

Newsletter of the ARSV



Fire at the Campbell Rhododendron Gardens

As you may have heard the bushfires destroyed part of the Campbell Rhododendron gardens at Blackheath in the Blue Mountains. The following page has a description of what happened as described by Wayne Hanley, the BMRS Archivist on the BMRS website. The photos on this and the next page are from the same site

<https://rhodogarden.org.au/projects/blue-mountains-mega-fire-blazes-the-campbell-rhododendron-gardens/>).

ARSV stands ready to help Blackheath with restocking their lost plants and we know they would appreciate any help you may be able to give.

Donations can be made at <https://rhodogarden.org.au/join-support/donate/>



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Fire at the Campbell Rhododendron Gardens contd.

“On December 21st, 2019—a day classified as “catastrophic” on the fire risk index—a massive bushfire reached Blackheath’s doorstep. It had already burned nearly half-a-million hectares to the north of the Bells Line of Road terrain, then down through the Grose Valley. At 11:00 am the Rural Fire Service website, ‘Fires Near Me’, posted a new outbreak, positioning its location marker right in the middle of the Campbell Rhododendron Gardens. From a distance this fire appeared to be further away, maybe on Ridgewell Road, but conditions were deteriorating rapidly and all attention was now focussed on the major line of fire-attack—the extremity of Hat Hill Road/ Pulpit Rock Road. Many residents evacuated their homes on the advice of authorities, and throughout Saturday night the town, amidst dense smoke, was a scene of frenzied fire-fighting activity in a number of areas. Then came a report that the Rhodo ‘Conifer Garden’ area was ablaze, but without verification due to access restrictions.

Extent of the Fire

On Monday morning everything in the Gardens seemed quiet again and Committee members and some Monday volunteers were able to venture onto the fire-ground to assess the situation. Fortunately, they found the ‘Conifer Garden’ area was intact, with the conifers unscathed, but almost all the large tract of native bush on the north side of the valley and the service road was severely burned.

The fire had extended all the way from the swamp at the eastern end and out to Ridgewell Road on the north-western perimeter. There was still much live fire activity in the burnt area, with tree trunks smouldering or flaming and ember beds alive on the ground. Sadly, it was discovered that most of the rhododendrons in the Species and the Quota areas had been destroyed, as had some plantings between the developed and the native areas on the north side of the creek.

Even part of the swamp was damaged, due to ignition of methane gas which the area emits. On the positive side, the high canopy of the gum trees remained minimally affected through this destructive inferno, and the firefighters had prevented the blaze from crossing the valley to the main developed Gardens area, saving the Lodge and other buildings.

At last, the native area of the Campbell Rhododendron Gardens has received a major hazard-reduction burn! However, it’s unplanned happening certainly was far more dramatic than anyone ever anticipated. Occurring as it did, in the midst of the lead-up to Christmas and 2020 celebrations, there is little that can be achieved immediately.

The Committee will meet with the Gardens’ Supervisor on January 6th 2020, when they will conduct a thorough review of the damage, and set in motion a remediation strategy. Although the native area will recover reasonably quickly, reconstruction of the affected plantings north of the creek will be a long-term process.



Rhododendron in focus: Rhododendron nuttallii

Section Maddenia, Dalhousiae Alliance.

This species comes from Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Yunnan, and Tibet at relatively low altitudes (by Himalayan standards) of 1100 to 3700 metres. It is regarded as frost-tender in England but is perfectly suited to our climate at Olinda. We have a large number planted in the Maddenia Walk up to 60 years old which thrive on the light shade of eucalypts and surprisingly little water. It can be grown in some suburban gardens but suffers in our summer heat-wave conditions.

R. nuttallii can be easily identified by its large bullate leaves, large white flowers with a yellow throat, and spicy perfume. I took a long walk down to the North end of the garden in early November and was amazed at the sight of masses of pure white flowers (see photo).

Alan Kepert



Yunnan trip cancelled

The botanical trip to Yunnan discussed in the last few newsletters has had to be cancelled because of concerns with travel to China in view of the coronavirus outbreak. The trip will be rescheduled for 2021.

Companion animal – Himalayan Marmot



We welcome back companion animal with one of the most ubiquitous creatures of the high mountains of China and the Himalayas - the Himalayan Marmot *Marmota himalayana*. This amazing rodent lives in burrows at high altitude in alpine meadows, montane grasslands and scrublands at elevations up to 5700 m. They are large animals weighing 4 to 9.2 kg and have bodies up to 65 cm long and short tails (12-15 cm). Their habitats include clumps of alpine Rhododendrons including *R. nivale*, although there appears to be no records of *Rhododendron* in the diet which is

mostly grasses, forbs and shrubs such as *Potentilla*, *Primula*, *Kobresia*, *Anaphalis* and *Lonicera*. They live in family colonies of up to ten animals based on a dominant male, and adult female, two years-olds, one year-olds and young of the year. A colony occupies several burrows and they can usually be seen standing in the burrow entrance or young frolicking nearby. They are important food for the many local predators such as wolves, snow leopards, foxes, eagles etc. They hibernate for periods of 6-7 months each year during the severe winters. They are common on the Tibetan plateau and the higher mountains of west and southwest China and extend across the Himalayas to the Hindu Kush and Tajikistan, including northern India, Nepal and Pakistan. The picture below shows marmot habitat in Qinghai, China. The “shadows” under the crags are *R. nivale* and *R. thymifolium*.



Coming events

Saturday 22nd to Sunday 23rd February. Melbourne Begonia Society - Show & Sales 2020. Saturday 10:00 am - 4:00 pm, Sunday 10:00 am - 3:00 pm. Entry adults \$5, concession \$3, children free. Moorabbin Senior Citizens Hall, 964 Nepean Hwy, Moorabbin. BYO bags! <https://melbournebegoniasociety.com/events/previous-events/>

Saturday 07th to Sunday 08th March Ferny Creek Horticultural Society - 2020 Plant Collectors Sale & Garden Expo. Saturday and Sunday 10:00 am - 4:00 pm. Ferny Creek Horticultural Society Hall, 100 Hilton Rd, Sassafras. <http://www.fchs.org.au/events/>

Saturday 14th to Sunday 15th March Cranbourne Friends Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria's Autumn Plant Sale. Saturday and Sunday 10:00 am - 4:00 pm. Free Entry. Ballarto Road/Botanic Drive, Cranbourne. <https://rbgfrienscranbourne.org.au/event/growing-friends-plant-sale-5-2019-10-27/>

Saturday 28 March 2020 - Sunday 19 April Tesselaar KABLOOM Festival of Flowers 2020. 10am - 5pm daily. Tickets online at www.kabloom.com.au. Free entry for Children 16 & under. Tesselaar Flower Farm, 357 Monbulk Rd. Silvan. www.kabloom.com.au