

GREATER PHILADELPHIA

# RHODOGRAVURE

NEWSLETTER OF THE GREATER PHILADELPHIA CHAPTER, AMERICAN RHODODENDRON SOCIETY :::::::::: SUMMER 2020

## *Ron Rabideau is new chapter president*

Alumnus of RareFind, active hybridizer

When Ron Rabideau was a lad in central Massachusetts, he got his first shrub – the rose ‘Pinocchio’, compliments of his father, and learned that horticulture could be an income-producing endeavor. He was paid a half-cent for every Japanese beetle he captured and a full cent for each dandelion pulled.

And now he’s president of the Greater Philadelphia Chapter. (Parallel history! Washington: cherry:president. Rabideau:dandelion:president.)

Ron was elected by acclamation to a two-year term during the Zoom audio-visual annual meeting of the chapter on June 29. Also elected were Vice President Linda Hartnett and new Directors Stuart Brooks and Bill Halberstadt. Treasurer Myo Myint and Secretary Michael Martin Mills were re-elected. (Continuing on the board are Maris Ogg, Kate Deregibus, Karel Bernady and, in the position reserved for immediate past president, Craig Conover.) Kim Kopple and Gary Ammon have retired from the board, and the chapter owes them and Craig deep gratitude for their service. Gary’s legal acumen determined that the chapter bylaws and Pennsylvania nonprofit law made the Zoom version of the annual meeting a legal alternative to the traditional June picnic meeting, which the pandemic made a no-go concept.

For the first time in recent memory, it may be said that the chapter has an Ace Plant Dude for president. Hey, he’s introducing a magnolia cultivar named ‘Fancy Dude’ (more on the magnolia connection later).



**Barbara Olejnik and Ron Rabideau**

Having started his studies with the wise gardening lady who grew roses nearby in Clinton, Mass., Ron switched from animal science at the University of Massachusetts to plant and soil science, which led to seven years working for a garden center. A key opportunity was when he had the major role in procuring and installing an array of choice, obscure woodies for a new garden being created for the Worcester County Horticultural Society's Tower Hill Botanical Garden. This was in a different era in American gardening in terms of exotic varieties, so he cleverly got on the phone and called the likes of Michael Dirr and such to track down specimens.

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of events  
on Page 6*

No need to dwell on his subsequent seven years with the Boston water department, other than to say that this was when he met Barbara Olejnik (pronounced oh-LAY-nik), which wisely led to a 1996 marriage and a relocation to New Jersey. And thus he made his way to Hank Schannen's RareFind Nursery in its earliest days, rising to manager. RareFind blossomed into an astonishing horticultural enterprise, annually doubling sales and producing a glorious diversity of rhododendron and other plants in easy reach of Philadelphia ARS members.

"It was never a dull moment" at RareFind, Ron told the RhodoGravure. Schannen knew rhododendrons, and Ron knew other woodies and propagation. Naturally, he got even deeper into hybridizing.

In its heyday, RareFind would plant out tens of thousands of seedling rhododendrons in hopes of finding great new hybrids. One thing Ron noticed was that some seedlings with excellent flowers performed poorly in propagation. So he took note of what succeeded and what didn't. He now focuses on durability, foliage and big leaves. So far he has registered and introduced 'Absolute Citron', which was widely disseminated via the 2019 ARS Convention sale in Malvern. He has more coming along, some that he hybridized, some grown from seed of crosses made by others, such as 'Jersey Mammoth' (*R. brachycarpum* X *macabeanum*).

About those magnolias. One day a RareFind customer brought in a photo of a pink-flowered, big-leaf deciduous magnolia, eventually identified as *M. officinalis* var. *biloba*. But



**Ron's creation:** Magnolia 'Fireworks' X 'Angel Mist'

pink? Hitherto unknown for the white-flowered species. And Ron was off to the races. He hand-pollinated the customer's tree with *M. 'Angel Mist'*, grew the seeds, and has a stunning huge pink flower – 12 inches wide – as a result. He's now using its pollen on *M. sieboldii*, with successful germination earlier this year. The aforementioned variegated 'Fancy Dude' is his open-pollinated seedling of 'Big Dude', a *soulangeana* X *springeri* cultivar.

