeable collection of historic rhododendrons on her property. "You've got to see all those flowers to believe them. Having something so special right outside our door is pretty amazing."

Exotic flora and fauna were incomparable status symbols in Fraser's day. Intrepid plant-hunters roamed the earth, plucking rhododendrons from the Himalayas to New Guinea, in the service of an insatiable English aristocracy. Keen to construct a nursery and pursue his many horticultural interests, George Fraser set his own sights far from his native Scotland.

Shortly after his arrival in 1885, Fraser was handpicked to be the first foreman of Victoria's Beacon Hill Park, where he planted a variety of rhododendrons that still survives as one of the park's historic highlights. In 1894, Fraser migrated north to the village of Ucluelet. Purchasing 236 acres of property for \$236, he laid the foundation for what he would later call his "rhodo heaven." Local George Fraser authority Bill Dale, believes the rugged setting suited Fraser's tastes exactly - as a botanist and a Scot.

"I think the landscape reminded him of his home in Scotland, and the conditions are just perfect for growing rhodies," says Dale. At 85, he is an active grower of Fraser favourites and hybrids, donating them to groups who seek to promote this branch of BC's heritage.

The George Fraser Project is one such group. Based in Ucluelet, this small but stalwart bunch of volunteers is committed to preserving and celebrating the achievements of the world-renowned botanist who was also a founding father of their community.

Since 2001, the project along with the local heritage committee has hosted "George Fraser Day" in Ucluelet. This festival, which includes rhodo tours, guest speakers, and concerts, is as dynamic as the ubiquitous blossoms it celebrates. Project members are planting nearly 200 shrubs along the entrance to the village in preparation for this year's events.

"By spring there will be a spectacular display of blooms beside the highway leading into town," says Wanda McAvoy, a member of the George Fraser Project who has witnessed a rhodo renaissance since the project began its activities in 2000.

"Calls are coming in from all over the island and even the mainland! We've received donations of rhodos, help with funding and many people have offered historical information about Fraser as well. The momentum is really exciting."

For a community that has endured the forestry and fishing industries' decline, this enthusiasm is more than welcome. Widespread interest in Fraser's legacy suggests that rhododendrons and history are homegrown resources with long-term promise.

"I think people are just beginning to realize what a gem Fraser created in this area," says Abby Fortune, Director of Recreation and Tourism for the District of Ucluelet. "It's a combination of history and visual impact that is truly unique."

In 1991, The American Rhododendron Society honoured Fraser's contributions as an early developer and hybridizer with its rare Pioneer Award. A short walk or drive between Peninsula Road and the harbourfront – once the epicentre of Fraser's gardening activities – reveals the depth of this pioneer's impression on his adopted home.

George Fraser, it seems, was equally impressed. Shortly before his death in 1944, he confided to friends and family, "I don't know where I'm going to end up, but it doesn't matter. I have had my heaven here on earth."

IF YOU GO

Heritage Fair and George Fraser Day, Ucluelet - Saturday, May 29, 2004
District of Ucluelet: www.dist.ucluelet.bc.ca
Ucluelet Chamber of Commerce: www.uclueletinfo.com