# AtlanticRhodo

www.AtlanticRhodo.org

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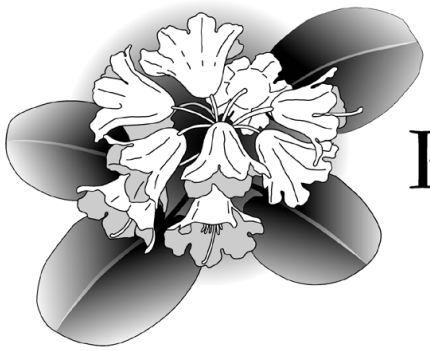

# Atlantic Rhododendron & Horticultural Society

## Our Mission

*ARHS supports and promotes the development and exchange of expertise and material relating to the creation and maintenance of year-round garden landscapes featuring rhododendrons and other plants.*

**Inside this Issue**



Photos in articles are by the authors, unless otherwise identified.

## Membership

**Atlantic Rhododendron & Horticultural Society (ARHS).** Membership renewals are now **due**. The current membership period is September 1, 2025 to August 31, 2026. The membership fee is $30.00. For benefits and to download a membership form see ARHS website **www.atlanticrhodo.org**

**American Rhododendron Society:** ARHS is a chapter in District 12 of the American Rhododendron Society. Combined ARHS and ARS membership cost is $74.00 Canadian. Members receive electronic copies of the ARS journal (A 60 page glossy magazine) three times a year. The ARS offers an extensive seed exchange, a pollen bank, and a reduced rate book store. It is also possible to pay for printed copies of the ARS Journal for an additional $10 US.

An on-line payment system is now available on the society's website at: https://atlanticrhodo.org/shop/. You can also still pay by cheque, made out to "Atlantic Rhododendron & Horticultural Society" sent to **Jim Sharpe, 6231 Watt St, Halifax , Nova Scotia, B3H 2B9**. Payment can also be may be made by e-transfer to atlanticrhodo@gmail.com. Please include your name, address (with postal code), e-mail address and telephone number, for organizational purposes only.


***AtlanticRhodo*** is the Newsletter of the Atlantic Rhododendron & Horticultural Society. We welcome your comments, suggestions, articles, photos and other material for publication. Send all material to the editor at atlanticrhodo@gmail.com

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**Layout:** **Sterling Levy**


Cover Photo: [Vireya R 'Saint Valentine' Jamie Ellison Photo.]

# President's Message

### Jim Sharpe, ARHS President

I'm looking forward to another spring Rhododendron bloom season. I'm currently touring the gardens of Vancouver Island as part of the 2026 ARS Spring Convention. Although the winters are milder here allowing for a much larger selection of species and hybrids to flourish, they are having problems with summer droughts and must water immense amounts throughout the dry season. Enclosed is a picture from Sean Rafferty's seaside garden in Shirley, BC on the Juan de Fuca Strait. Sean is an ARHS member and participant in our Seed Exchange.

On the last weekend of May (Saturday May 30 and Sunday May 31) the ARHS garden tour will feature some impressive gardens on the Nova Scotia South Shore. On Saturday, May 30 we will visit Cosby's Nursery in Liverpool to tour Ivan Higgins imaginative concrete sculptures and gardens (see https://www.concretecreations.info/), tour Pine Grove Park to see the mature Rhododendrons and woodland ephemerals in their full bloom under stately pines (see https://novascotia.com/listing/pine-grove-park/) and if the winter damage allows, visit Chris Clarke's private garden in Liverpool. The next day will visit John Brett's extensive Rhododendron collection on Morris Island south of Tusket in Yarmouth County. Full details including times and addresses will be sent out to members in early May.

This will be followed by our ARHS Plant Sale in Victoria Park, Spring Garden Road and South Park Street in downtown Halifax on June 13. Information to order plants from four of our local growers, Bob Osborne from Cornhill Nursery, Ken Shannik from Insigne Gardens, Jack Looye from Rhodoland and Jamie Ellison has been sent out to members and featured at our April meeting. If you did not receive the plant lists please contact me at atlanticrhodo@gmail.com. Pick-up for the pre-ordered plants, if not previously arranged, will be at 9:00 am on Saturday, June 13th at Victoria Park. This will be followed by a public plant sale starting at 11:00 am. Please contact us at atlanticrhodo@gmail.com if you want to reserve space for selling plants at the public sale or help with the set-up and loading of plants for the sale.

