The Royal Horticultural Society

The Rhododendron Story

200 Years of Plant Hunting and Garden Cultivation

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RHODODENDRON, CAMELLIA & MAGNOLIA GROUP

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Chapter 14

Rhododendrons in British Gardens: a Short History

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It would seem logical to divide the history of the rhododendron garden according to the chronological sequence of introductions: the American and Pontic period, the Himalayan period and the Chinese period. However, this is a history of garden style, not a history of rhododendrons themselves: other hands are dealing with the history of introductions and of hybridization. Tastes in garden-making do not automatically change on the introduction of a new plant; new introductions, if they are widely adopted, are taken up because they fit an existing taste, and there has often been a long time-lag between the introduction of a plant and its achievement of popularity. Furthermore, changes in taste are not always seen for what they are; it is all too easy, once a new taste has come to be taken for granted, to assume that the works of one's predecessors were the result of inadvertence, rather than a positive intention; over and over again, we can find writers condemning the works of the past generation as made 'without any attention to colour', when what has really happened is a change in preferred colour combinations. Accordingly, I am going to divide the history of the rhododendron garden into the ages of the exotic specimen, of the American garden, of landscape colour, of the woodland garden, and of colour co-ordination.

A further caveat. Then as now, most literature on rhododendrons is devoted to a description of species and hybrids, or to lists of which rhododendrons are grown in a particular garden; there is little literature at any period that details how the plants were grouped, or what their intended visual effect was. The inevitable attrition resulting from frost and wind, hatchet and chainsaw, neglect and overgrowth, changing fashions and rhododendron fly, all make it difficult to speak with too much confidence of the appearance of rhododendron gardens in the 19th century, or in many cases, of more recent date. Also, I shall make no effort to update to a contemporary nomenclature the names of the
rhododendrons and azaleas that occur in my quotations. Any reader who is interested in the history of rhododendrons will have learned to cope with this little difficulty.

The Age of the Exotic Specimen
'The introduction of a useful or ornamental plant into our island is justly considered as one of the most important services that a person can render his country.' Henry Phillips (1823)

The earliest history of the rhododendron in this country is a history of plants in glasshouses and pots, and not immediately relevant to garden design. The first rhododendrons to be introduced came from Eurasian alpine climates, and successive editions of Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary*, while noting an increase in the number of available species, remain consistently gloomy about their successful cultivation in England. Attempts at cultivation in the open were few at first. Warmer-climate rhododendrons, when they began to arrive, also endured a probationary period before they were allowed into the pleasure grounds. Uncertainty over climatic tolerance led most gardeners to provide protected cultivation for any exotics from lower latitudes, and it was not until new introductions arrived in sufficiently numerous quantities, thanks to the War-dian case in the early 19th century, that gardeners could risk possibly fatal experiments to test their cultural requirements. Rhododendrons had a long and successful career as ornaments for the glasshouse collection—a story that does not concern us here.¹

Enthusiasm for rhododendrons begins with the arrival of American species. Such enthusiasm was aroused by these immigrants from American bogs that they earned the label 'American plants', a term which included rhododendrons and azaleas as well as kalmias, magnolias, vacciniums, andromedas, and miscellaneous ericas; it came to be a general phrase for peat-loving plants. The word 'American' lingered in this context until the second half of the 19th century, long after American species had been relegated to a subordinate position by Asiatic ones; John Waterer continued to call his rhododendron exhibitions 'American exhibitions' into the 1870s. Other, less popular, terms were 'bog plants' and 'heath-mould plants'.²

The first nurseries of importance in rhododendron provision were those of Loddiges, and Lee and Kennedy, both in London (Hackney and Hammersmith respectively). It was from Lee and Kennedy that such early rhododendron gardens as Whiteknights built up their collections in the 1810s and 1820s, but by the 1830s Loddiges was taking the lead; by 1836 they were listing 28 varieties of *R. ponticum*, 73 Ghent azaleas, and several Highclere hybrids. For the most part, however, these plants were denizens of the glasshouse, and when introduced into the garden, tended to form part of collections
arranged purely for botanical interest in sheltered enclaves. In 1828, John Claudius Loudon praised Whiteknights for the completeness of its rhododendron collection, but said that from the point of view of the ‘beauties of landscape-gardening’, ‘nothing can be duller and more stupid, than the walled parallelogram containing the hot-houses and more rare plants, near the house at White Knights’. ³

The Age of the American Garden
Uvedale Price, the great promoter of the picturesque in landscape, warned against ‘too distinct and splendid’ colour in the garden, as tending to destroy the unity of the landscape; foregrounds were to be planted with dark green foliage, leading away into the blue distance through lighter colours. As long as such prejudices held sway, there was little scope for the introduction of rhododendrons into garden scenery.

Attitudes toward colour were changing in the 1820s, and not only among gardeners; this was the age when Constable and Turner were beginning to win their fight against the graded colour schemes of the 18th-century Academy and increase the tonal range of their paintings. John Claudius Loudon was only the most eminent of the gardeners who began to campaign for an increased use of colour in the garden, for the introduction of the flower garden as the chief element in the view from the house, and in particular for the presentation of broad masses of a single colour instead of the mixtures of colour that they found characteristic of the previous generation’s planting.

Henry Phillips provides a good example of 1820s taste in transition: still basically a product of the age of Nash and Repton, unwilling to adopt the principle of solid masses, but nonetheless intent on increasing the colour content of the garden. In his advice on planting shrubberies, he recommended that the foremost (dwarfest) layer of planting could consist of contrasting groups of China asters, African marigolds, and Peruvian nasturtiums for autumn effect. ‘The most beautiful shrubs should occupy the most conspicuous and prominent places. For instance, a projecting part of the plantation should be reserved for the purple rhododendron, the flaming azalea, and other bog plants.’ ⁴

Phillips also recommended the planting together of azaleas and rhododendrons; for those for whom this is the ultimate sin, it should perhaps be pointed out that he was writing at a time when the available choice of either was very limited, and the first Ghent azaleas had yet to reach the British market. Nonetheless, the terms in which he makes his recommendation are worth noting carefully:

‘Clumps of the flame-coloured azalea should shine near those of the purple rhododendron, for as they both flower at the same season the contrast is as rich as a purple robe wrought
with gold. It requires the nicest judgment to intermix even those plants which contrast or harmonise the best.\textsuperscript{15}

‘Contrast or harmonize’; this may seem to offer the gardener a wide latitude of effect, but it should not be assumed too readily that these words represent contrary approaches. In the first half of the 19th century, it was common to find ‘contrast’ and ‘harmony’ used synonymously. At a time when the analogy between harmony of colour and harmony in music was taken literally, it was argued that, just as adjacent notes on the piano make a discord when played together, so adjacent colours in the spectrum make a discord when juxtaposed. Red, yellow, and blue could make a harmonious colour scheme; red and orange could not.\textsuperscript{6}

Phillips was by the mid-19th century a voice from the past; the mixture of rhododendrons and herbaceous plants, and the small scale of colour contrasts, were yielding to massing of colours on a larger scale, and to the first experiments in colour grouping of shrubs as well as of flowerbeds. The Leeds landscape gardener Joshua Major grouped shrubs by colour on an estate in Pontefract in the late 1820s, but no documentation has survived to show how the groups were arranged.\textsuperscript{7}

