

Rhodiola integrifolia

by Karen Unruh



Rhodiola rosea

Margot suggested that I share information about my newly purchased herbal plants, *Rhodiola integrifolia*, with you for this December Nanoose Garden Tidings newsletter. It is appropriate for the month as this is a plant that grows naturally on the alpine ledges in the Yukon and Alaska. It likes winter! Interesting to see that this cold loving plant from the Crassulaceae or stonecrop family can even be found in the mountains as far south as California.

I read about rhodiola in my new medicinal herbal book, *The Boreal Herbal: Wild Food and Medicine Plants of the North*, by Beverley Gray, who lives in Whitehorse, Yukon. I was interested to read that she had become excited about using rhodiola medicinally and yet she was worried about harvesting wild stocks, so decided to purchase 100 plants four years ago. She gave her source of plants as Richters Herbs in Ontario, www.richters.com.

I researched further to discover that rhodiola has been grown from seed at the UBC Botanical Garden, where they had 60% germination and now have young plants. That was all the encouragement I needed to place an order for 12 plant plugs. This may not be the Arctic but I had to give this plant a try.

They arrived safely packaged for their 3 day Canada Post trip across western Canada. The plants are about 1 and 1/2 inches tall with really established root systems. The succulent leaves are somewhat spoon shaped. Attractive flowers in dense clusters are anticipated next summer. I planted them in my 'alpine' berm where the drainage is good as they do not like standing water, a grit mulch protects the roots, and the site gets the most sun in my garden. I have them covered with cloches to ease their transition from the nursery to outside colder temperatures and prevent the rains from drowning them. They will need 14 hours of daylight to grow. So, as the days get longer in the spring, I'm hopeful my small plants will survive and flourish!

I have also included a picture of *Rhodiola rosea* roots and plants, the eastern variety of rhodiola, that are being farmed in Alberta for medicinal harvest. This variety has been used medicinally in Siberia, northern China and the Scandinavian countries. It is the new 'ginseng' in the herbal world and Alberta is prepared for its demand.



Plant row spacing for medicinal harvesting of *Rhodiola rosea* in Alberta.



Buds are the means of survival and roots are harvested at 4 years.

Medicinally, rhodiola is an adaptogen. It aids the body in adapting to stress, thereby reducing fatigue and depression and increasing energy and mood. It is used in Russia by the Russian cosmonauts and Olympic athletes to enhance physical performance and endurance, increase energy, accelerate recovery time, return the heart rate to normal more quickly and decrease pain caused by increased lactic acid buildup in the tissues. I am sure we will be hearing more about rhodiola as the Winter Olympic games begin in Sochi, Russia. But for us, the adaptogen qualities are also important--promoting well-being and longevity, providing relief from seasonal affective disorder, strengthening the immune system, improving our memory and increasing mental alertness.

I see rhodiola as an ingredient in adaptogen tinctures on our health food store shelves and I think I will be trying them while waiting for my plants to grow. Four-year-old roots are harvested to make these tinctures. But more simply, a decoction (recipe attached) which is a tea made from the roots would be a good way to achieve these health benefits. A cup of rhodiola root decoction taken in the morning. Interesting to note that rhodiola has a more stimulating effect in smaller amounts and a more sedative effect in larger amounts. Also it is best taken in the early part of the day. So, four years from now, I look forward to harvesting some roots to make the decoction, carefully taking only some roots and not the buds below the leaves to ensure plant survival. And, as I harvest the roots I will note the subtle rose-like scent of the roots. A common name for rhodiola is rose root and I find pictures of this in my books of wildflowers in the Pacific northwest mountains, and wildflowers along the Alaska Highway. Rhodiola Decoction adapted from *The Boreal Herbal: Wild Food and Medicine Plants of the North*.

Place a hearty pinch of the dried chopped-up root in a saucepan, cover with cold water, and bring to a simmer, turn down the heat to prevent boiling, and simmer for 10 to 20 minutes. Remove from heat, let steep until warm, and enjoy your aromatic brew. Left to steep overnight creates a stronger brew. Usual proportions for decoctions are 1 teaspoon of dried herb to 1 cup of water.