The Rhododendron Story
200 Years of Plant Hunting and Garden Cultivation
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RHODODENDRON, CAMELLIA & MAGNOLIA GROUP

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Chapter 4

Nomenclature: An Ordered Universe

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Although in the West we tend to think of ourselves as in the vanguard of those involved in the development and recording of rhododendron and azalea cultivars, the truth is somewhat different. In Japan there was sufficient interest and knowledge as far back as 1692 for Ito Ihei to publish a detailed, illustrated account of a large number of azalea cultivars. Some of these persist to this day and Ito's account too is still available, translated and republished as A Brocade Pillow (Weatherhill, 1984). It is an early example of a continuing tradition of fine Japanese works on azaleas, continuing to the present day in the detailed accounts published by the Japanese Satsumi Azalea Society.

It was much later, well into the 19th century, before a similar number of rhododendron or azalea cultivars had been developed in Europe, later still in the USA. But then they came pouring out of British nurseries such as Standish & Noble and the various Waterer establishments at Knap Hill and Bagnall. In continental Europe the establishments of Vervaene and van Houtte launched countless new azaleas and Seidel in Germany developed a steady stream of new rhododendrons (see chapters 9, 10, 12 and 13).

With so much activity in different countries, involving such a wide range of firms, using different languages and even different alphabets, it is not difficult to see why the names used for the plethora of new cultivars became duplicated or confused. Without a single international authority to turn to, raisers of new plants simply had to manage on their own, often in ignorance of what others had done before them. One has to remember too that at this time Rhododendron and Azalea were still regarded as separate genera, so the use of the same cultivar name within both was quite usual. Standish & Noble, for example, listed an Indian azalea 'Comet' in an 1848 catalogue having already offered a hardy hybrid rhododendron of the same name in 1847. Later James Veitch & Sons also raised an Indian azalea of this name and by 1862 Liebig in Germany was offering a 'Comet' derived
from \textit{R. formosum x edgeworthii}. Such examples are not uncommon and lead to all manner of confusions.

Trying to introduce some international order and method into this rather haphazard process of naming cultivars is clearly impossible without an agreed set of rules setting out what is and is not acceptable and what procedures need to be followed. The first steps in establishing such a code were taken by Alphonse de Candolle in 1862, and by 1867 the International Botanical Congress in Paris accepted his \textit{Lois de la Nomenclature Botanique}. This incorporated an article indicating that plants of horticultural origin should be given fancy names, that is names in a common language as distinct as possible from the Latin names of species. The inadequacy of this article soon became apparent but attempts to produce expanded rules foundered during World War I. However, by 1930 a collaborative venture involving the Natural History Museum and the Royal Horticultural Society produced a set of rules that were finally incorporated as an Appendix to the Botanical Code of 1935. It is significant for cultivar registration that in discussing these proposals the 1930 International Horticultural Conference suggested that the starting point for nomenclature in horticultural groups should be either a horticultural monograph or an \textit{ad hoc} list of varieties drawn up by a recognized body of specialists. Where such bodies did not exist it was suggested that some recognized society be charged with the work. Working experience of the new rules dictated further revision. After much international discussion and collaboration articles on the botanical names of hybrids were incorporated as an appendix to the 1952 Botanical Code, leaving the bulk of the cultivated plant regulations for still further discussion. These eventually produced an agreement on the first Cultivated Plant Code, published in 1953. Full details of the historical development of that Code are given by Professor William Stearn in his scholarly introduction to the text. The Code included a section on registration indicating that: ‘Adequate and accurate registration of names is of first importance for their stabilization. The aim of registration is to avoid duplication of names and the creation of names which are unnecessary or are likely to produce confusion and controversy’. In a Note it was recommended that for any large group of plants there should be a recognized International Registration Authority. Essentially this all still holds true today.