The shrubbery, considered as a garden feature to be seen at a fairly close range, is one thing; the distant vista is quite another. Colour grouping would not make its way into the wider landscape until a later generation; but the initial impact of a patch of positive colour in the landscape was already appearing as a theme in the 1830s. James Mangles, in his \textit{Floral Calendar} (1839), wrote of the effect of masses of rhododendrons on islands or accompanying lakes:

‘Two of the most tastily disposed and ornamental gardens in England, are Lord Farnborough’s, at Bromley, and Lord Carnarvon’s, at Highclere; the principal feature of attraction in both these beautiful places is attained by a profusion of clumps, of American bog plants, besides gravel walks with long marginal belts on either side, profusely studded with Rhododendrons, Kalmias, Azaleas, Vacciniums, Andromedas, &c. &c.; and wherever a stream or lake is at hand, islands are judiciously introduced, and being thickly planted with these American shrubs, present in the summer one gorgeous mass of reflected floration, the splendour of the tints greatly enriched by the tremulous and varied shadows occasioned by the glistening of the waters, and the brilliance of the carpeted surface above, reminding one of some of Claude Loraine’s glowing sunsets.

At Lord Amherst’s, at Montreal, near Sevenoaks, an oblong island has been made in the midst of an oval pond. It presents a perfectly matted surface of Rhododendrons, and every
summer bursts out into one condensed mass of resplendent flowers, exhibiting in lieu of a common pond one of the most attractive objects in these beautiful grounds; and on a small scale, a good sample of “capability”.

By 1859, as George Lovell said, “American gardens”...have come to be considered as almost necessary features in the grounds of every country residence, large or small. Let us consider some of these earliest rhododendron gardens, and the rhetoric with which they were discussed.

At Kenwood was the first rhododendron collection to be described as a grove: ‘quite a grove of Rhododendrons, which seem to grow with native luxuriance; many thousands are coming up round the old plants, from the self-sown seeds’. At Fonthill, William Beckford tried to create an impression of the ‘mountainous regions of Catholic countries on the Continent’, avoiding displays of modern plants; his American ground was ‘disposed in groups and thicketts, as if they had sprung up naturally, with glades of turf kept smoothly mown to admit of walking through among them, and examining their separate beauties’. This is the first report in the gardening press of a garden whose planting attempted to replicate an exotic landscape; such comparable examples as Penjerrick, where Anna Maria Fox accompanied the experiments on the acclimatization of plants with attempts to introduce cockatoos and monkeys into the forest, had to wait for a later date for press coverage.

At Bagshot, The Gardener’s Magazine in 1828 publicized ‘an increasing arboretum’ under direction of Andrew Toward, who I believe was the first head gardener to have a rhododendron hybrid named after him. The collections were already so abundant that thinning was in progress, and self-seeding was being observed in the peat-like soil. ‘It seems to be a part of the plan of management at Bagshot, to distribute exotic trees over the margins of the native woods, and so, gradually, to give them a highly enriched and botanical character.’ By 1842 a terrace walk had been raised alongside the American garden to serve as a viewing platform.

At Keele Hall, Ralph Sneyd began planting early R. arboreum crosses about 1830; these groups of scarlet rhododendrons were later described as looking like ‘little mountains, spangled and sparkling from top to bottom’.

At Highclere, the first private garden to become famous for its rhododendron hybridization programme, The Gardener’s Magazine in 1834 reported two large beds which contained 100 bushes of rhododendron hybrids; the planting strategy was ‘to mass the varieties and species as much as possible together’. As the American garden developed to its eventual extent of 6.5ha (16 acres), the natural soil was removed to a depth of around 46cm (18in) and
replaced by peat; rhododendrons were grouped in circles, ovals, and other curvilinear figures, with broad grass walks and trees between. In 1841 a feature was reported consisting of eight borders arranged to form a Catherine wheel, planted with new azaleas; this wheel was still to be seen in 1909, although the early rhododendron and azalea beds near the house were re-arranged in the 1850s. The Milford lake was fringed along its banks with rhododendrons and azaleas, as were the islands within it; further rhododendron beds flanked the major drives. What the colour effects were like is difficult to ascertain. In 1834, Highclere was commended for avoiding ‘that surfeit of rich colours which we have heard some find fault with when criticising the London exhibitions’; in 1871, H Noel Humphreys compared the scene with a London rhododendron show, with a further comparison to the paintings of John Martin.14

Dysart House became famous for its American plants in the 1830s, but it was not until the 1850s that Robert Fish, head gardener at Putteridgebury and an important horticultural journalist, adduced it as a model for planning, with its rhododendrons ‘thrown together in groups and bold, sweeping borders in grounds traversed with gracefully-curved walks, and these again bordered with broad, irregular margins of turf’. The significant lesson Fish drew from Dysart was the importance of segregating rhododendrons from herbaceous plants.

‘There seemed to be no attempt to mingle flowers with the evergreens. What flowers would compete with these Rhododendrons in the height of their bloom? In the autumn, again, though cheerfully green, they would be sombre, contrasted with other things in the height of their beauty. The inference would seem to be – mingle not groups of these with groups of herbaceous flowers or bedding plants, but give them a garden for themselves.’ 15

The beginning of the 1840s brought the discovery of the self-seeding of R. ponticum, and the development of its use for covert planting. Some background is useful for setting the scene. As art, rather than nature, became the leading principle among gardeners, and the flower garden was seen as a challenge that was being successfully met, some gardeners cast their eyes further to the woodlands around the estate, and sought for ways of increasing their artistic content. The most radical attempts were made by men like Joseph Paxton at Chatsworth and Philip Frost at Dropmore, who enjoyed juxtaposing the wild and the highly cultivated, for example by planting the latest fuchsia cultivars in the woods and introducing clumps of bramble onto the manicured lawn. At Highclere in 1834, Loudon praised the contrast offered by a bank covered with sloes and juniper ‘to the smooth polish of the pleasure-ground, and its groups of
rhododendrons and magnolias, below.

While press coverage of this trend died down after the 1840s, it continued unabated; in the early 1860s the Covent Garden seedsman Peter Barr offered 'Paxtonian packets' of mixed annual seed for scattering in woodlands for a 'richly floriferous effect'. This trend culminated in 1870, with the publication of William Robinson's *Wild Garden*. 16

Such was the climate of opinion when the discovery was noised abroad of the self-seeding capacity of *R. ponticum*. Hints had been made before 1840: in 1829 Jacob Rinz had reported from Fonthill about an abundance of self-sown rhododendrons.17 However, it was in the first volume of *The Gardeners' Chronicle* (1841) that the matter surfaced noisily. G S Mackenzie wrote in to report his discovery, to be answered by Philip Frost, head gardener at Dropmore, who airily pointed out his long experience of the fact that

'...where they are grown in woods they are sure to sow themselves by tens of thousands. In the woods here we have, by a little attention, thousands of self-sown seedling *Rhododendron ponticum*, growing on any kind of soil excepting stiff clay... *Rhododendron cataubiense* and its varieties are far more beautiful than *ponticum*, and therefore should be planted near walks and the margins of woods; it is also one of the best to cross the Nepaul
kinds upon to obtain hardy varieties, which are mostly very beautiful. When in bloom, nothing can surpass the beauty of Rhododendrons in woods; last year the woods here were quite enchanting with them. It is very easy to fill woods with them, by sowing the seed broad-cast, where it is desirable to have them."\(^{18}\)

