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 9

Hybrids for a Cold Climate: The Seidels

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The leading German specialist in the breeding and selection of rhododendrons during the 19th century and the early 20th centuries was without doubt the firm of T J Rudolf Seidel, whose nursery garden at Grüngräbchen near Dresden is still in existence. Their records contain something like 600 entries of new cultivars. Their achievement can perhaps be compared to that of the British family of Waterer: certainly no other German nursery of the past can compete with it.

The first member of this important family of gardeners was Johann Heinrich Seidel (1744-1815). He began his career as a garden apprentice in Dresden in 1764, but he spent seven years training and studying abroad in Vienna, the Netherlands, England and, finally, Paris before returning to his native Saxony in 1771 when he was appointed assistant curator (Adjunkt) of the Elector of Saxony’s orangery. In 1778 he was promoted to be the Elector’s head gardener (Kurfürstlicher Hofgärtner) and later the King’s gardener (Königlicher Hofgärtner). Early in the year 1807 he began selling his own Rhododendron ponticum, and it is said that he had six different species of rhododendron in cultivation.

Four of his sons became gardeners and in 1813 two of them, Jacob Friedrich Seidel (1789-1860) and Traugott Jacob Seidel (1775-1858) established the nursery known as Gebrüder Traugott Jacob Seidel (T J Seidel Brothers). At first their main business was growing camellias and the story of how this came about is an intriguing one. Jacob Friedrich, the younger brother, had been working from 1810 to 1812 as a garden inspector at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris where he quickly recognized the horticultural potential of camellias as winter-flowering shrubs. When he was forced to join the French army in 1812 and set out on Napoleon’s
march to Russia, he took the camellia plants he had acquired in his knapsack. However, he got no further than Erfurt before deserting and making his way back to Dresden where he soon started growing camellias in the family nursery which he set up with his brother in 1813.

Later another speciality – rhododendrons and azaleas – was added, and in 1820 T J Seidel Brothers put Rhododendron ‘Azaleoides’, R. catawbiense, R. dauricum, R. dauricum var. atrovirens, R. ferrugineum and R. hirsutum on the market as hardy plants. By 1822 Jacob Friedrich was already hybridizing rhododendrons.

Towards the end of the 1850s Jacob Friedrich Seidel’s son, Traugott Jacob Herrmann Seidel (born 1833) joined the family business after learning his trade as a gardener both at home and in France and England. When Jacob Friedrich Seidel died in 1860 Traugott Jacob Herrmann took over the management and changed the name of the firm to T J Seidel. At the same time he gave up growing other plants in order to specialize in rhododendrons, camellias and azaleas. He had already visited John Standish at his Bagshot nursery in Surrey and worked at the nursery for a time in 1859, and this undoubtedly influenced his decision to concentrate on
breeding rhododendron hybrids.

About 1860 he made his first hybrid, ‘Jacob Friedrich Seidel’, for which he was to be awarded the first prize of one ducat at an exhibition at Berlin. His next novelty, ‘Eduard Bäseler’ (‘crimson, one of the biggest flowers’), appeared in his catalogue for 1867. In 1869 he offered ‘Marie von Woedtke’ and in 1873 ‘Justizrath Stein’. From then on further novelties followed regularly. In 1877 he started the first trials with hardy rhododendrons. His eldest son, Rudolf (T J Rudolf Seidel) joined the business in 1883 and his second son, Heinrich, followed six years later. T J Herrmann Seidel died on 28 April, 1896.

A property at Grüngärbchen near Dresden (Niederlausitz or Lower Lusatia) was acquired in 1897. There T J Rudolf Seidel (1861-1918), the foremost breeder of rhododendrons of the dynasty, produced hardy Seidel hybrids on a large scale; his aim was to produce even hardier rhododendrons. Some 150ha (360 acres) of the estate at Grüngärbchen with extensive areas of moorland, as well as a stand of 100-year-old Scots pine (Pinus sylvestris), provided the ideal habitat. Grüngärbchen lies 40km (25 miles) north of Dresden, with a harsh climate – the average temperature around 4°C (39°F) lower than at Dresden. This offered optimal conditions
for the selection of absolutely hardy plants.