In 1955 the 14th International Horticultural Congress at Scheveningen in The Netherlands appointed the first such International Registration Authorities, IRAs, and it was at this time that the RHS took on the responsibility for \textit{Rhododendron} (including \textit{Azalea}), as well as \textit{Narcissus} and perennial \textit{Delphinium}, with orchids, conifers, dahlias, lilies and dianthus following at a later date. By 1958 the first International Rhododendron Register had
been published by the RHS.

Rhododendron and azalea growers in the UK had not however been entirely idle during this long period of gestation that ended with the 1958 Register, and their efforts to a large extent shaped its form and content. In the *Rhododendron Society Notes* for 1926 HD McLaren and EH Wilding published a ‘List of Rhododendron hybrids that have flowered and have been named, and of which the parentage can be traced back to species on both sides’. This consisted of just over 100 names, but excluded all vireyas and azaleas. In 1928 the highly exclusive Rhododendron Society expanded its membership to become the Rhododendron Association. While not exactly going out of its way to recruit the common man, it became a rather more accessible organization for the rhododendron and azalea enthusiast. From the issue of its first Year Book in 1929 it carried a ‘List of Hybrid Rhododendrons compiled from the lists of principal nursery gardeners’ (an euphemism one suppose for, dare one say it, the trade). Some acknowledgement of name duplication was already evident, but the only additional information listed was flower colour and an indication of hardiness. The list contained over 600 names, but again omitted Vireyas and azaleas. It grew steadily over the succeeding years and included some European cultivars.

Significant changes occurred in 1934 with not only the first separate list of azalea cultivars, but the first attempt at a Rhododendron Stud Book. This was intentionally an exclusive list, intended to distinguish only primary hybrids (between two species), hybrids with an Award of Merit (AM) or First Class Certificate (FCC) from the RHS or hybrids involving a ‘registered’ rhododendron. A committee was available to consider ‘application for registration’. The Stud Book differed from the nursery list in giving parentage, raiser/exhibitor and a date, but the entries lacked a description. A second table listed the named progeny of each individual species or hybrid.

All these lists continued in the Association’s Year Books, sometimes in a supplementary volume, up to World War II. During the hostilities the Year Book ceased publication, but the RHS published the lists of new rhododendron hybrids in its *Journal*. Of particular note in the 1943 listings was the information that the previously listed cultivars ‘Bellona’ and ‘Jupiter’ had had to be re-named as earlier usages had been discovered.

In 1945 the Rhododendron Association transmogrified to become the RHS Rhododendron Group, a designation that happily continues to the present day. The first Year Book from the new Group was published in 1946 and contained a listing and description of newly awarded plants but neither the commercial lists nor Stud Book. These were now contained in the new *Rhododendron Handbook* (1947). This also incorporated many of the other features of the old Association Year Books,
such as the systematic account of the species and the lists of collectors’ numbers. The cultivar lists continued to appear in later editions (latterly in a separate volume) until 1969. The Handbook now concerns itself with species alone.

Examination of these various lists shows that much of this material and the style in which it was presented evolved directly into the Register. This is not to say that Dr Harold Fletcher, the first International Rhododendron Registrar, and his assistants; did not add a tremendous amount of further entries from other sources worldwide to produce a list with c.8,000 entries. Annual Register supplements have been published by the Society every year from 1962 onwards. Until 1987 these were incorporated within the Group’s Year Book, but subsequently have appeared as a separate publication. Sadly, it is no longer possible for the Supplements to be circulated automatically with the Year Book and the 1994 Supplement (number. 34) had to ‘go it alone’ for the first time.

Following Dr Fletcher’s translation from Wisley to Edinburgh, David Pycraft took over the Registrar’s work in 1970 and continued in this role until 1983 when he in turn was relieved by Dr Alan Leslie. The Register continues to be based at Wisley where work on a new edition has been in hand for some time. Progress has sometimes seemed to be (and has been!) at a snail’s pace, due to the Registrar being diverted to other responsibilities. However the revision is now going hand-in-hand with computerization of the records so any future editions will be much more readily produced. At the time of writing (January 1995) about one-third of the 20,000 or so records have been entered on the database and a draft of the ‘A’s has been circulated for comment to a small international panel of advisors.