Shortly after, Donald Beaton, then head gardener at Shrubland Park in Suffolk, wrote that ‘We intend soon to plant the *Rhododendron ponticum* extensively, as undergrowth in the plantations for ornament and for the use of the game.’\(^{19}\)

Beaton’s letter introduced a new note: underwood planting. Much attention was devoted to this topic in the early gardening press; for example, at Claremont, Charles McIntosh was praised for his creation of a laurel underwood ‘by laying down the long straggling branches of the old plants, so that they now completely cover the surface... one of the most masterly things of the kind that has been done anywhere.’\(^{20}\) By the 1860s the planting of *R. ponticum* for underwood and covert was widespread, and with it came a change of emphasis; the early reports of its wonderful ornamental quality faded away as it became commonplace. \(^{21}\)

**Digression: Victorian Gardeners and the Rhododendron**

The gardening press today is more likely to credit developments in the garden to the owner rather than to the gardeners in his employ, but in the second half of the 19th century gardening had a higher profile as a skilled profession. The gardening press began with men like J C Loudon campaigning for better salaries, living quarters, and education for gardeners; and by mid-century a number of gardeners had risen to public prominence. Of these the most notable was Joseph Paxton, who, having begun his career as an under-gardener in the Horticultural Society’s garden at Chiswick, ended his days as a knight, a Member of Parliament, and a railway millionaire, with his career taking in such sidelines as architect, glasshouse designer, magazine editor, and company director, even while he retained his position as head gardener at Chatsworth. Not many gardeners could hope to emulate Paxton’s meteoric rise in the social scale, but all could hope to be pulled a little distance in his wake, and by the second half of the century, celebrated gardeners were being head-hunted from estate to estate rather in the way football stars are today.\(^{22}\)

The struggle to achieve professional status for the gardener was long and hard (and ironically the result was not long to endure, when you consider that gardening is today classed as a semi-skilled profession). Take the case of David Taylor Fish, later to become an advocate of colour planning in the wider landscape. He trained at Scone Castle, where ‘the curriculum for apprentices was... a useful and an unvarying one. One year (the first),
fires and houses; the second, serve the kitchen; and the third, work in the flower garden.' Moving then to Putteridgebury, where his brother Robert was head gardener, he studied writing and drawing in addition to his gardening duties; he then went through a series of nurseries gaining additional experience, and a series of gardens in subordinate roles. Finally

'. . . came the offer of a head place. This offer proved my first great professional trial. From the summit of my ideal I was brought suddenly down to the lowest level of everyday life by the offer of a situation at £30 per year, with board, and the half of a footman’s room for lodging. Hardly had these terms escaped “Joe’s” lips, when my indignation blazed forth, much to the good man’s amazement. “Why,” I asked, “couple the knowledge and culture of professional men with the rewards of a livery servant?”'.

Another example: James Tegg, who
became famous for a rhododendron garden, trained at Groom’s nursery in Clapham, became known as a fruit grower and exhibitor while head gardener to Baron Hambro at Roehampton (in which capacity, just to note another skill in which gardeners were expected to be proficient, he designed the first bouquet presented to Queen Alexandra on her arrival in England), and then served a brief period as head gardener at Clumber Park, before taking up his most famous position at Bear Wood, the estate of John Walter, the proprietor of The Times. ‘Of the many features added during Mr Tegg’s charge was the planting of the Wellingtonia Avenue, the laying out of a new kitchen garden, the sunken hardy plant garden near the mansion, and the gradual extension of the pleasure grounds’, including rhododendron and rock gardens. During all this time, while he continued his fame as a grower and exhibitor of fruits and vegetables, and added the role of estate forester to his role, he received press compliments like this:

‘Mr Tegg deserves the highest credit for the admirable manner in which the grounds are kept. The visitor can walk along miles of pathway and not see a single weed; and the sward is so well kept, that scarcely a leaf could be seen lying upon its surface.’

The head gardener was expected to be experienced not only in horticulture and botany; he needed to be able to turn his hand to surveying, garden design, flower arranging, building and engineering (especially in the glasshouse world) – and, of course, plant breeding. Interestingly, it is in the great rhododendron gardens that the status of head gardeners has remained highest in the 20th century (witness the Puddles at Bodnant), largely through their involvement with rhododendron hybridization. When we look back over the development of expertise in the cultivation of rhododendrons during the course of the 19th century, remember that it was primarily head gardeners who carried out the experiments and built up the resulting body of knowledge.

Much still needed to be learned about the culture of rhododendrons; at Whiteknights in 1835, it was reported that the rhododendron plantations had been ‘burned up’ in the drought because they had not been planted in the lowest part of the ground, and the assumption that anything Asiatic needed greenhouse cultivation took a long time to die. This change of attitude was largely due to the Wardian case, the use of which began in the late 1820s by Loddiges’ and other nurseries; the loss rate for plants plummeted, and as a result the ability of nurseries to supply large stocks increased. As gardeners found they had disposable quantities of new exotics, they began conducting systematic programmes of hardiness testing, for example leaving a certain quantity of plants out after the others had
been brought back into the greenhouse to see what temperatures they could endure.

We can construct an approximate chronology of the education of Victorian gardeners in the ways of rhododendrons and azaleas.

1820s-30s Controversy over the botanical arrangement of the genus. Loudon had treated *Rhododendron* and *Azalea* as distinct genera in his *Hortus Britannicus*; in his *Arboreetum*, he described Don’s inclusion of *Azalea* in *Rhododendron* as ‘however technically correct … injudicious in a practical point of view’.²⁶

1820s-40s First age of hybridization, as Loddiges, Dean Herbert, and others begin crossing rhododendrons and azaleas; the climax of this first period of hybridization was Gowen’s development of the Highclere hybrids, which began to be reported in 1831, and which, it was claimed, ‘as far surpass the common rhododendrons as the new double Scotch roses do the old wild ones’.²⁷

1820s-50s Experiments in hardiness, which by the 1850s were so successful that there was a general expectation the new Sikkim rhododendrons would be hardy. The 1850s to 1870s saw a dawning realization that rhododendrons in cultivation differed significantly from the wild state – comparing the plates of Hooker’s *Rhododendrons of the Sikkim-Himalaya* with cultivated specimens of the same species not only demonstrated their variability, but was frequently decided to be to the advantage of the British-grown plants²⁸. The year 1859 saw not only a storm unmatched until 1987, but debilitating autumn frosts which provided a good test of hardiness, much discussed in the press for 1860.

1830s-50s Experiments on the grafting of rhododendrons, especially new exotics on stocks of *R. ponticum*. The years 1854-55 saw a debate on grafting in *The Gardeners’ Chronicle*, the issue being whether grafting was suitable for garden, as opposed to greenhouse and exhibition, plants. The same period saw a fashion for growing rhododendrons as standards.

1830s-50s Realization that peat was not necessary for their cultivation. As early as 1835 *The Gardener’s Magazine* reported on a 6.5m (21ft) *ponticum* being grown ‘without bog earth’ at Maeslaugh Castle,²⁹ but it was not until mid-century that the possibilities of peatless cultivation were extensively realized.

