



"Niagara Rhodo"

Newsletter of the Niagara Region Chapter,
Rhododendron Society of Canada
District 12, American Rhododendron Society



January 2013

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Word of Caution

By becoming a successful grower, the reader will be exposed to a contagion for which there is no cure. Once infected with an appreciation of rhododendrons and azaleas most gardeners spend a lifetime collecting these most beautiful of all plants.

H. Edward Reiley

President's Note

Our Public Meeting held on November 18, 2012 followed a different format. It focussed on a number of topics: on the evaluation of Rhododendrons, the challenges of hybridizers, registration of new hybrids, evaluation of plants, characteristics of plants chosen by wholesale nurseries/landscapers, and the thought that goes into deciding on cultivars to be available at the Annual plant sale. As you can see, the role of our organization in furthering the appreciation of rhododendrons and azaleas can cover a lot of ground.

This meeting, featuring a number of presenters, each with a different perspective, was very informative and stimulating. It provided insights that enables each of us to help deliver more of what members of Rhodo Niagara will find valuable. As a not-for-profit organization, we can evaluate new plants in our gardens, check plants for Niagara hardiness/suitability, and create awareness for new introductions as well as for old proven winners, thereby stimulating demand for specific plants and/or companion plants.

Hence, the activities that we have adopted in recent years – Plants for Members, Brueckner Test Project, and special orders of plants that tie in with speakers -- are consistent with this broader understanding of our unique role. Not only can we beautify our gardens, we can have fun and gain satisfaction while doing it.

The Brueckner Test Project has been described, and promoted to the ARS, and has created a new level of support and direction.

Desirable colours - brilliant whites, new blues, and hardy yellows – are not just a dream We can help bring them to reality.

We have a full program for 2013. So start planning your 2013 garden enhancements and developing your plant wish list.

Best Wishes in 2013 for you and your family!

Sondra Meis

Notes: Part 1 November 18, 2012 Meeting
Part 2 will appear in the February issue of "Niagara Rhodo"

This public meeting featured Kevin Kavanagh, Peter Hannam and Christina Woodward discussing factors and methods involved in evaluating cultivars, the process through which cultivars are introduced to growers, issues that landscapers consider and deal with in fulfilling clients' requests, factors that are important to commercial growers in selecting plants to provide to home gardeners. Nick Yarmoshuk described where rhododendrons and azaleas come from and the factors that the plant selection committee of the Rhodo Niagara Board, headed by Marian Little, consider when they select cultivars to offer to members at the Annual General Sale and in the P4M program.

Kevin Kavanagh started the afternoon with a discussion of factors landscapers consider when they accept a commission to develop a garden. Factors such as cost, siting, exposure, soil type, colour and effect that the owner wishes to create are standard considerations. Kevin reminded us of the importance of “how familiar is the owner with the genus that is to be introduced to the garden”. Lack of familiarity with the cultural requirements of the genus may result in the plant not performing as expected or perhaps expiring soon after its installation. Too often azaleas and rhododendrons, newly planted in mid to late June, are left to the tender mercies of mother nature when the owners leave for a 2 week vacation in July to escape the brutal heat of the period, only to discover a withered stalk on their return. He cited dangers to be found when areas adjacent to newly planted specimens are used by children for soccer or other vigorous activities or where active family pets have full run of the yard and gardens. Rhododendrons are not as forgiving as some plants to having a ball bounce off of them or being tripped over, stepped on or ‘watered’ by the family pet. Not surprisingly, therefore, learning how the client intends to use areas adjacent to their garden beds is among the most important considerations in recommending (or not) Azaleas and Rhododendrons for their garden.



Desirable characteristics of rhododendrons and azaleas include leaf size, brightness and saturation of colour, consistent flowering year-to-year, plant shape, leaf colour through the growing seasons including fall colour. Since rhododendron and azaleas flower for a relatively short period of time, their appearance during

the summer, fall and winter are critically important. Cultivars that provide pleasant shapes, interesting forms and changing leaf characteristics are considered by many as highly desirable. In southern Ontario, plant tolerance to both extended winter cold and hot summer temperatures is an important consideration by landscapers. Finally, since many plants are obtained by landscapers in plastic pots (as compared to balled and burlapped) and clients often request larger than smaller plant sizes, selections that develop well in the nursery in pot culture are most desirable commercially.

Following Kevin’s presentation, the moderator turned to the source of cultivars we are now able to acquire.

