

# GREATER PHILADELPHIA RHODOGRAVURE

Newsletter of the Greater Philadelphia Chapter, American Rhododendron Society ::::::::::: Winter 2015

## *Sweet and smooth*

In pursuit of *R. arborescens* in the wild

**By Karel F. Bernady**

My fondness for the recurring seasons has grown with accumulating age spots and reliving of previous joys. Among these are the songs of first robin of spring and its cousin, the wood thrush, the return of ruby-throat hummingbirds, savoring the first fully ripe tomato of my own planting, and the explosive pop and sugary acidic flavor released upon biting a just-picked Macoun apple in September. So too it is with my first encounter in June of a blooming sweet azalea, *Rhododendron arborescens*.

I travel a bit to enjoy the perfume of this wonderful native. Its preferred habitats are streamsides along moving waters, wet seeps and cool mountain tops. Some fruitful sites to enjoy the blooms and scent are recounted here.

From Philadelphia the nearest place to experience *arborescens* in the wild is along the Susquehanna River below Holtwood Dam. Lock 12 of the Susquehanna & Tidewater Canal, which was completed in 1840 for barge traffic on the west side of the river, is now a recreational area and gives access to the riverbank. The river here is just above the lake behind Conowingo Dam in Maryland. The land rises, permitting the Susquehanna to reclaim its historic rocky bed where it cut through the mountains ages ago. *Arborescens* finds a home above the water in the outcroppings of the underlying bedrock along the river's edge.

The plants here tend to be small, stunted from growing out of narrow cracks within the bedrock. Root restriction makes natural bonsais of some. How seed can germinate and grow in such a hostile environment is mysterious. Flowering in mid-June, the fragrance is present but not overwhelming because of the limited numbers of flowers on these small neat shrubs. The bushes exhibit the typical white flowers with red pistils and filaments. Occasionally pink will highlight corolla margins or the ribs of the expanding buds at the fingers stage. The new vegetative growth lacks hairs (botanically glabrous) and is smooth to the touch, giving the plant another useful name, the smooth azalea. Of our native azaleas only *R. prunifolium* shares this characteristic.

Elevated ten to fifteen feet above the riverbed during low summer flows, the bushes are occasionally inundated by floods, sometimes completely covered. Evidence of this is the detritus captured by the branches: dead grasses and leaves, twigs and man's debris, plastic bags and other snatchables. One might think the leaves and seedpods would be scoured off by the floating mass, but the plants survive intact and give their autumn bounty of colorful foliage and seed.

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K. Bernady photos

*Rhododendron arborescens* in a rock cleft along the Susquehanna River near Lock 12 in York County, mid-June.

## *Beautiful new cultivars*

ARS registrar to explain his task, with numerous knockout photos

Can you think of a less-alluring alliterative phrase than “rhododendron registration”? (Please, don't answer that.) Think visually instead.

Michael Martin Mills hopes to wow you with stunning pictures of what's really behind the concept of registering rhododendron names: the beautiful flowers themselves. Since he took over the job of North American registrar from Jay Murray in 2012, Michael has become steward to a trove of electronic images. He will make use of that collection as the speaker at the chapter's January meeting, with a presentation titled “Name That Clone!”

In addition to floral portraits (have you ever seen ‘Teton Twilight’, ‘Sunset Gold 50’ or ‘Whisper White’?), Michael will explain just what registration is and why it matters. If you have a plant worthy of propagation, in need of a protected name and registration, this meeting is for you.

The meeting is Sunday, January 11, in the Widener Visitor Center of Morris Arboretum. Gather at 1:30 p.m. for friendship, coffee and tasty items, with the program beginning at 2 p.m. (All are encouraged to bring cookies or paté or whatever.) At the Morris entrance kiosk, simply say “rhododendron meeting” to be admitted to the arboretum without charge.

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The American Rhododendron Society is a horticultural organization devoted to the genus *Rhododendron* – which includes azaleas. At the national level, the society holds annual conferences, publishes the excellent, full-color quarterly *Journal of the ARS*, and fosters plant research and conservation. Its website, [www.rhododendron.org](http://www.rhododendron.org), is a trove.

The Greater Philadelphia Chapter gathers eight times a year. Sunday afternoon meetings are held September, October, November and January at Morris Arboretum. February through August we are more mobile, with a banquet, plant sale and picnic at various sites. The latest meeting information may be found at [www.GPChapterARS.org](http://www.GPChapterARS.org).

Not already a member? Dues are \$40 per year, which includes chapter and national membership and a subscription to the *Journal*. Contact the president or treasurer (see above) for a member form or go to [www.GPChapterARS.org](http://www.GPChapterARS.org); click on “Join us.”

### Fun with Latin

Here’s an arbitrary sample of specific epithets for rhododendrons (from a 1980s series in the *ARS Journal* by Theo Smid).

