THE RHODODENDRON STORY

200 Years of Plant Hunting and Garden Cultivation

Edited by Cynthia Postan
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RHODODENDRON, CAMELLIA & MAGNOLIA GROUP

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Chapter 11

Hybrids in the United States of America

Pat Halligan

He was a big man, powerfully built, standing in his blue denims, braces and bow tie amid a myriad rhododendrons. It may have been his thick Norwegian accent that caught the attention or his enthusiasm for growing and breeding rhododendrons, but Halfdan Lem was a man whose passion was in the hunt: a treasure hunt of sorts, for the little gems that keep popping up among the multitude of seedlings in the garden of every hybridizer.

During World War II Lem corresponded with Fred Rose, a gardener of Townhill in England, and, because of the bombing raids, Rose sent Lem much rhododendron material to ensure its preservation. How lucky we are that Rose was in an area subject to German bombing! From one of Rose’s seed came ‘Anna’, Lem’s favourite parent and from ‘Anna’ came ‘fine stuffs’ as Lem would say – from just six seedlings of one cross came five unsatisfactory plants and... ‘Lem’s Cameo’ (see figure 17) which he called ‘Cameo’ but had to affix his name because the name ‘Cameo’ had already been used.

With his fellow hybridizers in the Rum-Dum Club, Lem would engage in energetic debate on every aspect of rhododendrons. The club was an exclusive group with Bill Whitney, Lester Brandt, Hjalmer Larson, all professional growers and hybridizers, a tight-knit bunch who kept their secrets of growing and breeding close to their chests. And indeed why not since they were all selling seeds and seedlings to the general public? All, that is, except Lem who was only too happy to share his knowledge with others. He was a fair man and a friend recalls that when Lem was helping a young mother to select the one plant that she could afford on her budget, a group of well-known and well-heeled purchasers arrived to place what would amount to a large order. They expected him to drop everything and wait on them but Lem told them to wait because ‘she deserves just as much consideration as
anyone else’. And, in the spirit of fairness, if he was out of a required plant, he would always substitute a better plant than the one asked for without telling the customer. Lem would smile and say, ‘I can’t wait to see his face when he sees it bloom for the first time.’

In my experience Lem characterizes the type of person hybridizing today, full of wonder, eager to exchange views on rhododendrons with others and... a little bit quirky!

Lem passed away and his hybrids were left to another generation, but he passed on his enthusiasm and knowledge through innumerable letters to all manner of rhododendron lovers all over the world. Current members of the Northwest Hybridisers’ Group can remember getting their first rhododendrons from Lem along with advice and, of course, that infectious enthusiasm.

The Northwest
Going back in time to the introduction of rhododendrons to the Northwest we see James Barto and Mrs A C U Berry as unsung heroes. Although few of their hybrids survive today, their aggressive introduction of new plants from England and from the pre-World War II plant explorers set the stage for future hybridizers. As Del James said, ‘In all my visits to gardens in Oregon, Washington and California I have yet to see a garden that did not have plants from Barto.’ After the war others such as Del James, Rudolph Henny and Endre Ostbo took up his search for new material.

This new generation of rhododendron lovers found enough company to warrant some sort of club and so, in 1944, The American Rhododendron Society was founded in the very heart of rhododendron country. Soon rhododendron breeders such as Lester Brandt, Hjalmer Larson, Ted Van Veen, Roy Clark, Ben Lancaster, Robert Bovee and Bill Whitney were coming up with a rainbow of new plants. Most of these have been lost but a few of them are household names even today.

All was bliss in this mild and nurturing climate of the Northwest until the winter of 1950 when people were put on the alert. But it was not until that fateful night early in November 1955 that the full power of nature’s might would be etched into every grower’s consciousness. After a mild Indian Summer the temperature plummeted from a balmy 21°C (70°F) to a frigid -18°C (0°F) overnight. Death came with a white face and all those pampered beauties met a brown and inglorious end. It was a wake-up call to all horticulturists in the Northwest. No longer was it enough to come up with pretty plants; they had to be tough too. But the great flurry of hybridizing in the Northwest that had marked the late 1940s and early 1950s was slowly petering out. Some of the major hybridizers continued to produce new hybrids but few new people were there to take up the baton as the older ones faded away. Hybridization in the Northwest
entered a period of hiatus in which only a few people were active. Not that these new hybridizers were insignificant. Great things came from the garden of Ned Brokenbrough who worked extensively with Lem's hybrids and continues his work even today. Also Jack Lofthouse, salesman extraordinaire, who produced tremendous excitement among potential hybridizers. Other important figures include Joe Davis, Jim Elliott, Art Wright, Frank Mossman and Harold Greer.