Where do the plants come from? Species from which many current cultivars have been developed came to us from mountainous areas in various parts of the world. For example, North American species were exported to Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries where they were hybridized with species from Asia and Europe; and the resulting progeny were then imported to North America.



Hybridizing occurs naturally with flying insects usually providing the opportunity to mix genetic materials. Humans have been developing new rhododendron cultivars for centuries. On Canada’s east coast Bruce Clyburn, John Weagle are notable hybridizers as were the late Captain “Dick” Steele and Dr. D.L.Craig. The late Dr. Joe Brueckner did hybridizing work in New Brunswick and later in Mississauga. Dave Hinton in Orono, Ontario, did fine work developing cold hardy cultivars. He now works with Magnolia. The work of the late Al Smith of the former Vineland Research Station was notable; Jack Looye of Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, continues to do exemplary work.

Hybridizing



The photos above show the essential elements in sexual reproduction of rhododendrons. The two bottom photos depict the pollen being applied to the pistil with a label applied to the hoped-for fertilized stigma.

Results of Hybridizing: The process of generating seed is tedious and time consuming. It may take up to six months for the seed to develop. Then the seed must be sown. If it germinates, a further 12 to 18 months are required for the seedling to develop to a size where it may be transplanted to a test bed. Barring weather related problems, the plant may take 2-4 years (or longer) to flower. Then the flower is evaluated for its various characteristics. Of the 100 seedlings that are produced, perhaps 5% may be deemed worthy of further evaluation. A sample of a USA west coast hybridizer's work is shown below.

Jim Burlap's Results



How is testing done? Evaluation of the quality of a cultivar is a time consuming process. Attempts are made to assess the cold hardiness, heat tolerance, drought resistance and disease tolerance of the cultivar. Also, the general worthiness of the plant as a horticultural specimen is assessed. Typically this is carried out on the home territory of the hybridizer. The limitation to this approach is that the locale may be subject to a microclimate. Further testing may be done through a collegial or friendship network. Some testers carry on their work for many years, a decade or more. Others may limit their testing to a shorter time period. Ideally a wider test area involving several climate areas would be preferred. Randomized, controlled testing would be ideal but the process is difficult to execute because of differences in soil and availability of sufficient plant numbers. The Niagara Region Chapter's Brueckner evaluation program is a compromise process. Members of the Chapter, resident in somewhat widely separated areas, are invited to grow Brueckner hybrids and to provide evaluations during a 3-4 year period. The same cultivar is likely to be tested under 4 or 5 different conditions providing an assessment of the cultivar's ability to perform under varying conditions. The major limitation here is the difficulty in obtaining sufficient numbers of rooted cuttings so that sufficient numbers of plants may be distributed for testing.

The photo collection below describes the typical rooting process. Cuttings must be taken at an appropriate time during the growing season. This process was the subject of a talk by Dennis Bottmiller, November 2011.

Multiplying by Stem Cuttings



Growth Hormone is applied. An appropriate light soil mix is created and a propagating frame used to attempt to root the cutting in about 6 months' time. Again, the process is time consuming.

What do commercial growers look for?

Commercial growers are in business to make a profit. Accordingly, the faster they can “turn over” a crop the greater will be their profits. To stay in business, however, they must achieve turnover and provide high quality plants. Our research among commercial growers reveals that the high quality producers want:

1. Rhododendrons and Azaleas tolerant to local cold conditions.
2. Good tolerance to Black Vine Weevil.
3. Colour other than pink or lavender.
4. Attractive foliage at time of sale.
5. Plants grow quickly to large size – Customers look to create instant gardens.
6. High tolerance to applied fertilizer – ability to respond & grow quickly.
7. Good response to shearing – pruning – to develop bushy plants.
8. Plants in bloom at sale time.
9. Unique flower colour, leaf flower or leaf form.

What Niagara Region Chapter Selection Committee looks for when selecting cultivars?

1. What people “in-the-know” are identifying as “good-doers” and their evaluations of these.
2. What was in short supply and in demand last year.
3. What is new, unique & interesting this year: Colour, leaf form, eventual size, time-of-bloom.
4. What has not been available but has done well in our yards.
5. What can we be certain will be hardy in our area.
6. What is heat, drought, disease tolerant.
7. What best value can we obtain for our members.
8. What is not carried by commercial vendors.