1850s-60s Discovery that rhododendrons were pollution-tolerant and therefore suitable for town planting. As a result, they became plants of major importance for municipal parks; W W Pettigrew, in 1928, published statistics about Philips Park in Manchester, where rhododendrons were one of the few trees or shrubs worth attempting to grow outdoors throughout the winter, and even they had an average
lifespan of only three years in the notoriously polluted atmosphere.  

As the railways began to carve their way through Surrey, the focus changed from the London-based Loddiges and Lee to Knap Hill, the Goldsworth nursery, and later (from 1847) Standish & Noble at Sunningdale. Here rhododendrons could be seen growing as if in a garden setting, and the displays of standard shrubs at Waterer’s were to become famous as pieces of garden design by the 1870s. (Loudon claimed, incidentally, that the reason so many gentlemen started raising rhododendrons from seed in the 1830s was because of the excessive prices of nursery-bought stock.)

The rise of rhododendron exhibitions also played an important role, not only in publicizing what was available, but in creating expectations of what rhododendrons could look like in the garden. Waterer started a long-running series of ‘American exhibitions’ in 1849 at the Royal Botanic Society’s garden in Regent’s Park, reports on which became an annual feature of the gardening press (to such an extent that a
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report could sometimes be cribbed from a previous one – compare the 1862 and 1864 reports in *The Gardeners’ Chronicle*. During the 1860s he started exhibiting at the RHS Garden in Kensington as well, and then branched out regionally, with a Manchester show in 1873 and shows in Cadogan and Russell Squares. The gardening press regularly issued cautions to the public about inferring garden effect from exhibition effect: the controversy about grafting rhododendrons was in large part a reflection of their use in the London exhibitions, and by the 1860s azaleas were reported as not coming true to colour under canvas.

In 1859 came what was effectively the first English treatise on rhododendron culture, in the form of a series of articles by George Lovell of Bagshot, summarizing his experience in the year of his death, in *The Gardeners’ Chronicle*.32

The Age of Landscape Colour

In the 1820s, Joshua Major had grouped shrubs by colour; in 1859 Thomas Appleby, who had been Major’s foreman 30 years before, criticized the usual manner of grading plants by height in shrubberies (in which rhododendrons would appear along with box and spiraeas, in between tall shrubs, like thorns and laburnums, and dwarf shrubs in the front), and published proposals for borders grouped by colour. In his plan for a 12-row border, tall rhododendrons would occupy a row between laurustines and sweet bays, while *R. ferrugineum* would fill a row between berberis and andromeda.33

The subject of colour planning in the wider landscape, which had occasionally been touched on in the 1830s, was brought into prominence by William Paul, the Waltham Cross nurseryman, with a series of articles on ‘pictorial trees’ in *The Gardeners’ Chronicle* for 1864; here he recommended choosing trees and shrubs for landscape planting on the basis of colour grouping, whether by leaves, flowers, or bark. There was at first little response, but within a decade a number of other writers – James Bateman, Charles Lee, William Barron, D T Fish – had supported his proposals, and the 1870s saw landscape colour as a new field of activity among gardeners.34

This was a time when the flower garden colour schemes of the High Victorian period were being criticized by a younger generation of gardeners, like William Robinson, who turned against the massing of colours in the flower garden; the continuing proponents of massed colour, like D T Fish, began renewing the analogies of Loudon’s age, and talking about the way in which nature masses colours – bluebell woods, hillsides covered with heath or furze, and so on. Not surprisingly, then, the gardening press of the period began to pay respectful attention to the effect of masses of rhododendrons, as at Bedgebury, where a writer in 1867 described the effect of an island of rhododendrons facing banks of wild heath: ‘a
mass of flowers to which our most highly cultivated flower-beds can bear no comparison.36

In the garden, the immediate response was the planting of shrubs by masses, and the first garden noted for such planting was Waddesdon Manor, work on which began in 1874. Along the major drives were arranged triangular groups of shrubs, the points and bases of the triangles alternately coming to the front: rhododendrons and azaleas, berberis, philadelphus, lilacs, furze and broom formed the masses.36 This period was also the heyday of the ‘subtropical garden’, or garden devoted to foliage shape, and rhododendrons occasionally found employment here; Edward Luckhurst in 1876 described a portion of the grounds at Pencarrow where rhododendrons were mingled with gunneras and pampas grass—characteristic ‘subtropical’ plants—on a hillside leading to ‘the crown and glory of the valley, a Rhododendron garden some two acres in extent’.37

An example will show how quickly
the introduction of exotic shrubs for landscape colour became accepted. In 1880, William Paul published proposals for the management of Epping Forest, recently saved from development by the City of London. ‘While preserving the general character of an English forest’, he wrote,

‘I would not altogether eschew those exotics which are thoroughly hardy, but rather seek to introduce such for the sake of grandeur and variety . . . Of shrubs of moderate and lowly growth the Rhododendron (R. ponticum) should specially abound. There are many spots in which it would thrive as well as in its native habitats, and the richness of its foliage in winter, and the gorgeousness of its blossoms in May and June, commend it to every observer.’

His suggestions provoked a reply urging caution on the introduction of exotics into a native woodland, but the caution was concerned only with conifers; no objection was provoked by the idea of multiplying rhododendrons.38

The traditional American garden played a decreasing role in these years. It occupied a sort of middle distance between the principal flower garden and the wider landscape, but in the 1870s, attention was shifting not only outward, to the informal landscape beyond the pleasure ground, but also to the immediate curtilage of the house, where a few pioneers began replacing the familiar parterre with informal planting. At Tittenhurst Park, first Thomas Holloway and then T H Lowinsky brought formal beds of rhododendrons into the parterre and its precincts; but this garden received little publicity until the 20th century, when its pioneering collection of flowering shrubs won it esteem.39

At Bear Wood, James Tegg created a flowering shrub garden, in which rhododendrons, azaleas, and kalmias were the most important features, consisting of groups arranged informally on the lawn, characteristically composed of a centre of R. ponticum fringed by hardy hybrids. William Goldring, later a prominent garden designer who served his apprenticeship by reporting on gardens for Robinson’s magazine The Garden, reported that:

‘A noteworthy feature at Bearwood is the absence of all elaborate geometric designs, which are too often met with, defacing extensive lawns . . . Here, there has been for several weeks past an uninterrupted display of flowering shrubs, which are planted in bold groups, with irregular natural-like outlines.’

Another writer said that ‘It is at places like Bearwood that the visitor realises something of the splendid decorative service the hardy Rhododendron renders in ornamental grounds, especially when seen as they are in such large masses.’ While the
gardens of the Mangles family at Hethersest and Littleworth Cross may have chronological priority over Bear Wood for bringing rhododendron groups into the precincts of the parterre, they did not receive publicity in the press, and it was Bear Wood that proved to be influential.  

The publication of William Robinson’s *Wild Garden* in 1870 helped to popularize a term of uncontrollable ambiguity. Robinson eventually had to add a preface to later editions, specifying what he had meant by the phrase – not a wilderness, not a garden of native plants, but a labour-saving garden in which hardy exotics were encouraged to naturalize themselves. Surprisingly, in view of the self-seeding potential of *R. ponticum*, Robinson dealt only cursorily with the genus in that book, including it in a couple of lists (plants for bare areas, for fringing waterfalls) without further comment. His enthusiasm grew in the 1880s, however, and while the first edition of *The English Flower Garden* (1883) had little to say on the subject, his coverage increased in the second, and culminated in a statement which first appeared in the 6th edition (1898), ‘The glory of spring in our pleasure grounds is the Rhododendrons’.