Ron is a trekker as well. First there were West Coast jaunts with Hank Schannen and Frank Furman, visiting gardens and acquiring plant material for RareFind. Ooh-la-la, southern China, Tibet, northeastern India and Siberia are in his passport for plant exploration expeditions. Unexpectedly, the Altai Mountains of Siberia had a native rhododendron, a form of *R. dauricum*.

After the economic collapse of 2008-09 and Schannen's death in 2009, RareFind was sold, and nowadays Ron is at Mercer County Community College, where he teaches labs and courses and manages the Horticulture Department's greenhouse (always good for a keen plantsman to have a greenhouse, eh?). As time permits, he does rescue missions for choice woodies on campus being overwhelmed by the overgrowth that prior inattention yielded.

Home for President Rabideau and Barbara Olejnik (who has a part-time landscape architecture business and has become a member of the chapter's Flower Show team) is Camden, where the smallish back yard is quite full, the magnolia collection now spilling over into an adjoining former community garden.

## *Alas, no cutting exchange this year*

September Plants for Members sale still on tap (so far)

The pandemic has necessitated cancelation of this year's District 8 Cutting Exchange and Auction.

What a disappointment, for this is a source of funding for the ARS Endowment and the Research Foundation. Closer to many members' hearts, it has become a wonderful way to acquire rare and even one-of-a-kind new hybrids from the chapter's propagation and grafting program, Perc Moser's high-potential backyard hybrids, and choice non-rhododendron donations from the likes of John Bartlett and Steve Wheeler.

Combined with the cancelation of both the Greater Philadelphia and Valley Forge spring sales, does this leave us with nothing but garden centers and mail order to renew our collections? Nope. Still scheduled is the September Plant for Members meeting, with a new crop of rooted cuttings and larger plants, including grafts. If Morris Arboretum is unavailable (there's no safe predicting in the current circumstances), the board will seek out an alternative location. Members will be informed via email as soon as matters firm up.

## *Two chapters form joint committee*

Greater Philadelphia and Valley Forge to explore the future

What is the future of chapters of the American Rhododendron Society? Overall ARS membership has been declining for years and the average age of members rising. Now the world is confronting a pandemic that is unlikely to leave many familiar endeavors unchanged.

Even before the pandemic, the Greater Philadelphia and Valley Forge Chapters agreed to the creation of a joint committee to explore the chapters' future. No mandate to achieve a particular outcome was articulated. While some individuals have used the word "merger" in the context of this committee, the Greater Philadelphia Board of Directors generally has regarded that as getting ahead of the game. While it is likely that the committee might discuss merging the chapters, it might also conclude that there are other actions to focus on instead.

In recent years, the two chapters have sought to coordinate activities, combine some, and draw on each other's strengths. The February joint meeting in Uwchlan has been a long-running popular success, and now (pandemic years excepted) a joint picnic with annual meetings is held in June. Starting in 2009, the phenomenon of both chapters' mounting a truss show the same weekend ended, replaced with a system of alternating years. Two years ago, the two catalogues of previous entries were combined and revised. Valley Forge now joins Greater Philadelphia for the September Plants for Members meeting, and each chapter regards the other's annual banquet as its monthly meeting. There is more along those lines that the committee might consider.

Each chapter has appointed three members to the joint committee. From Valley Forge: Perc Moser, Bob Smetana and Steve Wright. From Greater Philadelphia: Gary Ammon, Maris Ogg and Karel Bernady (due to pressing family matters, Karel has requested Michael Martin Mills to serve as his substitute for the time being). A first meeting is expected to take place this summer.

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The Susquehanna Valley Chapter has recently ceased operation. Its membership had significantly dwindled. Most members are expected to affiliate with the nearby Mason-Dixon Chapter. Susquehanna Valley's treasury, roughly \$5,000, was divided among Mason-Dixon, three ARS funds, and Hershey Gardens. District 8 of the ARS now has only three chapters, Greater Philadelphia, Valley Forge and Lehigh Valley.

## *Superastrid may be dominating your garden*

First, nudiflorum got the ax; now it's dicots

**By Bruce Palmer**  
Eureka Chapter ARS

Remember your high school biology class? You learned that flowering plants are angiosperms (Greek *angion*, a covering, and Latin *sperma*, a seed), divided into two groups, monocotyledons (Greek *monos*, single or alone, and *Kotylydon*, a hollow or cavity) and dicotyledons (Greek *dis*, twice). Cotyledons, sometimes called seed leaves, are the very first foliage that a germinating seed produces, soon followed by true leaves.