For the Steele Lecture in early October we have invited Lisa Roper, horticulturalist from Chanticleer Gardens in Wayne PA to speak on "Using Photography for Gardeners." In February Lisa spoke to our group by Zoom on the "Gravel Garden at Chanticleer" and showed us how she carefully selected plants to make a striking impression in the garden. She will be visiting Nova Scotia with her husband, Allan Summers, who is a Principal with RAS Landscape Architects in Media PA. If you are interested in helping host Lisa and Allan on their visit to Nova Scotia please contact me at atlanticrhodo@gmail.com as I am organizing the details for the event.

The ARHS needs more volunteers for planning and promoting our events. We need a communications coordinator to help with the postings on our website, atlanticrhodo.com. If you enjoy working with a great group of volunteers to promote Rhododendrons in Atlantic Canada please contact me at atlanticrhodo@gmail.com. ¤

# Success and Challenges in a fifty-year-old Garden

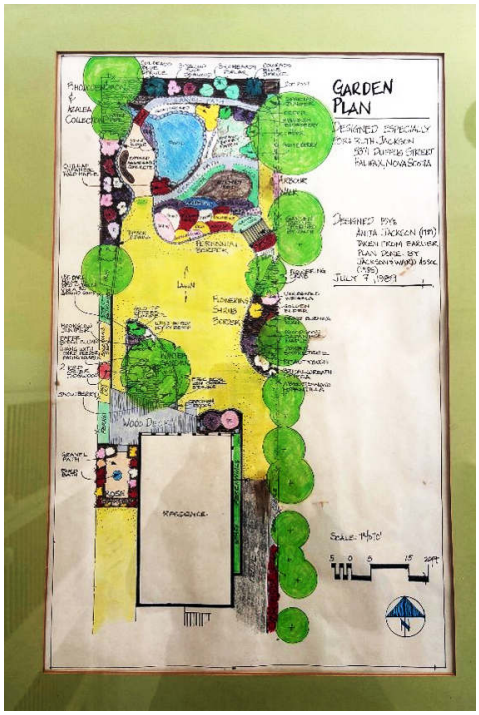
**Gardeners: Ruth Jackson and John Stanton**

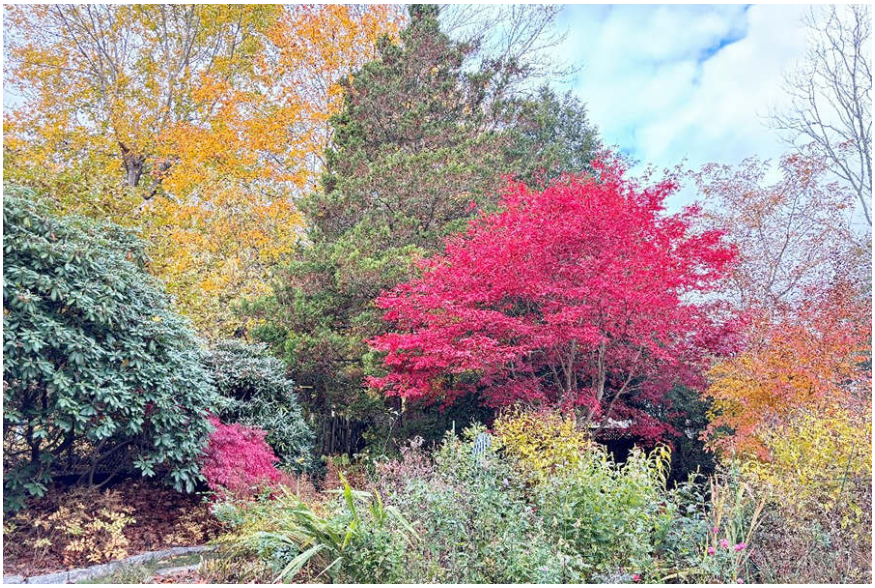
## Outline: Successes

We bought our home in 1975 and work as a team to maintain the garden. The lot is 52 x15 m (170 ft by 50 ft) and is located on the trailing edge of the Fort Needham drumlin; thus we have a clay soil. Fortunately, I had a horse so we had a source of manure that was utilized in a vegetable garden that gradually evolved into flower beds.