In a passage added in the 2nd edition of 1889, but which did not take its final form until the 5th edition of 1897, he advised gardeners to

‘...show the habit and form of the plant. This does not mean that they may not be grouped or massed just as before, but openings of all sizes should be left among them for light and shade, and for handsome herbaceous plants that die down in the winter, thus allowing the full light for half the year to evergreens.’

Since Robinson was also the author of a book on *The Subtropical Garden*, and an enthusiast for foliage and ‘beautiful form’, this emphasis on habit can be seen as another legacy of the subtropical movement. In the 3rd edition of 1893, he added a further warning that rhododendrons were ‘often over-planted; that is to say, we are sure to see Rhododendrons in large and often inartistic and ugly masses in many country-places where no planting of any other kind worth speaking of is carried out’. (The words ‘are sure to’ and ‘inartistic and ugly’ were deleted beginning in the 8th edition; the latter phrase was replaced by the word ‘lumpy’.)

The young Robinson, together with his contemporary William Wildsmith, head gardener at Heckfield Place, actively campaigned against colour schemes in the flower garden – to such an extent that the early articles of Gertrude Jekyll, proposing colour schemes for the border, were criticized in some quarters as a reversion to the standards of High Victorian bedding. I suspect that Robinson’s growing enthusiasm for rhododendrons was fuelled in part by Jekyll, under whose influence he became ever more tolerant of colour
schemes, so long as they were carried out in the herbaceous border, the rock garden or the wider landscape, and not in the principal parterre.

At Munstead Wood, Jekyll determined ‘to group only in beautiful colour harmonies . . . to avoid overcrowding’, and planted so that clumps of crimsons and purples would not be seen at the same time. Purples, she thought, grouped better in the shade, crimsons in sunlight. She divided rhododendrons into ‘six classes of easy harmonies’:

1. Crimsons inclining to scarlet or blood-colour grouped with dark claret-colour and true pink.
2. Light scarlet rose colours inclining to salmon . . .
3. Rose colours inclining to amaranth.
4. Amaranths or magenta-crimsons.
5. Crimson or amaranth-purples.
6. Cool clear purples of the typical ponticum class, both dark and light, grouped with lilac-whites.’

Note that ‘harmony’ has now come to imply contiguity in the spectrum, rather than separation. As for azaleas: ‘Any of them may be planted in company, for all their colours harmonise’. At one point in the garden, she created a sequence of azaleas leading up a hill: first whites, then pale yellows and pale pinks, then orange, copper, flame, and scarlet-crimson; then softening off with strong yellows, and dying away into the woodland with *Azalea pontica*. These principles – spectrum-adjacent harmony, avoidance of immediate contrasts, and a colour series planned for recession into the distance – were Jekyll’s general legacy for the succeeding 20th century. For the rhododendron grower, one lasting consequence of her principles was the admonition that ‘Azaleas should never be planted among or even within sight of Rhododendrons’. Jekyll became the main source for this increasingly popular 20th-century rule.41

‘Colour effects seem for all time to have claimed the attention of past and present planters’, said a writer visiting Tortworth Court in 1914.12 And colour selection has certainly proved to be the most contentious single issue in rhododendron planting during the present century.

**The Age of the Woodland Garden**

Lord Armstrong’s garden at Cragside was one of the most massive planting projects of the later 19th century: over 6,880 ha (17,000 acres) of bleak Northumbrian hillside transformed, beginning in 1864, into a thick coniferous and rhododendron forest. As early as 1880 *The Gardeners’ Chronicle* referred to a collection of conifers and the carpeting of the ground with rhododendrons, kalmias, and heaths. By 1892 *The Gardener’s Magazine* could describe ‘impenetrable thickets’ of hundreds of thousands of bushes, ‘blooming so profusely as to light up the whole hillside with their varied colours’. As for these varied colours, one theme that the turn-of-
The-century articles emphasize is the combination of azaleas and rhododendrons: ‘Varieties of Azalea mollis have also been freely employed, and it is of interest to note that they are quite at home, and bloom freely, their shades of orange and buff presenting a delightful contrast to the stronger tones of the rhododendrons.’ The rhododendrons were ‘enhanced by the groups of hardy Azaleas, which are even more brilliant than the Rhododendrons in spring, whilst their leaf tints in autumn are as rich as anything in the woodland’.

Cragside was hailed as ‘one of the greatest examples of the planter’s art during the present century’. Colour apart, Cragside brought a new note into the literature: the creation of a forest rather than a display collection.43

While none of the early articles makes any comparison with the landscapes described in Joseph Hooker’s Himalayan Journals, it would not surprise me to learn that Hooker’s work had helped to dictate the form this forest planting took. Comparison of British rhododendron gardens
with Chinese and Himalayan scenery has been a minor theme of 20th-century discussions: George Forrest describing part of Rowallane as 'a bit of Yunnan', Frank Knight comparing the terrace gardens at Werrington Park to the areas from which Forrest collected (though that last may have been a sardonic comment on the state of overgrowth).\(^{44}\)

Woodland gardens have been so often associated with rhododendrons that it has become a commonplace that it was the rhododendron which was the stimulus to their creation. On the contrary, the older the woodland garden, the less likely it is that it was planned specifically to accommodate rhododendrons; the tradition of woodland embellishment, discussed briefly earlier, continued through the 19th century, and provided a context in which rhododendrons only gradually became dominant. So, for gardens as famous in recent times for their rhododendrons as Abbotsbury, Bodnant, Borde Hill, and Westonbirt, early accounts of the garden mention rhododendrons in passing or not
Rhododendrons in British Gardens: a Short History

at all. Their absence from the early years of Bodnant is particularly ironic. The second Lord Aberconway recalled:

“We planted shrubs, but we did not plant Rhododendrons. My grandfather never planted Rhododendrons except some good old hardy hybrids, like ‘Ascot Brilliant’ which we still have. When I was 21 I remember discussing it with our Head Gardener, not Mr. Puddle, but his predecessor. We discussed the possibility of planting some Himalayan Rhododendrons, and he said “Oh no, sir, they would never grow at Bodnant, don’t try Himalayan Rhododendrons” . . . We should not always take advice. About 1908 Veitch were selling Rhododendrons raised from Wilson’s collection in China of 1900, and I thought that we would try some of these Chinese Rhododendrons. I reflected that the Head Gardener could not say that they would not grow because he had never tried them. At the same time I thought that we would grow Himalayan Rhododendrons among them, and we have them mixed to-day. Of course the Chinese and Himalayan Rhododendrons were a great success, and although those grown in Cornwall grow twice as fast, they do very well in Wales.”