In 1959 the FCC form of *Rhododendron yakushimanum* arrived in the Northwest and before long everyone was 'yakking' everything in sight so that 'Yaku This' and 'Yaku That' started showing up on the plant registration lists. Funny thing though - all the plants looked the same! Nice, but all the same. Only now are we seeing second and third generation 'yak' hybrids starting to sport rich colours.

Warren Berg started a one-man introduction and hybridizing boom all on his own. An airline pilot, he was able to use his perks with the airline to introduce important new species forms, with which he hybridized, using especially *R. keiskei* 'Yaku Fairy' to produce many of the best new hybrids.

The seminal event which produced the second great wave of hybridizing in the Northwest was the inception in the late 1970s of the Northwest Hybridisers Group. For the first years Elsie Watson hosted those meetings. Breeders are different now since, instead of the closed group of professionals of the 1940s and 1950s, we now see an open exchange of ideas and materials between breeders, insiders and beginners alike. Rhododendron breeding has been taken over by amateurs. Even the professional growers are amateur breeders and I think that this change in attitude has contributed enormously to the present day explosion of hybridizing in the Northwest. We are seeing tremendous new things from the gardens of Frank Fujioka, Clint Smith, Elsie Watson, Lloyd Newcomb, Dave Balint, Dan Bones, Roy Thompson, David Goheen and many others.

I too am a hybridizer and, like so many others, owe much to fellow breeders. To give just one example: two parents which have infused their blood into many of my plants are unnamed hybrids which Halfdan Lem gave to Lloyd and Eddie Newcomb. They subsequently gave them to me and I made good use of them. Hybridizing weaves a tangled web of both plant lineages and friends.

**Eastern States**

Rhododendron hybridizing began in the United States before 1860 with Samuel Parsons of Flushing, New York, who produced a number of *R. catawbiense* hybrids including 'Parson's Grandiflorum', 'President Lincoln' and 'Abraham Lincoln' which, with his other hybrids, are bona fide antiques and deserve to be grown for their historical value alone. Besides, these hybrids are not bad plants and some are really tough survivors.
Many years passed and America’s lack of interest in breeding rhododendrons was profound until Charles Dexter, a patrician of inexhaustible energy, came along. From among his crosses came ‘Scintillation’, for years the favourite hybrid in the East. After his death, even more remarkable was the flurry of activity on the part of Anthony Consolini, John Wister and many enthusiasts in the Sandwich Club to catalogue, test, introduce and further breed his creations.

By the 1930s several hybridizers were hard at work including Joseph Gable, an unsophisticated nurseryman in bib overalls, and Guy Nearing, a man for all seasons and survivor extraordinaire. Together they formed an unlikely collaboration resulting in ‘Cadis’ and the important parent ‘Catalgla’ by the former, and lepidote gems ‘Mary Fleming’ and ‘Ramapo’ by the latter: but they never did find the perfect red.

Tony Shamarello’s parents brought their tradition in the nursery trade from sunny Italy to the bitter cold continental climate of Cleveland, Ohio. The killer winter of 1939 convinced Tony that hardier rhododendrons were needed and he started breeding rock-hardy plants. This objective has since been taken up by David Leach who has introduced a United Nations of hybrids. Joining the party were Weldon Delp, Lanny Pride and Edmund Mezitt. In the far reaches of Canada, Dick Steele and A W Smith have sought to push rhododendrons to the realms of the Northern Lights.

On the East Coast Gus Mehlquist has used his background in genetics to perform rhododendron magic, while Edmond Amateis showed what it really meant to produce a few good hybrids. Other honourable East Coasters, including Donald Hardgrove, Paul Vossberg and Warren Baldsiefsen, have enriched many a garden with their creations. Hank Schannen, Nathaniel Hess, Dorothy Knippenberg and others are busily at work even as we read. Meanwhile Augie Kehr, Olin Holsonback and Russ and Velma Haag are leading the way deep in the heart of Dixie. All these names point to the fact that hybridizing in the East is truly vibrant with energy.

