

The Heather Family Party Talk by Fran Benton

I bet a lot of people are big fans of the heather family and don't even know it. And what fodder for the party season to be able to chat aimlessly about the Ericaceae. "I say my good man, what is your opinion of Calluna vs. Erica?" What an excellent party conversation starter. Well – you folks who guffaw at that are in for a shock. There is a group of people in Mill Bay who would dive right into that conversation. Did you know we have a HEATHER SOCIETY in Cobble Hill/ Mill Bay? Well we do and if you are a fan, this is a very cool group to join. You would learn such important things as this- the heather family includes our wonderful rhododendrons, arbutus, cranberry, blueberry, azalea, Kinnikinnick, Salal, and of course Heather! There are many more members of this family that you know and love.

My personal favourite is a nice fat shrub called Hairy Manzanita. When I studied botany at UVic I had an instructor that looked a bit like a bear. His nickname was Hairy Manzanita because, no lie, he looked exactly like that shrub. He had the same girth and same height. He even was a bit itchy which matched the scratchiness of that shrub. He rarely even wore a jacket in winter, just a ratty old tee shirt! No one would have dared call him that to his face. I think he retired to roam the scrublands of coastal Oregon.



Ah sorry, back to the Ericaceae. How do botanists group and identify plants? By their naughty bits, by which I mean their flowers. You will remember those lovely urn shaped flowers that your Arbutus happily dumps all over your lawn in spring. They are the most perfect urn shape. Rhododendrons and Azaleas have bell shaped individual flowers in clusters. While checking my information for accuracy I

came across this characteristic of rhododendrons. "Rhododendrons are characterized by inflorescences with scarious perulae, fruit with a septicidal capsule, an ovary that is superior (or nearly so), stamens that have no appendages, and agglutinate pollen." Now try using that nugget of information at your next party!



Mill Bay Garden Club meets at the Mill Bay Hall Every 4th Tuesday at 6:45. And there are cookies!!!