The great influx of rhododendrons from China, brought by Wilson, Farrer, Forrest, Rock, and Ludlow and Sheriffs, was accommodated in existing woodlands or coniferous gardens by Lord Digby at Minterne, the Aberconways at Bodnant, the Loders at Leonardslee and Wakehurst, Williams at Caerhays and Werrington, and others. But the aesthetic of the woodland garden was already established by the time these gardens began to receive their new introductions, and the descriptions of these gardens in the early 20th-century press display a few characteristic themes:

**Massing** – whether special features like the massed azaleas around the stream at Leonardslee, or vague incantations like the following, about Tregrehan: ‘gardening assumes a new meaning when one sees the landscape painted with such a lavish hand, with great masses of colour and backgrounds of every varying tone of green’.

**Highlights** – invocations of individual flowering trees becoming visible against a backdrop, as in the excellent phrase ‘flaring bushes of Rhododendron’ used of effects at Bodnant.

**Profusion and Variety** – achieved by simple listing.

But discussions of these gardens tended to devote more attention to the enumeration of species and hybrids than to a discussion of planting principles. When the arrangement of plants was specifically discussed, it tended to be either according to geographical origin, as in part at Wakehurst and Leonardslee, or by series, as at Tower Court and Wisley.
Planting by series was already waning in popularity before the recent revision of the genus. At Wakehurst, after its transfer to Kew, a scheme to plant rhododendrons in their series was changed to planting in ‘natural “cultural groups” ’. Nonetheless, two of the most important rhododendron gardens of the 20th century were arranged on this principle, and deserve some special attention; both were associated with John Barr Stevenson, who may be regarded as the foremost practitioner of planting by series.

At Tower Court, J B Stevenson created a series of avenues descending the ridge from his house, two of them lined with flowering cherries, one interplanted with Kurume azaleas, and the other with various series: ‘These spread into the surrounding valleys, presenting in the spring a vista of most varied colouring, lapping in waves up to the terrace on which the house is built.’ At Wisley, the area called Battleston Hill, acquired in 1938, 0.5ha (1 acre) of which had already been put to use for Exbury trial hybrids, was developed after World War II with Stevenson’s help. So many dead larches were removed that one side of the hill became quite sunny; some azalea series were planted in this open ground, and others where more shelter and shade were available. On the brow of the hill, *R. yakushimanum*, which created a sensation at Chelsea in 1947, was planted in open sun. ‘No attempt being made to devise a colour scheme, the effect during a favourable spring is one blaze of riotous colour.’

By the 1980s Battleston Hill was more likely to be criticized than praised in the press, and the storm of 1987 which devastated the area was greeted by audible relief in some quarters. Its replanting was not devoid of controversy: Christopher Lloyd attacked it in *Country Life* for the massed banks of azaleas.

The long debate in the 19th century over the planting of rock gardens — should the rocks be considered as a picturesque feature, to be planted with conifers, ivy and other trailing plants, or as a place to grow exotic alpines? — was never completely resolved, but the proponents of alpines were the most vocal faction during the 20th century. Reginald Farrer was willing to give some small space to dwarf rhododendrons in *The English Rock Garden* (1919-20), but Sampson Clay omitted them altogether in his sequel *The Present-day Rock Garden* (1936). Some important rhododendron gardens had begun as rock gardens, from Rowallane, which as late as 1930 could be described in *New Flora and Sylva* as ‘now as effective a bit of rock and Rhododendron gardening as one could wish to see’, to the Lea Rhododendron Gardens, begun in 1935 in a disused quarry, and later adding alpine and scree beds as these became popular; but the Lea Gardens never attained the critical esteem that its predecessors had, and has always had an air of being looked down on for its very popularity with the public.
The Age of Colour Coordination

The recommendations of Jekyll for the avoidance of strong contrast and the grouping of related tints were taken up by the major garden designers and landscape architects of the postwar years, and gradually percolated down into the gardening columns of newspapers, where soft colours, harmony, and what in the world of interior decoration had come to be called ‘colour coordination’ became the accepted wisdom during the 1980s.

The invocation of Jekyll as an inspiration can be seen in the writings of Lionel de Rothschild in the 1930s:

‘...the real art of gardening is not only to group plants to make a picture but also to see that colours mingle well. What has been done in herbaceous borders can just as well be done on a large scale in the woodland with Azaleas and Rhododendrons ... Too many of the Rhododendron gardens of to-day have been planted with no eye to colour.' \(^{53}\

At Exbury, where work began in 1918, he created a dell ‘where groups of mauves and pinks predominate – all the old favourites, all if you like false colours, but all blending beautifully together as there is nothing to clash’. (He was still prepared to allow such contrasts as purple and yellow – ‘Purple Splendour’ contrasting with the azaleodendron ‘Galloper Light’). \(^{54}\

One of the most influential designers of the postwar period was Sylvia Crowe, who consistently called for cool colours to be preferred in planting. ‘The worst way to grow them is in a solid mass of mixed colours.’ (The very phrase would have met with stunned incomprehension in the 19th century, when mixing and massing implied two opposing methods of grouping.)

‘The salmon and orange pinks are the hardest to place and if used at all should be in small quantities grouped only with dark green or grey ... In any large planting of rhododendrons, the cool colours should predominate, the white, blues, mauves and lilacs shading to the deep purples and clarets and the dark reds as accents. The strong pinks are better kept out of the picture.’

These views came to be widely accepted, and increasingly, where hotter colours were used, it was with an apologetic gesture toward the unregenerate taste of the general public. Take the recommendations of Lady Mary Howick:

‘...pale pink or mauve, also yellow and white. But one cannot garden exclusively with pale colours ... Some of the brilliant red rhododendrons are splendid and spectacular, especially if they can be isolated in their own green setting. The public certainly loves a good splash of colour, so one cannot do without it.’ \(^{55}\

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Jekyll's warning against associating rhododendrons and azaleas was repeated during the interwar years by gardeners like Lionel de Rothschild, who allowed that 'azaleas look very well against the dark green of Rhododendrons which have flowered earlier in the year.' After mid-century, it became an accepted tenet that they should not be planted together; Sylvia Crowe described the results as 'deplorable . . . for in the main the colours are incompatible', while Lawrence Banks gave as a rare exception to the rule 'a subtle combination of purple and mauve rhododendrons with the common yellow azalea'.

The literature on colour coordination in the later 20th century has sought to dictate not only certain combinations, but also particular colours. Individual gardeners have always had their individual colour preferences: the 'bloody reds of Bodnant' (to use Eric Savill's phrase), and Hope Findlay's preference for yellow at Windsor Great Park. Blue became a fashionable colour for the flower-garden in the 1930s, and the same taste reached the rhododendron world, as at Colonsay and Tremeer, where mauve became the dominant colour. (At Colonsay, however, an element of strong contrast was maintained by a bank of orange-scarlet bushes.) But the promotion of individual colours also led to a backlash against others. Christopher Lloyd recommended that:

'...some of the most popular and blatantly colourful azaleas should be judged by the same standards as the modern marigold – but more stringently, because the marigold may look reasonably appropriate in its formal garden setting, whereas the hotting up of an informal wood by azaleas is just a bit too much'.

J F A Gibson of Glenarn described his preference for species over most hybrids:

'The traditional Principal Boy in the Pantomime was a splendid creature, but he was usually short on subtlety. So it is with many elepidote hybrids and I would lay heavy blame on griersonianum with its shameless carryings-on with white and pink partners. Some of its crosses with red species are, of course, first rate, but I have yet to see one of its pink offspring which I personally can thole.'