The narrowness of the garden has been mitigated by working with our neighbours and planting on their properties. The neighbour on the west side is fond of evergreens so we have planted a row of chamaecyparis and thujopsis species now about 6 m (20 ft) high. On the east side of the house, we had to opportunity to plant a full sun flower bed that is backed by the shrubs along our driveway.

My sister Anita Jackson is a garden designer; in 1984 she developed a plan for us.



I distinctly remember her comment that our view leaked. We have replanted the trees at the end of the garden several times to solve this problem. The present back drop relies heavily on hemlocks so we have them inoculated against the woolly adelgid.

Garden structures and their positions form an important part of the plan. An example is the positioning of the trellis shown on the plan. On our own we had placed it at right angles between two flower beds that ran along and across the garden. The plan placed the trellis at 45° between the beds achieving more of a cottage garden ambiance. The garden is entered via the driveway where a white gate with an arch creates privacy.

Plantings we are pleased with include masses of early spring bulbs in the beds and the lawn that continue to spread providing much appreciated colour. In particular, many of the early Spring bulbs are blue: Scilla siberica, Siberian Squill; Muscari, Grape hyancith; Pushkinia scilloides; blue Anemone blanda and Chinodoxa forbesii, Glory-of -the-Snow. Blue is a rare and desirable colour in the garden. The crocus provide nectar for the bees and are swarmed by them. The later bulbs tulips, daffodils and allium are planted in the borders so their foliage can die back discreetly. The ground is three dimensional and there is room for both bulbs and perennials.

The annuals are planted in pots with a water reservoir. This system dramatically cuts down on watering and allows the garden to be left unattended. Last summer was dry and we only had to refill the pots three times. We use large black plastic pots from Costco that hold an estimate of 20 liters of water. The pots are equipped with a sock that reaches into the reservoir and wicks up the water consistently.

Because there are so many small early bulbs in the lawns, we were reluctant to get professional help with lawn fertilization and weed control. Now that we employ a lawn maintenance company, we realize the bulbs are not affected by the treatments, the lawns weeds are reduced and we save time weeding and space storing fertilizers.

We particularly enjoy the succession of plantings in the main flower bed. The long succession of colour is achieved by the depth of the border and the extensive use of bulbs.

The main flower bed in June.

The main flower bed in September.

We have not allocated sufficient space for significant composting but we have been diligent with putting leaves on the garden in the fall. On the rhododendron beds whole leaves are added every year to a depth of about 10 cm. On the flower beds dried leaves are collected and shredded with the leaf blower in its suction mode. This method works best with dry leaves. Leafmould is a soil improver lightening heavy soils like ours but is nutritionally less rich than compost (Monty Don, The Complete Gardener).

There are two pieces of equipment/clothing that I find beneficial. One is a holster for my secateurs. The carrying case makes the tool readily accessible. I do not lay it on the ground, carry on with another task and then spend time looking for it. The second useful item is knee pads, particularly during the Spring when the ground is wet and at any time when I am planting.

I have kept a garden diary for 33 years. It is especially useful for noting when the lily beetles and Japanese beetles attack and remembering the specific varieties of plants like heucheras with subtle colour differences that are difficult to distinguish when visiting garden centres.

## Challenges*:*

I have difficulty planning for the ultimate size of a tree or shrub. For instance, early in my planting career I visited Captain Steele's rhododendron nursery (a founding member of our society). He asked If I would like a large plant. I enthusiastically replied yes. We have a city garden and rhododendrons the size of a shed takes up too much space. Also note that the estimated size for a rhododendron on its tag is at 10 years. This observation is important for planning at 10 years but they will continue to grow.