Of the 106 taxa of rhododendrons selected from the experimental garden at Dresden and moved to Grüngräbchen, 48 were killed by frost in the winter of 1899-1900 (temperatures of -33°C/-27°F with no snow cover); 41 suffered frost damage each year; and only 17 proved thoroughly hardy. Building on the experience of his forebears as well as his own knowledge, T J Rudolf Seidel used only well-tested hardy parents, such as the cultivars R. ‘Alexander Adie’ (syn. R. ‘Jay Gould’), R. ‘Boule de Neige’, R. ‘Mrs. Milner’, as well as a R. campanulatum hybrid ‘Viola’ of which he knew the inherited qualities and potential. These were crossed, following a special breeding programme, with R. catawbiense, R. metternichii (which was in fact R. brachycarpum, although this was not known at that time) and R. smirnowii.

T J Rudolf Seidel reported to the Mitteilungen der Deutschen-Dendrologischen Gesellschaft Jahrbuch, 1902 (Report of the German Dendrology Society, Year Book, 1902): ‘... based on my trials, and I make them systematically, there are 12 crosses likely to lead to success. They are (the first mentioned being the mother plant):

1. Rh. catawbiense x ‘Mrs Milner’
2. Rh. catawbiense x ‘Jay Gould’
3. Rh. smirnowii x ‘Mrs Milner’
4. Rh. smirnowii x ‘Jay Gould’
5. Rh. ‘Boule de Neige’ x ‘Mrs Milner’
6. Rh. ‘Boule de Neige’ x ‘Jay Gould’
7. Rh. ‘Viola’ x ‘Mrs Milner’
8. Rh. ‘Viola’ x ‘Jay Gould’

9. Rh. japonicum metternichii x ‘Mrs Milner’
10. Rh. japonicum metternichii x ‘Jay Gould’
11. Rh. ‘Boule de Neige’ x ‘Viola’
12. Rh. ‘Viola’ x ‘Boule de Neige’

His breeding principles were:
1. Readiness to flower when young;
2. Clear-cut colour differences;
3. Good growth and strong roots;
4. Dark, medium-sized foliage, not liable to wind damage;
5. Hardiness;
6. Needing no special care;
7. Late flowering;
8. Buds on the earliest shoots;
9. Coming true from seed (if possible).

New cultivars had therefore to meet stringent requirements. The aims laid down by T J Rudolf Seidel are still valid and reflect his experience and foresight, based on his life-long experience with hardy rhododendrons.

The hardiness of the Seidel cultivars was clearly superior to nearly all other similar cultivars. This was strikingly proved during the hard winters of 1962-63, 1965-66, 1978-79 and 1984-85, when many of the nearly 2,000 different rhododendrons at the Lehr-ünd Versuchsanstalt fur Gartenbau (Horticultural College and Research Institute) at Bad Zwischenahn were badly damaged by frost.

The earliest crosses were made by T J Rudolf Seidel at Dresden in 1891, frequently using the hybrid ‘Everestianum’. The cultivars ‘Allah’, ‘Anton’, ‘August’,
‘Carola’, among others, originated from these crosses. These novelties were named in 1899 but were not introduced until after 1905. The names were generally chosen from male and female first names, and followed an alphabetical sequence; thus, those named in 1899 included ‘Alfred’, ‘Allah’, ‘Anton’, etc., ‘Bertha’ and ‘Botha’ in 1900, ‘Emil’, ‘Erich’, and ‘Eva’ in 1903, and so on.

Every year between 40,000 and 50,000 seedlings were produced, and from 1913 onwards 12,000 to 15,000 four- and five-year old specimens were prepared for sale each year. A decisive factor in this success, or rather in the rapid propagation and distribution of these cultivars, was that about 1870 the Seidel nursery succeeded in propagating ‘Cunningham’s White’ from cuttings. In the early 1880s some 20,000 specimens were produced each year for grafting stock. Cultivation and propagation of novelties on a large scale were thus ensured.