Russell Page expressed a nostalgia for what he thought were the monochrome shrubberies of the 18th and 19th centuries, 'invariably of native box and yew, later augmented by cherry laurel, Portuguese laurel, aucubas and skimmias' (he evidently had not read Henry Phillips), a happy situation which had been disrupted by the arrival of the rhododendron. 'Reticence and discipline' were to be the new attitude in garden-making; Page turned 'with relief to planting long quiet stretches of R. 'Sappho', R. fastuosum flore pleno, R. catawbiense or the simple and fragrant R.
luteum’. In terms of practical recommendations, the gardener was to avoid ‘parti-coloured blight’ and restrict himself to a palette of ‘white, pale yellow, pale blue, rose and mauve. Bright reds and oranges and violets will throw these subtler harmonies out of key.’ On a sufficiently large scale, he was prepared to allow the planting of groupings ‘allied by their parentage and in all the modulations and variations of one colour’ – so long as contrast was avoided.  

Against these trends in colour planning should be set a counter-emphasis on form. Robinson’s insistence on keeping rhododendrons distinct enough to display their habit met with an increasingly favourable response in the 20th century. J G Millais promoted the planting of some species for their leaves alone, and J F A Gibson of Glenarn described the Falconeri and Grande series as ‘such splendid pieces of garden furniture even when not in flower’. The demand to keep larger-growing rhododendrons separate, rather than making them part of a group, was associated with Holford of Westonbirt, followed by the second Lord Aberconway and Eric Savill (‘wider spacing . . . study a plant individually’), and has been heard with greater frequency as the century has progressed. Graham Thomas complained that ‘Rhododendron plantings tend to be overcrowded. We have to go to High Beeches in West Sussex or to the landscaped expanses of Lochinch in South-west Scotland to see rhododendrons so well spaced that we can enjoy their vast beauty.’  

Later woodland gardens, such as the The High Beeches and the Savill Gardens in Windsor Great Park, placed greater emphasis on glades and a higher proportion of open space to woodland planting.  

The most significant instance of the pursuit of form was the work of Eric Savill and Hope Findlay in Windsor Great Park. Savill’s work began in 1934, with the cutting of glades and grassy rides through a R. ponticum game covert; Findlay arrived in 1943, and the climax of their work was the creation of the Kurume Punch Bowl in the postwar years. ‘In our judgement,’ wrote Eric Savill, ‘harmony of form is more important than that of colour and we are not perturbed if some of the strange mauves and purples find themselves immediately in front of the strongest reds, provided the former are derived from the Kurume . . .’ – going so far as to proclaim colour-blindness a merit if it nipped the obsession with colour coordination in the bud. This was an extreme statement, however, and in the 1950s the Kurume Punch Bowl could be held up in other contexts as a model of one school of colouring:

‘Colours were blended and distributed so that one colour would not predominate in any one area. The possibility of clashes was not considered to be a problem as it is a well-known fact that where one is mixing a wide range of colours, intermediate shades prevent the clashing of colours which would
be intolerable if used in twos and threes...’

This attitude to colour grouping, opposed to the colour coordination which was increasingly dominant, was held up for approval less and less as time passed, but the Savill Gardens continued to be invoked as a model for other qualities – those of form, or more specifically of three-dimensional scenic structure. In the early 1970s, Richard Bisgrove offered it as an example in a series of articles on garden planning directed at the amateur gardener with a small garden:

‘In one area of the Garden wings of dark rhododendrons flank a broad central walk casting deep shadows against which primulas, azaleas, meconopsis and many other beautiful plants are displayed. Instead of being a flat panorama for the visitor walking up the side of the valley, the scene becomes three-dimensional, with successive groups of flowers receding into the distance. Had the rhododendrons been any closer the whole area would be in gloomy shadow; any further apart and they would be sporadic black lumps in a flat expanse of flowers. Clearly this type of effect is not easily achieved.’

Epilogue: the Age of Uncertainty
The hiatus in gardening caused by World War II often necessitated a radical new start. Many of the great rhododendron gardens had suffered, becoming neglected and overgrown. Lamellen, begun at the turn of the century, was neglected after 1941, and only brought back by Walter Magor in the 1960s, doing his pruning with his chainsaw. Gillian Carlyon took on the restoration of Tregrehan in 1945; two years later the restoration of H A Mangles' 1870s garden at Littleworth Cross began. Tregye had to wait until 1970 for Edward Needham to acquire it and begin restoration. At Arduaine, failure to thin the tree shelter had resulted in a large number of tall straggling bushes; reorganization of the garden began in 1971. But the phenomenon of gardens falling into neglect is a perennial one; at Eckford House, Benmore, neglect only set in in 1972, and by the end of the decade visitors from the Rhododendron Group were pronouncing the garden impenetrable.

If one single change could be taken to indicate the uncertainties and reversals that have overtaken rhododendron gardening since World War II, it would be the changing reputation of R. ponticum. Once its ability to seed itself had been a source of delight; understandably, over-familiarity and the need to slash through R. ponticum undergrowth in restoring neglected gardens (one of the major themes of postwar renovation stories) went some way toward diminishing this sense of delight. Seedlings could still reward the gardener, however. Graham Stuart Thomas, perhaps the major inheritor in the mid-20th century of
the tradition of Robinson and Jekyll, could praise *R. ponticum* as late as 1984 for its 'supreme value in the landscape; every plant is different and flowers a few days before or after the next, creating a blend rather than a blare.'

As wild gardening slid gradually into a putatively ecological position, however, the attack on *R. ponticum* began. Immediately after World War II, the first wave of 'ecological' landscape theory still welcomed it, precisely because, like sycamore, it had naturalized and had therefore become part of the ecology. Witness Brenda Colvin: 'Rhododendron *ponticum*, for instance, the pale magenta one that grows so freely from self-sown seeds on light acid soils, has found a place along with heather and gorse, pine and birch on many a common.' By the end of the 1960s, this attitude was becoming unrecognizable as an 'ecological' one; like sycamore, *R. ponticum* was now deemed worthy of extirpation because it competed too successfully with native plants, and the Forestry Commission was labelling it 'a noxious alien weed'.

By the end of the 1960s, an increasing politicization of cultural attitudes was also apparent, affecting gardens as it did everything else. Russell Page had long ago quipped that 'rhododendron addicts form a large class in the upper strata of British gardeners', and this class bias surfaced in the tabloid gardening press in the late 1970s and early 1980s: fulminations against the dominance of rhododendron growers on the RHS, coupled with predictions that the future belonged to alpines, the democratic plants that could be grown by all.

Dwarf rhododendrons tended to be ignored in this rhetoric, however much actual writing on small garden planting brought them in. 'I do not believe this great genus is really appreciated by the public at large', wrote Lady Anne Palmer, echoing Lionel de Rothschild and other early promoters of dwarfs. 'There is a rhododendron for every garden, great and small.' By the mid-1950s, Branklyn, Keillour, Knightshayes and Glendoick had created a tradition of arranging dwarf rhododendrons; in the first three, peat blocks formed the basis of planting, while at Glendoick, the Coxes experimented with a graded sequence of habits, starting with truly prostrate near the paths and increasing in size toward the centre of the beds.