Pruning or lack of it is an ongoing issue in the garden creating too much shade. We now employ a firm to limb the trees in mid midwinter. The work is done at this time because the sap is not running in the trees and the perennials and bulbs are dormant. The pruning could have been mitigated if I had been careful in choosing smaller trees such as the de Vos and Kos magnolia hybrids known as "Eight Little Girls" i.e. Betty, Susan, Ann, etc., that mature to the dimension of apple trees rather than the taller Magnolia x loebneri 'Merrill'.

When purchasing plants having a plan of where to put in the garden is ideal. Unfortunately, if I see plants that I want an acquisition will be made. Therefore, I struggle to find an ideal home for it. Beth Chatto, an English gardener, motto "right plant, right place" should be heeded; I just do not have the will power.

I am writing this in February looking forward to seeing the stalwart plants return, wondering how the more delicate vegetation and flowers fared and keenly studying catalogues for more treasures. ¤

## THE SEARCH FOR ORNAMENAL NATIVE LARCHES

**Bob Osborne, Corn Hill Nursery**

Most people keep their eyes on the road when traveling. I do as well but my peripheral vision is attuned to interesting trees along the roadway. In particular, I search for interesting native larches (*Larix laricina*). Larches have been neglected in the horticultural world. The reason usually given is that it is a conifer that loses its needles in winter. A strange reasoning, as they also grow the deciduous trees that lose all their leaves. Because they come in so many shapes and forms, I think there are many larches in the wild that would create useful and eye-catching specimens. They are also extremely hardy (Zone 2-3) and tolerate many soil types. The best time to search is in late fall, when the bright yellow foliage stands out.

Most larches form tall, somewhat open, trees, but others can be narrow, twisted or anything in between. There are also witch's brooms that occur with relative frequency. These are formed when a mutated bud creates a dense growth with very short internodes. Climbing to get pieces of witch's brooms can be challenging but the rewards are worth it for the larch sleuth.

Larch cultivars are difficult to root so most are grafted onto young rootstocks. Scions should be collected when the trees are still dormant, usually in mid-March. They should be stored near freezing in sealed poly bags until the rootstocks have just begun growth, which coincides with the root tips showing new growth. The last year's growth is used for grafting as it will only have vegetative buds whereas older growth often contains flower buds. Vigorous new growth can be pencil-sized but scions of wild trees are often very narrow, making grafting a delicate operation.

We use a cleft graft to propagate the larch. We start with healthy seedlings (1-2 year) that are container-grown in either large plugs or 1 gal pots. We cut off the stem approximately half-way up with secateurs, although this can vary depending on the shape of the rootstock. The terminal tips of the remaining growth below the cut are snipped off to reduce any terminal dominance. This growth will draw up water and sugars and will feed the scion after healing. With a sharp razor blade a vertical cut is made from the center of the cut downward approximately 1-1.5cm. Care must be taken to keep the blade centered as the stems are often very thin. The scion is prepared by making a 1-1.5cm long wedge (depending on the size of the scion and rootstock) using a very sharp grafting knife. The wedge is inserted into the cut making sure one side of the wedge is perfectly aligned with one side of the cut, so the cambium layers are aligned. This is a delicate operation. The fit should be snug but do not push too far.

After fitting the scion piece, the union is tied with a budding rubber, being careful the alignment is not moved. The rubber should be snug but not too tight. After tying, the graft area and scion are gently covered by a strip of Parafilm® to prevent air from entering the graft. The graft can then be quick-dipped into a pot of melted grafting wax (we use 2 parts beeswax to 1 part tree rosin). The finished grafts are kept in a coldframe to prevent freezing and to provide a humid atmosphere. Water but do not overwater. Once the buds break through the Parafilm® it will indicate the graft is a success.

After a month or so of active growth the budding rubber should be untied at the base or cut to prevent girdling. In stages throughout the year the growth below is removed until by year's end there is none left.