Azalea breeding was pioneered by B Y Morrison and Joseph Gable, soon to be followed by Fred Galle and Augie Kehr in the Southeast, Henry Skinner at the National Arboretum, Robert Gartrell in New Jersey, Peter Girard and Tony Shamarello in the Great Lakes region, and Polly Hill on the picturesque island of Martha’s Vineyard. In the warmth of California Julius Nuccio and Howard Kerrigan have been creating evergreen azaleas especially suited to Mediterranean climes. Recently the geographic boundaries of azaleas have been pushed by Susan Moe and Harold Pellett in Minnesota and A W Smith in Canada.

California
Because of the climate, hybridizing in
California has taken quite a different turn. Beneath the swaying palms subtropical rhododendrons waft their intoxicating perfume. First appreciating that scent in the 1950s and 1960s were Maurice Sumner, whose ‘Mi Amor’ and ‘Owen Pearce’ are still loved by R. maddenii growers, and Paul Bowman whose ‘Else Frye’ is one of my favourites. Soon, Jack Evans was coming up with great new things of his own, and when you add more recent Californian hybridizers, including Bill Moyles and others, you can find yourself surrounded by a distinctive and regional rhododendron flora.

Bob Scott carried on the work of the pioneers to produce R. maddenii hybrids in colours once considered unthinkable. Bob contracted multiple sclerosis and was unable to care for his plants. Paul Molinari once explained to me how he and Hadley Osborn were able to help their friend to continue breeding rhododendrons, despite his disability, by acting as his hands and feet. Such acts of co-operation and kindness are not uncommon among rhododendron lovers. Today Paul Molinari is acting as a one-man rhododendron clearing house for Californian hybrids.

From even further afield are the Vireyas and in California Peter Sullivan and Jack Evans began importing these brightly coloured tropicals in the 1960s. Peter Sullivan at the Strybing Arboretum bred Vireyas in earnest and through his generosity with both plant material and insight the baton was passed on to Bill Moynier of Los Angeles. Suddenly vividly coloured flowers began to appear from Middle Earth. Yes, they really do grow Vireyas outdoors in Los Angeles which is fortunate since you certainly will not have much luck growing regular rhododendrons there!

Bill Moyles conducts a special American Rhododendron Society seed exchange devoted to Vireyas and E White Smith of the Rhododendron Species Foundation publishes the journal Vireya Vine. These services link a small but dedicated coterie of Vireya breeders. Peter Schick and John Dulac have been key distributors of Vireya material from Australia and New Zealand while Dick Cavender, Bill Moyles and Jim Gerdemann have been busily creating new variations. (See Chapter 7).

Hybridizing in California illustrates just how diverse is rhododendron growing in the United States. We breed just about all types, from the lush beauties of the Northwest to the tough plants of the Northeast and from the subtropical R. maddenii hybrids and tropical Vireyas of California to the disease-resistant rhododendrons and azaleas of the Southeast. The great plains, the western deserts and the intermountain West remain to be colonized by rhododendrons, although individuals in unlikely places such as Oklahoma and Arizona are testing the possibilities. One area of breeding that has been lacking in the United States is the Section Choniasstrum. We could take the example of Peter Valder of Australia and
try these plants in Southern California and the Deep South. The plants are pretty weird so growing them should be an adventure. And is that not what breeding is all about?

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Pat Halligan has a doctorate in plant ecology, hybridizes lepidote rhododendrons in Washington State and is active in the American Rhododendron Society. He is Chairman of their Ratings Committee
Figures 15 and 16: R. simii, found in a Shanghai nursery by Robert Fortune, was sent to Standish & Noble at Bagshot in 1851 – (top left) an engraving of the plant from Curtis’s Botanical Magazine and (top right) a living plant (see Chapter 13). Figure 17 (above left): R. ‘Lem’s Cameo’, Halfdan Lem’s superb American hybrid, (see Chapter 11). Figure 18 (above right): John Charles Williams of Caerhays, one of the first Englishman to grow Chinese rhododendrons and Chairman of the Rhododendron Society 1916-27 (see Chapter 15)
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