

## Showing rhododendrons – an amateur’s perspective

RUSSELL BEESON

STAGING IN FULL  
SWING IN THE  
MARQUEE AT  
ROSEMOOR



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RHODODENDRON COMPETITIONS have a long tradition within the RHS. A key element of this was the often fierce rivalry between the major estate owners, dominated by the Rothschilds, the Loders, the Aberconways and others, as well as a number of famed private gardens of grand proportions with their many acres of sheltered woodland. Titles abounded, and the average gardener may well have felt that this was a game from which they were excluded. Nevertheless, we must be grateful for the magnificent contributions that these great gardens made to the shows, and still do to this day. The prize lists are still dominated, and rightly so, by gardens such as Exbury, Caerhays, Marwood Hill and a few others. Only they are able to produce the massive displays of the wide variety of species and hybrids that are needed to fill the exhibition hall. Indeed, without them there would be no show.

The main shows were, of course, always held in London, and so were dominated by those gardens willing and able to travel, often

significant distances, to the capital. Since the Main Rhododendron Competition moved to the RHS garden at Rosemoor in Devon, the make-up of the exhibitors has changed. Exbury are still able to make the journey, but we no longer see exhibits from the great gardens of southeast England. More entries now come from the southwest, particularly the wonderful Cornish gardens, which has changed the look of the show. If this competition were to be relocated to other parts of the country, the list of major exhibitors would naturally change once again as a result.

Having said all that, it is important to note the increasing contribution made to these shows by amateur gardeners, often with quite small gardens. For these exhibitors, the time-honoured question on the entry form requiring the ‘gardener’s name’ is laughably inapplicable. We (and yes, I number myself amongst them) produce our exhibits by our own toil and sweat and often, to our great surprise and pleasure, are able to win prizes in full competition with



**HOW EXBURY GARDEN TRANSPORT THEIR EXHIBITS**

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the greatest gardens in the land. My purpose in this article is primarily to encourage other amateur gardeners to take part in these shows and to make some observations based on my own experiences over the last four years.

So why should a small-scale amateur gardener consider getting involved with the competitive showing of rhododendrons? I can only speak for myself, but I was persuaded by friends in the Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group that I should have a go and that it would above all be fun! I was sceptical at first, but decided to give it a try in 2009. It was hard work; it was a little intimidating; it was frustrating. But I have been back every year since because it was, as predicted, fun. Most importantly, I found that



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the camaraderie amongst the exhibitors turning up at 7.00 in the morning was infectious. As a relatively new member of the Group, and one who can hardly claim either to be an expert grower or to have a comprehensive collection, I found that participation in shows was a marvellous way of getting to know people of all backgrounds but with similar interests and dedication. Of course, one inevitable result of this has been a crash course in my education about rhododendrons.

The outlook of the small amateur grower is naturally rather different from that of the major exhibitor. The great gardens will often aim to enter as many classes as they can; winning the major cups remains an important



**'EXBURY CORNER' IN THE MARQUEE AT ROSEMOOR**

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competitive objective. The amateur is likely to be much more selective about the classes they will enter. Most amateurs cannot realistically hope to do well in the prestige classes for Six Species or Six Hybrids. The major estates will have many thousands of plants to select from and, most importantly, they will be taking much of their material from mature specimens whereas I, with my young garden, will often debate whether it is worth cutting off a significant portion of my immature shrub, just for a couple of days at the show. Even so, it is not unknown for amateurs to do well, even in these very challenging classes.

The major exhibitors have a huge job, with teams of gardeners picking their exhibits the day before the show, frequently working well into the night and often in bad weather; then



**R. 'ALISON JOHNSTONE' (FIRST PRIZE TO RUSSELL BEESON, 2012)**  
RUSSELL BEESON/SALLY HAYWARD (INSET)

they have the equally onerous task of safely transporting their material to the show and staging the exhibits under great time pressure. The amateur can usually take a somewhat more leisurely approach, and be very choosy about his few exhibits. Sometimes, this can put the amateur at an advantage.

It is a fact that certain classes are often not well supported (particularly in the species section) and, although it might be called gamesmanship, the amateur would be well advised to get to know which these classes are and to consider whether they might be able to produce something for them. Not only will they be contributing to the interest and variety of the show, but they may also have a better chance of winning a prize.

Is it all about winning prizes? Of course not, though any exhibitor who denied the pleasure that prizes bring would, I think, be dishonest. A prize is recognition from the judges, always eminent experts in their field, as well as from one's peers and friends, that it has all been worthwhile. Contributing to the spectacle is very important as well. Often the pleasure comes from simply bringing along something of interest from your garden, knowing that you will be able to compare it with other exhibits and talk to experts and colleagues about it. Identification of unknown specimens is often a bonus. I have been both surprised and delighted to gain good numbers of prizes, including firsts, in every year

that I have taken part, as has my friend and close neighbour Robin Whiting, who started exhibiting at the same time as I did.

Moving on to some practical issues, for the Main Rhododendron Competition at Rosemoor, the South West branch of the Group (which is responsible for much of the organisation of the show) issues guidance notes to exhibitors regarding how to stage exhibits. These notes, written with new exhibitors in mind, are invaluable. Other authoritative advice on the whole subject of selecting, gathering, transporting and staging exhibits can be found, for example, in Peter Cox's book *The Larger Rhododendron Species*. Most of this advice is as applicable to the small amateur grower as it is to the great garden; often it is just a matter of scale. To illustrate this, compare the photographs showing how exhibits are transported, at one extreme, by Exbury Gardens and, at the other, by me.



**SIX SPECIES (FIRST PRIZE TO EXBURY, 2011)**  
RUSSELL BEESON

#### KEY POINTS TO BEAR IN MIND

- Start planning several weeks in advance of the show. You will find it very difficult to decide what you are going to put in; it is a nail-biting time waiting to see what is and is not in flower for the show but remember that everyone is in the same position. Just enter for all the classes you think are possible. Late changes and additions can always be made, even on the day of the show.
- Study the Competition Schedule very carefully. A little creative thinking will enable one species

or variety to be exhibited in a number of different classes.

- Remember that you can enter as many exhibits as you want in any one class, so bring along everything you can find space for.
- Allow plenty of time for packing the car so that material remains fresh and doesn't fall over during the journey, and arrive as early as possible. Staging always takes longer than you imagine.
- The RHS supply vases (though in 2009, my first year, there was a serious shortage, which proved quite traumatic, resulting in exhibits being staged in jam jars and plastic milk bottles!)
- Bring along plenty of newspaper and moss for stuffing into the vases to hold exhibits steady.
- Bring secateurs, scissors and other tools for final manicuring of exhibits. You will be rightly marked down if your exhibit has faded flowers or dead twigs in evidence.
- Pay attention to the labelling of exhibits, as required by the Schedule.



**AN AMATEUR (PAT BUCKNELL) COLLECTS THE LODER CUP FROM JIM GARDINER**

SALLY HAYWARD



**JOHN ANDERSON OF EXBURY COLLECTS THE CROSFIELD CHALLENGE CUP FROM JOHN HILLIER**

RUSSELL BEESON

These days, colleagues and officials try their very best to help novice exhibitors, particularly in avoiding the dreaded 'NAS' (Not According to Schedule) card. As a new exhibitor, your knowledge of the botanical classification of rhododendrons will grow rapidly as you mull over which class a particular specimen belongs in.

I have tried to give you a flavour of what exhibiting is all about with the pictures included with this article. I do hope that some readers who may never have considered entering a show will be inspired to take the plunge. If you do, you will certainly improve your circle of friends and your knowledge of rhododendrons. Above all, you will also have a lot of fun!

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