

LuZhu

A Garden of Rhododendrons

This property was purchased by the present owner in 1976 approximately eighteen months after establishing residence in B.C. The land was formerly owned by a Mr. Johnson who was a professional forester and very enthusiastic about the site. However, due to advancing years, he felt he was unable to make the effort to clear the brush necessary to establish a residence there and therefore offered the property for sale. His enthusiasm for the site was infectious and this became most apparent when he demonstrated the view from the rock above the present dwelling and then went on to reveal the gorge with the fast flowing Neviski Creek. In order to reach the view point, it was necessary then to hike through the bush and clear the dense undergrowth and then to scale the fairly steep rock wall extending from the lower pond up to the garage. The property remained untouched for many years except for occasional visits and picnics until 1983 when an attempt was made with a number of friends to clear the dense underbrush. This proved to be a very labor intensive and daunting task and despite a considerable effort the area rapidly became overgrown within a few years.

The property comprises of approximately twenty-five acres which is roughly divided by the Lougheed Highway into fifteen acres to the south of the highway and ten acres to the north. The site to the north of the highway is roughly divided into approximately six acres to the east of Neviski Creek and four acres to the west of Neviski Creek. The present site primarily involves the northeast portion but many trails have been built into the hills.

Following the Victoria Rhododendron Conference in 1989 and visits to the beautiful gardens of Princess Abkhazi and Tower Crest and later to the Anderson Garden in Puyallup a need was felt to find a site to begin my own rhododendron garden. After much searching both in the Fraser Valley and on Vancouver Island no appropriate site was found which was deemed both affordable and suitable for rhododendrons. This property had been offered for sale but there had not been one, single potential purchaser. As a consequence, a decision was made to see if the present site could be made suitable for the creation of a garden.

A local heavy duty contractor by the name of Bunk McLean was found to live close by, approximately a mile away, and he was contacted to inquire if he would be prepared to look at the site and clear some of the bush so a more detailed appraisal of its suitability could be made. He willingly undertook the task and after removal of the dense undergrowth and approximately 150 large deciduous trees it became apparent that there were many beautiful bowls which would be extremely suitable for the creation of a garden, and, in particular, for a rhododendron garden. The tall evergreen firs were bottom limbed in order to create more light for the site and the brush and trees were removed. Steve Craine, a local professional landscaper was asked to review the site and to give some advice and estimates with respect to costs involved in creating a garden and immediately became very enthusiastic about the concept.

The site was cleared in the fall of 1992 and the brush and debris removed with the object of beginning planting in the spring of 1993. A 5,000-gallon steel water tank was placed high up in the mountainside to provide storage for underground irrigation. The walking paths were contoured to fit the terrain with the primary objective of exposing views to the Fraser River and the majestic surrounding mountains where possible. The caboose was installed, the pond dug and the site prepared for the first plants in June of 1993. The foundation plants for the garden were generously obtained from the Crabbe garden upon their decision to retire from the Fraser Valley and relocate to Vancouver Island.

Over the following four years' rhododendron plants have been obtained from variety of sources, both within Canada and from the U.S.A. Many of the companion shrubs and trees have been obtained from Andy Vendrame, a local nurseryman, garden enthusiast and friend.

The well was drilled in 1996 and is approximately 530 feet deep. I.e.: approximately 100 feet below the Fraser River. However, the hydrostatic level is approximately 300 feet below the pump house indicating that the water is solely derived from the mountainside and not from the river. The pump is capable of providing 30 gallons of water per minute and was operated continuously from the 6th of June last year through to late fall.

The garden has evolved from primarily working at weekends throughout the summer and winter regardless of weather conditions.

For the statistically inclined, approximately 1200 railway ties have been placed, 3 miles of irrigation piping installed, 100 tonnes of rock have been placed, 100 large loads of bark mulch have been moved and approximately 200 truckloads of road mulch have been placed for pathways and road. Most of this material has been moved by bobcat owned and operated by Steve Craine.

A previous visitor asked why there were so few benches available for sitting and gazing – hopefully the explanation is obvious!

Enjoy

-Mike Bale