*Calendulaceum* – of the color of calendulas.

*Dauricum* – of the Daur culture of China

*Keiskei* – for its discoverer, Keisuke Ito.

*Lacteum* – milky colored (the flowers).

*Neriiflorum* – flowers like *Nereum*, i.e., oleander.

*Pachysanthum* – with thick flowers.

*Ponticum* – of Pontos, the northeast coast of Turkey.

*Strigillosum* – with many short bristles.

*Tsariense* – for the Tsari Chu, a river in Tibet.

*Vernicosum* – literally varnished, for the glossy leaves.

All of these surely lead to *R. goodenoughii* and *R. exasperatum* – but don’t leap to conclusions. The former is for the New Guinea island of Goodenough; the latter merely means rough.

## So why not sow?

Now is the time to plant rhododendron seeds

The nights are annoyingly long and the ground, if not already, will soon be frozen solid. Time to sow seeds! Rhododendron seeds, that is, and of course it’s an indoor activity.

Growing rhododendrons (and azaleas) from seed is not for the instant-gratification set. Seven years is typical before first blooming, sometimes less, sometimes much more. But every rhododendron in your garden was once a seedling, including those propagated by cuttings, which can be regarded as something on the order of a photocopy, because there had to be an original before it could be duplicated.

Most notably, seeds are how we get new cultivars. Say there is a plant by Hy Bridizer that he is naming ‘Libidinous Lemon’. Before it was a plant, it was encased in a seed that resulted after pollen from ‘Big Yellow’ was placed on the stigma of ‘Pure Sex’. Had no one planted and tended those hypothetical ‘Pure Sex’ X ‘Big Yellow’ seeds and seedlings, ‘Libidinous Yellow’ would never have come into existence.

Certain species, particularly deciduous azaleas, are frequently grown from seed, since propagation by cuttings is so demanding, with a relatively low success rate.

In order to get seedlings to a size that will make outdoor winter survival a reasonable bet, early winter is considered the optimum time for indoor sowing. That means now.

The rudiments of rhododendron seed culture are not that different from many other indoor seed starts: sterile plastic containers, a fine medium of sphagnum and perlite, full enclosure to create a continuously humid environment, some warmth (room temperature is reasonable), 14 hours a day of artificial light once the seeds sprout, and careful monitoring, tending and thinning through the spring and summer.

Here are two excellent sources for detailed how-to instructions: H. Edward Reiley’s fine book *Success With Rhododendrons and Azaleas* (revised edition, 2004) and an online primer by Tom Ahern, a hybridizer from Allentown, found at [http://valleyforgears.org/files/abc\\_seedlings.pdf](http://valleyforgears.org/files/abc_seedlings.pdf).

Some details diverge slightly. Reiley recommends 70 percent sphagnum, 30 percent perlite; Ahern favors a mix of 50 percent pine parks bit sieved at ¼ inch, 25 percent sphagnum, 25 percent perlite. Ahern sprays the surface, after sowing, with a multipurpose fungicide such as Daconil, but Reiley considers this “seldom necessary.”

It important that the container be nonporous, but that doesn’t mean fancy. The late Howard Roberts, gentleman hybridizer, used clear plastic party cups about 4 inches in diameter, for instance, and pint or larger almost-clear food containers, if well washed and given a dilute bleach rinse, are perfectly fine. Containers should be at least 4 inches deep, with a separate container for each variety of seed being sown. The medium should be fully damp, not wet, filled no more than 1 inch from the top of the container, tamped lightly and given an even surface.

Rhododendron seeds are tiny. Some fall naturally out of the dried pod (check every crevice of the envelope they came in), other require cracking the pods. Sow no more than 100 in a container. Do not cover with medium.

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## Sweet and smooth

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*Arborescens* in this habitat can help stabilize river banks. Here, however, it clings to immovable rock for dear life. In visiting this location, a person also needs to hold on dearly. Step carefully over rocks and the flood-borne logs and lumber jammed among them. Footing can be treacherous in places. The climb along the riverbank is exhilarating, and the views of the shrubs and river well worth the effort.

Another location to see *arborescens* in this environment is picturesque Swallow Falls State Park in Garrett County, Md., 230 miles west of the Susquehanna. The Youghiogheny River flows through the much beloved park. Henry Ford, Thomas Edison and friends camped here in 1918 and 1921. Easier to walk to and approach are the azaleas along the riverbank below Upper Swallow Falls. The bushes are larger, more their expected size, mainly because most grow unimpeded in the sandy river embankment and not in some constraining fracture of a rock. They also bloom in mid-June. Along the walk to the river one can observe the terrible devastation Superstorm Sandy inflicted upon the forest in October, 2012. The Park is allowing the tree fall to remain as found to evaluate forest recovery from the catastrophic event. The azaleas were spared damage.