A particular tradition of the Seidel family was to repeat the same names for the male children. The first specialist of the family bore the names Traugott Jacob, and all his male descendants have since been given the same two first names, plus a third, which was their real personal name, for example, Traugott Jacob Herrmann Seidel. Part of the tradition was the spelling of the German first name ‘Herrmann’ with two r’s, the usual spelling, never accepted by the Seidel family, being ‘Hermann’.

The Horticultural College and Research Institute (at Aurich, East Frisia till 1975) is now at Bad Zwischenahn (Oldenburg). Here, I have been collecting Seidel cultivars for years in order to preserve them and there are now nearly 120 growing at the Institute. It forms the largest collection of Seidel hybrids in the world. In 1971 the Institute received ‘Bella’, ‘Echse’, ‘Eva’ and ‘Fee’ from the Arnold Arboretum at Boston, USA. These four cultivars, extinct for a long time in Germany, had been sent to the United States by the Seidels along with a number of others in 1908. They had survived many of the harsh North American winters. This fact alone proves that the Seidel hybrids are very hardy. I have managed to acquire other cultivars lost to the Seidel nurseries from Hermann A Hesse, the well-known nursery at Weëner/Ems. In 1974 the late Mr Michael Haworth-Booth (Farall Nurseries, Haslemere, England) sent propagation material of ‘Bernhard Lauterbach’ dating back before 1890. This cultivar had been erroneously listed in the Rhododendron & Camellia Year Book (1956), No 10, as ‘Baron Leuterbach’.

long-forgotten Seidel cultivars is a never-ending adventure, as is their correct naming.

Ludwig Leopold Liebig (1801-72) was another important rhododendron breeder in the 19th century. In 1837 he acquired Elisenruhe, a private nursery, and made it a commercial undertaking. By 1887 his nursery was, after the Seidel’s, the third largest at Dresden. Of his cultivars, so far as is known, the following are still in existence: ‘Jewess’, a very hardy *R. caucasicum* hybrid which originated before 1857; ‘Ludwig Leopold Liebig’ (bright scarlet) from before 1880; and ‘Gabriele Liebig’ (white, petals slightly tinged towards the edge with soft rose-violet, and with strong dark red marking) from before 1863. An *R. edgeworthii* hybrid called ‘Suave’ produced by Liebig is known to exist in England, introduced before 1863.

The other German rhododendron breeders of the past, such as Otto Schulz, head gardener of the Royal Porcelain Manufactory at Berlin, Johann Baptist Müller, breeder of ‘Wilhelma’, a race of heavily speckled rhododendrons, Sebastian Rinz of Frankfurt-on-Main, Louis Roth of Stuttgart, the Mardner brothers of Mainz, and some others, produced comparatively few cultivars which have all disappeared almost without trace.

It is worth mentioning here that a Scotsman, James Booth (at his nursery at Klein-Flottbek, now a suburb of Hamburg) was (in 1837) the first to hybridize rhododendrons in northern Germany. They have all vanished, presumably because they possessed too many of the tender *R. arboreum* genes.

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*From 1961 to 1995 Walter Schmalscheidt was officially in charge of fruit and woody plants at Oldenburg for the Weser-Emms Chamber of Agriculture. He is now responsible for a large collection of old and rare rhododendrons in Bad Zwischenahn*
Figure 9 (top left): the Vireya R. jasminiflorum was first exhibited in 1850. The strangeness of the flowers led to a comment that it was 'probably no Rhododendron at all' (see Chapter 7). Figure 10 (top right): R. 'Humboldt', one of TJ Rudolph Seidel's cold-hardy hybrids (see Chapter 9). Figure 11 (above): Borde Hill, the Sussex garden of Colonel Stephenson Clarke, a prominent member of the original Rhododendron Society (see Chapter 15)
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