Cornell Pink

4 examples of interesting acquisitions for members



R. luteum "Golden Comet"



Hot Dawn



Hodgsonii

Notes from Christina's & Peter's presentations will appear in the February 2013 issue of *"Niagara Rhodo"*

Sunday, February 10, 2013, 2 P.M.

Vineland Research & innovation Centre
Vineland Station.

The featured speaker on February 10, 2013 will be Steve Hootman, renowned plant explorer in New Guinea, Western China and the Himalayas. He is, also, Director of the Rhododendron Species Foundation and Botanical Garden located near Seattle, Washington.

Steve Hootman is one of the foremost international plant hunters of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and one of the most intrepid. As Director of the RSF&BG he has played a determining role in making this garden one of the premier gardens of its kind in the world. The Rhododendron Species Foundation and its gardens are devoted to conservation, distribution of many ericaceous plant species and to inform gardeners of their beauty and versatility.

Steve is an extraordinary lecturer and educator on the subject of rhododendrons and has made significant contributions to ongoing scientific research on rhododendrons. Steve's enthralling lectures combine plants, cultivation and adventure. He is a much sought after speaker. We are delighted that Steve has agreed to donate his time and talent to speak to the members of Niagara's gardening community. Your attendance on February 10 will demonstrate your appreciation of his work.

As always, our speaker meetings are open to the public. This enables you to bring your friends to introduce them to an expanding world of rhodos, azaleas and companion plants.

Our meeting will also include a brief Business Session to review 2012 activities, report on the Chapter's finances, and to refresh the Board's mandate. To facilitate this process, we have included further information on Page 6 in this newsletter.

Don't forget to mark Saturday, April 27th on your Calendar for our Annual Plant Sale, our major fund raising event. As in past years, we will provide a Pre-order Option so that members may choose their plants in advance. The 10% discount on all purchases applies to Chapter/ARS members.

We hope to see you then.

2013 Program

All Meetings at
Rittenhouse Hall

**Vineland Research & Innovation Centre
Victoria Avenue, Vineland Station, Ontario**

Sunday, February 10, 2013, 2 P.M.

Steve Hootman, Director & Curator, Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden, Irrepressible Plant Collector in the mountains of the Far East.

Topic: Plants I Collect; Where I find them; How I decide what to collect.

Sunday, March 10, 2013, 2 P.M.

Bruce & Marianne Feller. Flower show organizers and judges. Bruce Feller is an avid landscaper on Long Island, New York and Eastern Vice President, American Rhododendron Society.

Topic: Evaluating rhododendrons.

Saturday, April, 6, 2013, 9 A.M.

Description & Discussion, with a Slideshow of . . .
"What Plants are Available this Year".

Saturday, April, 27, 2013, 9 A.M.

Annual General Plant Sale. All gardeners welcome.

An Example of Steve Hootman in China

Adapted from Potomac Valley Chapter original by Don Hyatt

Over a five-year period, Steve took three expeditions to China where his focus was the extreme northwest corner of the Yunnan Province in China. The area is bordered to the west by "Myanmar" or Burma along the "Gauligong Shan" range, to the north by "Xizang" or Tibet, and to the east by the "Nu Jiang" or the Salween River. The entire region has been relatively untouched by plant explorers due to its very remote location. However, it is known to be an exceptionally rich and diverse area for rhododendron species and many other choice plants.

With the cooperation of the Kunming Institute of Botany, Steve and several other experts in the rhododendron world traversed the rugged terrain in that region seeking rare rhododendron species growing in their natural habitats. They explored the Salween / Irrawaddy Divide and reached the Hpimaw Pass on their second trip and by the third trip made it to the dramatic

Dulong River gorge formed by a tributary of the Irrawaddy. Most of the plants they found are ones that very few of us have seen although some names may be familiar to hybridizers. You won't want to miss Steve's entertaining tales of plant exploration or his beautiful slides of rhododendrons and awesome scenery in this remote region.



Steve Hootman with 30 foot tall Rhododendron Rex

Rhododendron falconeri



In Steve Hootman's words "For sheer majesty in the genus *Rhododendron*, one would be hard-pressed to surpass the big-leaved Himalayan tree *Rhododendron falconeri*. The huge bold leathery leaves up to 14 inches in length are more than matched by the large, rounded inflorescence of white to pale yellow flowers. The stout growth habit and overall massive scale of this species have led some to christen it "one of the dinosaurs of the genus."