A gentle place to visit a large swarm of sweet azaleas is Mount Davis, the highest point (3,213 feet) in Pennsylvania, in Somerset County. At the picnic grounds *arborescens* of all sizes may be observed. Some of the bushes reach seven feet tall and when in flower near the end of June, and their fragrance is powerful. The entire area is perfumed with a pleasant heliotrope-like scent. The plants provide a textbook of *arborescens* variation to study in size, flower and foliage. Present are the smaller-stature plants of variety *richardsonii*. White flowers with or without yellow blotches are found. One large bush bears pale pink flowers in great profusion.

As it is easy to travel to and walk among the plants, one feels the picnic ground was landscaped with the sweet azalea for your dining enjoyment. A stroll to the edge of the woods will disabuse you of this thought. Large bushes of the azalea extend into the forest leading downhill and across the county road. The plants surrounding the picnic tables are just the upper boundary of a sizable natural population of *arborescens* in its montane preference. Mount Davis is the most



A low-growing *R. arborescens* at Mount Davis in Somerset County, Pa., with the author.

convenient location to sense the sweet azaleas' magnificent bouquet without undue effort. Caution: one visit during flowering time may be highly addictive and have you seeking return.

Autumn brings to close another flowering season of our natives. *Arborescens* has a final delight to share at that time. The foliage will turn a mixture of colors, yellow, red, orange, usually combined. When the leaves further desiccate, they age to brown and become scented with the aroma of burnt sugar, somewhat like the odor of fallen leaves of the katsura tree, *Cercidiphyllum japonicum*. The sweet azalea gives a Halloween treat to beckon us to revisit it next season.



The sweet azalea's fall foliage, along the Susquehanna River.

## Calendar

**Important:** If you do not receive this newsletter electronically, you will not receive email reminders a week before events. Please use this calendar to mark your own.

**January 11, 2015, Sunday** Chapter meeting. Speaker: Michael Martin Mills, "Name That Clone!" 1:30 p.m., Morris Arboretum. See article on Page 1.

**January 13, Tuesday** Flower Show committee meeting. 7:30 p.m., home of Randy Dalton.

**January 18, Sunday** Valley Forge Chapter meeting. Speaker: Janet Novak, "Plants of Greece and Sardinia." 2 p.m., Jenkins Arboretum.

**February 10, Tuesday** Board of Directors meeting. 7:30 p.m., home of Kim Kopple.

**February 15, Sunday** Joint meeting with Valley Forge Chapter. Speaker: George Woodard of the Howard Phipps Estate. 1 p.m., Uwchlan Meeting House, Lionville, Pa..

**February 28-March 8** Philadelphia Flower Show, "Lights, Camera, Bloom," with our chapter's exhibit. If interested in helping, contact Linda Hartnett (contact info on Page 2).

**April 11, Saturday** Annual chapter banquet, Whitmarsh Valley Country Club. Speaker: Joel Fry of Bartram's Garden.

**May 8-9** Chapter plant sale, Morris Arboretum

## *It's time to sow*

The only way to get a truly new rhododendron is to start from seed

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Then the containers must be covered tightly with quality kitchen plastic wrap, which is secured with a rubber band. This creates the constant humidity that the seed and seedlings need. As always, label the containers one by one as you go.

If kept at 75 to 80 degrees, seedlings may emerge at about two weeks, later if conditions are cooler. They will be tiny and there will be many! Wait until the seedlings have developed two to four true leaves (the first pair are cotyledons, also called seed leaves, which are shed relatively soon) before opening the plastic to gradually acclimate to less humidity and prepare for thinning and transplanting. This will be about 8 weeks later. Consult Reiley or Ahern for those stages of the process. (A tip for handling seedlings of any plant: handle them by the leaves, not the stem; a seedling has only one stem, and if it's damaged, it'll curtains for that seedling.)

*Wait, you're saying, I have no rhododendron seeds! And neither Burpee's catalogue nor my local Pretty Good Garden*

*Center offers them either.*

That's why the American Rhododendron Society has its invaluable Seed Exchange, currently being led by Norman Beaudry of Bethesda, Md.

This year's catalogue will be published in January at <http://www.rhododendron.org/seedex-change.htm>. Seeds are \$3 per packet for donated seed and \$4 per packet from the special ARS collection trek to the Arunachal Pradesh, India. There is \$3 shipping for each domestic order (\$4 for shipments outside the United States). People who need a paper copy of the list of varieties may write to Norman Beaudry, ARS Seed Exchange, 7921 Deepwell Dr., Bethesda, Md. 20817, or send an email to [ARS-seed@gmail.com](mailto:ARS-seed@gmail.com).

There are some fantastic rhododendrons locked inside seeds created in the 2014 gardening year. Unless someone sows them, no one will ever see them. So clear a ledge (with supplemental lighting available) and bring some truly new rhododendrons to life.