It might be appropriate here to recognize the continued co-operation the Society enjoys from many individuals and Societies concerned with the genus Rhododendron from all over the world. In particular the local Registrars in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Japan have been an essential element in facilitating the gathering of information and promotion of registration. It would be much more difficult for the Society to function as the International Registration Authority without their help. Like the Society, they are all committed to the Cultivated Code’s principles of promoting ‘uniformity, accuracy and fixity’ in the naming of cultivars. Moreover, a Register which tries to record as much information as it can about each entry provides a valuable source of reference for more than just names: parentages, raisers, descriptions, awards are all included and provide a unique database, one which computerization will make easier to use for a variety of purposes.

Maintaining a Register, even with so much voluntary assistance is a costly exercise and is an essential part of the Society’s ‘charitable works’. Indeed, although it
used to charge a fee, initially of 2s 6d and rising gradually to £1.00, even this has now been dispensed with and since January 1995 the smart-looking registration Certificate is also issued free of charge, provided it has been requested by the registrant. We feel the Certificate is a small ‘thank you’ to those who bother to register their new plants.

The Register exists to take account of all named cultivars. It is not a function of the IRA to pontificate on the quality or the distinctness of the plants themselves. The sheer practical difficulties of doing this in such a large, widely dispersed group would make it an impossibly daunting task to do. Such assessment should be undertaken by the raisers before any plant receives a name. Once it has a name and that name is promulgated the Register has to take notice. If you feel too many plants are being named it is up to you to try to influence those involved, preferably through your local Societies, to convince those concerned that the introduction of too many similar cultivars is not in the best interests of the rhododendron growing world.

As will already be evident, International Registration Authorities do not make the rules. Their actions and decisions are determined by the Cultivated Code. It is this Code which determines the maximum number of words (there has to be a limit!), bans the use of new cultivar names in Latin form and recommends a whole series of elements that, ideally, should not be used. The Code also indicates how new names should be published and no name is fully legitimate until it has been validly published. The International Commission responsible for the Cultivated Code recently met in Seattle (August 1994) to consider the first revision since the 1980 edition. The results of their labours are expected to be published in 1995 and will ease some of the apparently petty restrictions on the form of cultivar names. Experience will determine whether such relaxations will be beneficial and the results will be carefully monitored.

Naming new plants is a strange business. Some raisers show great originality and, whatever one may think about the vast number of new cultivars produced in the USA in recent years by Mr and Mrs Delp, they show great originality in their nomenclature. Luckily we are now spared the tongue-twisting epithets so beloved by Edward Magor and others in the 1920s and 30s, which gave us Cilkeisk Group, Cilaspis Group, Cilbooth Group and the like, but some registrants can still be very unimaginative and show a remarkable lack of concern for the euphonious quality or commercial potential of their new names.

What of the future? The priority must be to make a new, fully revised International Register available and to make good use of the computerized database it will represent. Versions on compact disc or even direct electronic access will no doubt need to be considered. We need to continue trying to improve our channels of
communication, 'spreading the word' and trying to chase up plants that have slipped through the net. Azalea breeders in particular have a very poor record as registrants and more needs to be done to bring them into the fold. Despite the extensive work already undertaken there is also much more historical investigation to undertake, sorting out ancient confusions, providing information about the plants still in cultivation today. The task is endless!

So, if you are likely to be naming new cultivars please make the effort to register the name. All we require now is information. Remember that once duplication occurs the name alone will never again be unambiguous and communication will suffer. The horticultural community as a whole benefits from a flourishing and active registration system. Help us to help you by playing your part in its operation.

**Dr Alan Leslie**, RHS Senior Registrar with overall responsibility for all nine International Registers in the Society's care, has been International Rhododendron Registrar since 1983. As a member of the International Commission for the Nomenclature of Cultivated Plants he has been involved in revising the Cultivated Plant Code.