Election of Members of the Board of Directors.

The current members of the Board of Directors are each standing for re-election to their current positions on February 10, 2013.

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|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Sondra Meis | President |
| Mike Little | Treasurer |
| Marian Little | Plant Selection |
| Lil Haworth | Membership |
| Peter Phelps | Plant Sales |
| Nick Yarmoshuk | Secretary, Newsletter, Web |
| <u>Nominated for election:</u> | |
| Wendy Fletcher | Chair, Brueckner Evaluation |

This is a call for additional nominations to fill 2 vacancies on the Board of Directors. Please write or phone nominations to Sondra Meis at e-mail: Sondune@gmail.com
Phone: 905-871-3066

About the Rhododendron Species Foundation A Canadian Connection



The Rhododendron Species Foundation is a non-profit organization founded and incorporated in 1964 by members of the American Rhododendron Society. Its role is to secure the finest authentic forms of *Rhododendron* species, and to develop a comprehensive collection of this plant genus. Conservation has become of primary importance in recent years due to the destruction of *Rhododendron* habitat in many areas of the world.

Following initial discussions among *Rhododendron* breeders and enthusiasts in the Pacific Northwest, the real origin of the Rhododendron Species Foundation may be said to lie with a visit to England by Dr Milton Walker in March of 1964. The purpose of his visit was to explore the possibility of importing cuttings of the best forms of *Rhododendron* species growing in both public and private British gardens, many from the original wild collections. Among the gardens he visited were Windsor Great Park, Wake Hurst, Leonardslee, and the major Cornish gardens, including Caerhays. In September he wrote to these gardens, as well as to Brodick, Wisley, Corsock, Leggygowan (Northern Ireland), Glenarn, Logan House, Younger Botanic Garden of Benmore, Stronachullin, and the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, to request cuttings. But there was a problem. Due to American import regulations the cuttings could not be brought into the United States directly from Europe. They could, however, due to an extraordinary flexibility on the part of the Canadian Department of Agriculture and Canada Customs, be imported into Canada. Dr. Walker contacted Mary Grieg, owner of the Royston Nursery on Vancouver Island, to inquire if it would be possible for the cuttings to be imported and propagated in British Columbia. As a result of Mary Grieg's further inquiries, arrangements were made with the University of British Columbia, and the first shipment of cuttings arrived there from Brodick Castle in September, 1964. Subsequent shipments arrived in

Vancouver that same fall, and over the next several years from other major British gardens. At UBC they were propagated by Evelyn Jack (now Weesjes), who in the process took on much of the correspondence with the British sources. The plants were grown on for up to two years, and, with a sharing agreement providing that one plant of each selection be kept at UBC, then sent on to Oregon to become a permanent part of the RSF collection.

The RSF *Rhododendron* collection was first housed on Milton Walker's property at Pleasant Hill, near Eugene, Oregon. The first plants were sent there in October, 1968. Three years later the collection was moved to the property of RSF board member P.H. (Jock) Brydon, near Salem, Oregon. By the fall of 1973 it had become apparent that the collection was becoming too large for the Brydon property, and a committee met with George Weyerhaeuser (a relative of committee member Corydon Wagner), who was immediately and enthusiastically receptive to the idea of providing space on the new Weyerhaeuser corporate campus. In 1974 the Weyerhaeuser Company generously leased at no cost a permanent site of 24 acres for the collection at its corporate headquarters in Federal Way, Washington. The collection was relocated from Salem to the Federal Way site in 1975, and planted in accordance with the geographic area of species origin.

A membership program was started in 1976, and has representation from 15 different countries. Plant distribution to members was also begun about this time, with the profits helping to support the garden. 1980 marked the opening of the Garden to the public on a limited basis, the formal establishment of a coordinated volunteer program, and the completion of a garden master plan that proposed replanting the collection in the Garden to reflect taxonomic groups (those species that are most closely related are planted near one another). This replanting was completed in 1984.

Education has always been a primary goal of the RSF. An International Rhododendron Species Symposium, organized by the RSF, was held in Tacoma, Washington, in April, 1985. Another long-held educational practice of the RSF is to provide horticulture students with practical hands-on experience. The Student Intern Program was inaugurated in 1986. Since that time 52 budding horticulturists have worked and studied in the Garden and nursery.



Steve Hootman (center) discussing seedlings at Rhododendron Species Foundation Greenhouse