Here are some of the discovered larches we are propagating:

**Shaggy Dog**-A large tree with branchlets that hang down, giving the tree a weeping character.

**Golden Spire**-A fastigiate plant. When discovered on Berry Mills Rd. in Moncton it was 7ft tall and only 15in wide. It is not only narrow but also dense with near vertical branching. We propagated 80 plants before the highway crew mowed it down. Saved in the nick of time. We think this is an important find as hardy fastigiate trees are not common.

**Swirligig**-A tree found in Petitcodiac, NB whose branches twist and spiral. A fascinating form, especially in winter.

**Velvet Fireworks**-Propagated from a witch's broom found in Quispamsis, NB. After 20 years it is a perfectly round dense specimen 1m tall and wide. Foliage is a bluish green.

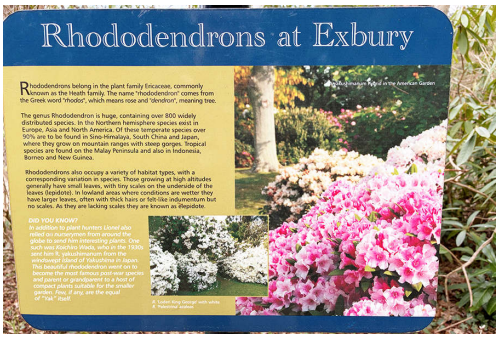
Velvet Fireworks.

Swirligig

Golden Spire

# What did I know???

**Sheila Stevenson**




Did You Know ? Sheila Stevenson Photo

We had been in Cornwall UK to visit gardens in late March 2025 and our last garden visit on the way back to London was Exbury, the estate purchased in 1919 by Lionel de Rothschild who "immediately began the headlong pursuit of horticultural excellence and experimentation". Our group had been rambling about with his grandson, Lionel Rothchild, looking at so many plants, including what seemed an endless number and range of good-looking rhododendrons that I didn't know. It was quite wonderful then, to come across a familiar plant, and to realize I was seeing R. *yakushimanum*. It was like running into a dear old friend.

A nearby panel informed me that the plant had been sent to Rothschild by a Japanese nurseryman, Koichiro Wada:

> "DID YOU KNOW? In addition to plant hunters, Lionel also relied on nurserymen around the globe to send him interesting plants. One such was Koichiro Wada, who in the 1930s sent him R. *yakushimanum* from the windswept island of Yakushima in Japan. This beautiful rhododendron went on to become the most famous post-war species and parent or grandparent to a host of compact plants suitable for the small garden. Few, if any, are the equal of "Yak" itself. "

The "post war" reference in the story on the panel got me thinking of the men engaged at that time in the hybridizing endeavour in Nova Scotia: Richard Steele a Captain in the Royal Canadian Navy with a property on the west side of Halifax Harbour, George Swain an Ontario nurseryman and science teacher, and Donald Craig, a federal plant scientist. The mission of the rhodo programme he started in Kentville in 1952 was to find, create, and promote climate-tolerant and beautiful rhododendrons for gardens and landscapes in Atlantic Canada. That mission dovetailed ever so nicely with Richard 'Dick' Steele's own interests, and he became an important player in the Kentville programme.

In a Bulletin in 1965, Steele had this to say about R. *yakushimanum*:

"This is an extraordinary Rhododendron of great promise, and also at present very substantial controversy. It is a comparatively new and rare species and in very short supply. It comes from YAKU SHIMA (i.e. YAKU Island) south of KYUSHU in Japan. Our specimen is a slow growing mound of quite tightly massed, dark green, semi-glossy 3 ½" leaves. These are tightly down-curved or partially rolled under at the edges, and have very light-colored wooly indumentum on the underside which darkens to a brown-tan as the leaf matures. The flowers in June open a delicate fresh apple-blossom pink and then turn white. The firm dome-shaped truss has ten blossoms. The plant blooms heavily."