By the 1980s, the woodland gardens which had once been hailed as the great achievement of the 20th century were slipping rapidly into oblivion as far as garden historians were concerned. In 1960, Miles Hadfield's *Gardening in Britain* listed Hidcote, Bodnant, Sheffield Park, and Westonbirt as the great gardens of the century; in 1986, in Jane Brown's *The English Garden in our Time*, only Hidcote still held that position, to be accompanied by Rodmarton, Sissinghurst, Shute, and other gardens in a more formal tradition - the rest of Hadfield's list had disappeared.
(even Bodnant, surely one of the most important formal gardens in the country). Christopher Lloyd’s quip in *The Well-tempered Garden* about ‘a host of exotic but formless woodland “gardens”’ expressed the new attitude succinctly: the plantsman’s garden was to be considered a curiosity of horticultural history, not a work of art. I would not like to count the hours that the English Heritage Gardens Committee spent debating whether or when a ‘plantsman’s garden’ qualified for inclusion in the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens.

As, around mid-20th century, landscape architects and garden historians discovered the merits of the 18th-century landscape park, they began to savage the rhododendron planting of the 19th and 20th centuries as inconsistent with the visual values of their preferred period, and the nod was given for the removal of landscape colour from historic landscapes where it was considered inappropriate to period. In 1948 Russell Page attacked the planting of rhododendrons at Stourhead, where in the 1920s a massive programme of replacing laurels, alders, ash, and *R. ponticum* with hybrid rhododendrons had been carried out: the ‘whole mood of the composition [was] destroyed by enormous rounded masses of pink, crimson, scarlet and white rhododendrons’. In 1960 Brenda Colvin, in a letter to *The Times*, condemned the plantings for their destruction of the intended 18th-century effect, and the National Trust gradually implemented a policy of regrouping the rhododendrons so as to remove them from the precincts of the lake.73

The very idea of a rhododendron garden came under attack during the 1970s. Graham Stuart Thomas wondered whether it would one day be considered ‘that, with its ease of cultivation and its magnetic attraction, the rhododendron has had an adverse effect on garden design in these islands’. Russell Page had already said that ‘I have yet to see a well planted rhododendron garden’.74

But for sheer vituperation, nothing could surpass Germaine Greer in her ‘Revolting garden’ column in *Private Eye*, with her expressed revulsion for ‘bloated heads of rubbery blooms of knicker-pink, dildo-cream and gingivitis-red’. Revising the history of the 20th-century garden, she claimed that:

‘...the descendants of the great rhodo propagators deeply regret their ancestors’ excesses. The R.H.S. swallowed the Rhododendron Association for the same motive that the whale swallowed Jonah, and is equally incommode by the fact that it won’t stay down.’

Greer herself remarked ruefully on the number of gardens open under the National Gardens Scheme that advertised displays of rhododendrons and azaleas; as usual, it is unwise to assume that the taste of the general public corresponds closely to the recommendations of critics and
designers in the horticultural press.\textsuperscript{75}

In the face of this apparent backlash against the rhododendron garden, what positive use for the plant can be discovered in the current horticultural press? I suspect that we are beginning to see the emergence into greater prominence of a trend that has been slowly growing during the 20th century: the use of rhododendrons as what have come to be called architectural plants. The insistence on form inherited, through meandering channels, from the subtropical movement of Robinson's young years, has also resulted in the use of rhododendron shelter planting to suggest walls and garden divisions, as at Achamore; of specimens as accompaniments to garden ornaments, as with the famous planting of \textit{R. williamsianum} around a stone tank at Bodnant; of tubbed plants on terraces; of rhododendrons to frame a staircase, as at Glenveagh. The invocation of such architectural effects by Mary Forrest in \textit{Rhododendrons 1990} suggests that this use of rhododendrons may still achieve greater prominence.\textsuperscript{76}

But the traditional employment of rhododendrons in the woodland garden continues to furnish possibilities for innovative garden design. The last 20 years have seen the establishment of the former Sunningdale collection of rhododendrons in a new home, in Ray Wood at Castle Howard. The acclaim that has greeted James Russell's planting – for example, the use of bamboo as a windbreak, based on E H Wilson's description of finding rhodo-

dendrons against a backdrop of bamboos in China – suggests that there is still new life to be found in the old tradition.\textsuperscript{77}

\section*{NOTES}
For simplicity the following abbreviations have been used:
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{GM} – \textit{The Gardener's Magazine};
  \item \textit{GC} – \textit{The Gardeners' Chronicle};
  \item \textit{JRHS} – \textit{The Garden or Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society}
\end{itemize}

\begin{enumerate}

  \item \textsc{O'Neill, J} (1979). ‘From American to Peat Garden’, \textit{Country Life}, 30/8/79, 614-16; also (1831) \textit{GM}, vol. 7, 251 for the expression 'heath-mould'.

  \item (1828) \textit{GM} vol. 4, 176; see also vol. 9 (1833): 664-69.

  \item \textsc{Phillips, H} (1823). \textit{Sylvia florifera}. 26-7, 33-4. \textit{Ibid.} 202-7


  \item (1859) \textit{Cottage Gardener}, 21: 248-49.

  \item \textsc{Mangles, J} (1839) \textit{Floral Calendar}, 62.

  \item (1859) \textit{GM}, 97.

  \item \textsc{Loudon, J C} (1822). \textit{Encyclopedia of Gardening}, 1226; (1841) \textit{GC}, 471.

  \item \textsc{Fonthill: GM}, (1835). II: 443.

  \item \textsc{Penjerrick: Challinor Davies, V.}
  \item \textsc{Penjerrick}, \textit{Rhododendrons 1980-81}, 26-31. See also \textit{GC}, 1889 ii 749; 1901 i 309-10; and \textit{The Garden}, 55 (1901), 70-1.

  \item (1828) \textit{GM}, 4: 303, 433-37; (1829) \textit{GM}, 5:

\end{enumerate}
382; (1842) GC, 591-2.
13 (1875) GC, i 622-3.
14 (1834) GM, 10: 245-9; (1841) GC, 400 [misnumbered 300]; (1858), GC, 575-6;
15 (1843) GM, 19: 436-9, for a list of early hybrids at Dysart;
(1834) GM, 10: 248, for the remark about Highclere,
17 (1829) GM, 5: 382.
18 (1841) GC, 52 (Mackenzie), 85 (Frost)
19 (1841) GC, 135
20 (1834) GM, 10: 325-30
21 (1864) GC, 54, for rhododendron game cover at Enville.
22 ELLIOTT, B. Victorian gardens (op. cit.), 13-16.
23 (1875) GC, i 655-6
24 (1902) GC, i 184; Garden, 1902 i 170.
27 (1414) Botanical Register, 17: 1414; (1831) GM, 7: 135, 251; (1841) GC, 400 [mis-numbered 300].
28 (1859) GC, 97; (1871) Journal of Horticulture, 21: 162-4; see also (1896) GC, ii 747-8, for a comparison between Hookers’ plates and specimens at Heligan, reinforced by W Magor’s comments in ‘The garden at Heligan in Cornwall’, Rhododendrons 1982-83, 1-3.
29 (1835) GM, 11: 361.
30 (1863) Florist; (1869) GC, 663; (1928) GC, ii 308.
33 (1859) GC, 97, 144-5, 169, 193, 216-7, 264-5, 313-4, 360.
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