Forget the binary concept. DNA analysis has turned plant classification upside down in the last couple of decades. The major categories that you learned (kingdom, phylum or division, class, order, family, genus and species) have remained largely intact so far, but additional categories above kingdom and among the other categories have been added.

The subclass monocotyledoneae remains intact because DNA analysis appears to show that its members, "monocots," are descended from a common ancestor. Dicotyledons ("dicots"), though, seem to have a diverse origin. Those plant groups that fit the traditional definition are called eudicotyledons (Greek *eu*, good). When a eudicot seed sprouts it puts up two leaflets before developing further (think bean sprouts); monocots start out with only one leaflet.

Based on DNA analysis as well as anatomical characteristics, several angiosperm plant groups do not fit either the monocots or the dicots; they appear to have an earlier origin than other angiosperms. They are similar to dicotyledons but have significant differences and are grouped separately as "early angiosperms". The early angiosperms include magnolias, water lilies, black pepper, custard apple (cherimoya) and star anise. Members of the genus *Magnolia* have tepals instead of sepals and petals; "tepal" is a modern word used when sepals and petals are the same. Magnolias have large numbers of tepals then stamens then separate carpels (ovaries) arranged spirally in order around a cone-shaped receptacle. Fossil evidence suggests that this is a primitive characteristic. In fall you have probably run across magnolia pods with red seeds arranged in a spiral. Custard apples (cherimoya) from Mexico, sometimes found in local grocery stores and a yard fruit in Hawaii, have most of the dicot features but the flowers have the three-part arrangement of monocots.

So, back to eudicots. With magnolias and the other early angiosperms out of the way, what is left of dicotyledons (about 85 percent of all flowering plants)? Recent information favors



**Get this:** R. 'Astrid' (a Hachmann) is a superastrid.

three groupings. A few families, including barberries, poppies and buttercups, have all dicot characteristics but many stamens and separated ovary sections (carpels). These families are called “early eudicots.” All other eudicots are divided into two groups. Those related to roses, most with open petals, are called superrosids (super roses). Those with part or all of the petals joined in a tube like daisies are termed superastrids (super daisies). Rhododendrons, with tubular flowers, belong to the superastrids.

To summarize, the designations at the class level are now quite muddled. As a result, plant groups with an apparent common ancestor are grouped into a clade (Greek *Klados*, a group). Groups such as dicotyledon are out of fashion, but don't panic – the situation will change again as more DNA and fossil information comes in. Stay tuned.

*(Reprinted with permission from the newsletter of the Eureka Chapter, American Rhododendron Society.)*

### *ARS Seed Exchange closeout sale*

All sorts of hand-pollinated crosses and wild-collected seed from around the world are still available. Go to: [www.rhododendron.org/seedexchange2.htm](http://www.rhododendron.org/seedexchange2.htm)

# *Calendar*

**All listings should be considered tentative  
pending coronavirus developments.**

**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.

**August 11, Tuesday** Board of Directors meeting via Zoom.

**September 13, Sunday** Plants for Members Sale, Morris Arboretum or another venue.

**October 11, Sunday** Chapter meeting, Morris Arboretum.

**October 13, Tuesday** Board of Directors meeting.

**November 8, Sunday** Valley Forge Chapter Banquet (and Greater Philadelphia monthly meeting).

**December 8, Tuesday** Board of Directors meeting.

**January 10, 2021** Chapter meeting, Morris Arboretum.

**June 3-6** ARS national conference, Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia, Canada, hosted by the Atlantic Rhododendron & Horticultural Society.

## Greater Philadelphia Chapter American Rhododendron Society [www.GPChapterARS.org](http://www.GPChapterARS.org)

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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 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. Latest meeting information may be found at [www.GPChapterARS.org](http://www.GPChapterARS.org).

Dues are \$40 per year, for chapter and national membership and a subscription to the Journal. Contact the president or treasurer (see above) for a form or go to [www.GPChapterARS.org](http://www.GPChapterARS.org); click on “Join us.”