Lionel Rothschild, noted horticulturist, whose grandfather, Lionel de Rothschild, declared himself to be "a banker by hobby and a gardener by profession." Ellen Ruddick Photo

In the rockery at Exbury Photo by Stephen Archibald

"The plant I have is from the Rothschild Estate and this form is considered to be the finest for appearance (even excels the F.C.C award form at the RHS Test Gardens in Wisley in England.) How ever it is subject to a great deal of criticism at present by one of the world's great hybridists, David Leach. He states that it produces many of its progeny with a serious genetic defect that results in their collapse and expiration about the age they first bloom. He describes it as extremely rapid senility. (This spring I feel like one of his problem plants.) This rhododendron appears to have a great deal more hardiness … and it withstands a great deal of exposure to both sun and wind. Quality rating – XXXX

During his naval career in the '50s and '60s Steele developed his encyclopedic knowledge of the genus, while acquiring seeds and cuttings of a remarkable number of rhododendron species, mainly in Britain. He did a thorough study of the genus with T. Hope Finley at Windsor Great Park. He had stores of pollen and plants at his Boulderwood property near Halifax and in a greenhouse in Annapolis County on the Cornwallis Naval Base where he was Base Commander from 1961-64.

Yak hybrid, "Mist Maiden", at the corner of the property on Hall's Rd that was still home base for Steele in 1967 when he reported from Virginia to his neighbours, "Some very useful work has taken place here [York River VA] in the past year. A considerable number of plants were transferred to Boulderwood and New Brunswick for trial and development". John Weagle says there were 42 trips back and forth from Virginia to NB/NS Stephen Archibald photo.

Our mid-century modern devotees of the genus rhododendron, Craig on the left, Steele on the right,on a Rhododendron Sunday at the Ag Canada Kentville Research Station, sometime after 1967. Elaine Ostrom Photo.

At this time his neighbours were buying in to his suggestion that they participate in his scheme to "bring more natural beauty and a great degree of serenity" to their granite/pine woods/lakeside area by planting the rhododendrons from Cornwallis. Steele produced 4 informative issues of his 'Boulderwood Bulletin' to let neighbours know what they were in for, with descriptions and assessments of the plants, instructions for bed preparation, how the genus was organized, etc. In 1965, when he was posted to SOCLANT in Norfolk, Virginia he told his neighbours, "Although I am most disappointed not to be returning to the Boulderwood location at this time, this should not impede my ability to produce material for the project; in fact if I am able to properly exploit my location, it may well increase our prospect." Which it did: he became co-owner of York River nursery in Belroi, Virginia while carrying out his assignment!

By contrast, Donald Craig started working at the Agriculture Canada Research Station at Kentville in the Annapolis Valley in 1947. In 1951-52 he was a Ph.D student in plant breeding at U of New Hampshire where he met Radcliffe Pike, botanist and plantsman from Lubec, Maine who did the original R. 'Bellefontaine' cross. Craig says in his 2003 article "50 Years of Testing and Breeding Rhododendrons in Nova Scotia", "I am certain that much of my enthusiasm for rhododendrons came via Rad. I recall memorable trips with Rad to the Arboretum at Jamaica Plains, Massachusetts and to the Reefe Point Garden in Bar Harbor. It was at Reefe Point that I was to view the hardiest and best R. f*ortunei* specimen that he knew. Rad crossed this f*ortune*i with a superior selection of R. *smirnowii*."

In that same article Craig recounts his role in starting the rhododendron program at Kentville on his return from New Hampshire and what came next - that George Swain joined the programme in 1957 and it was Swain's "gift of plant knowledge and landscaping that was mainly responsible for the numerous plantings, which became the Station's showpieces." Swain had graduated from Ontario Agriculture College in 1939, with a BSc in Agriculture. He began studies for a masters degree in plant genetics at MacDonald College, but left to join the RCAF in 1941. After the war and marriage, he worked in his grandfather's greenhouse business, Swain's Flowers, in

Ridgetown, Ontario. He left the greenhouse business to teach high school science in Ridgetown, and taught for a couple of years before accepting a job at the Kentville Research Station (then the Kentville Experimental Farm) in 1957.

In his 1964 Bulletin 2, Steele tells his Boulderwood neighbours about his exchange relationship with KRS breeder George Swain:

> "Mr. Swain is the horticulturist at the Agricultural Research Station, Kentville. He is in charge of 0rnamental Shrubs and Trees. He has the most advanced knowledge in the Maritimes regarding Rhododendrons and Azaleas. He certainly is one of the leading men in Canada in the field. He has other plantings commenced and has a breeding programme which is already showing excellent progress. Mr Swain has given me a great deal of assistance and quite a substantial portion of my stock plants originated with him. We have a mutual exchange programme to which I contribute far too littIe."

Craig did Steele's performance review 40 years later, in 2003:

> For many years Dick Steele, acknowledged as Canada's foremost rhododendron and azalea authority, has very generously given of his talents and knowledge of rhododendrons through the regional and national societies and through public speaking, radio, TV and the media. His firm belief in so doing is that the world can be a more beautiful world for humanity if more people can be encouraged to become involved in the culture of ornamental plants. To this end, the Kentville Research Station, my own garden and those of many others have been the beneficiary of his philosophy and generosity.
>
> During the 1953 to 1983 period the Kentville plantings progressed from a small to a large collection of display beds containing some 1000 rhododendrons and azaleas. In addition to assisting in this part of the programme he encouraged and assisted the breeding programme with planting material, pollen, knowledge and advice.
>
> Capt. Steele's contributions helped in making the Kentville plantings a major attraction for the public. The display of many cultivars and species became the largest in Eastern Canada affording the public an opportunity to see at first hand the diversity of plant form, flower and foliage quality and colour.

1967 was the first annual Rhododendron Sunday at the Kentville Research Station. Swain left KRS to start Blomidon Nursery that year. His son Rick suggested to me that publishing research results wasn't something his dad liked doing. Craig carried on with testing and some breeding while doing his very productive small fruit research. The promotional side for him was Rhododendron Sunday. It became a big thing, when hundreds visited KRS for the pleasure of the plantings. A decades-long correspondence with Steele started in 1968. Both men in 1971 were founding directors of the Rhododendron Society of Canada (RSC). Craig tells the story of their impulsive decision to drive Kentville trusses to Montreal for the RSC Annual Meeting and Truss Show, resulting in 2 silver trophies, a bunch of ribbons, and a lasting friendship between the two men who I think of as 'mid-century modern', playing in the fascinating world shared by the plant-smitten.

Steele retired from the Navy in 1968, moved from Boulderwood to Lunenburg County, and opened the nursery, Bayport Plant Farm, in 1973. He became Captain Rhododendron across Canada, thanks to the CBC Radio host, Peter Gzowski. Swain retired from Blomidon in 1980. He was the impetus for founding the RSCAR Atlantic Region chapter in 1977. Craig retired from Agriculture Canada in 1981, made a garden at Sunnybrook Farm, wrote articles, made presentations, and more crosses. His yellow R. "Nova Sunrise" is a gem.

The collaborative work of this post-war KRS triumvirate resulted in fourteen named hybrids. All these selections were the result of a rigorous trial; they were grown in open fields with no mulch or fertilizer, no irrigation, and no wind protection. Five of the fourteen had *yakushimanum* as the pollen parent.

Cultivar – **Minas Maid** (R*) introduced 1979 Breeder: George Swain
Parentage – Nova Zembla (*catawbiense* Parsons Grandiflorum x hardy red hybrid) x R. *yakushimanum*

Cultivar – **Minas Snow** (R*) introduced 1981 Breeder: George Swain
Parentage – Cunninghams White (*caucasium* x *ponticum* var album) x R. y*akushimanum*

Cultivar – **Minas Peace** (R*) introduced 1982 Breeder: Don Craig
Parentage – [(R. *catawbiense* var. album Glass x R. *degronianum*) x R. *yakushimanum*]

Cultivar – **Minas Rose Dawn** (R*) introduced 1982 Breeder: Don Craig
Parentage – (Nova Zembla (*catawbiense* Parsons Grandiflorum x hardy red hybrid) x R. *yakushimanum*) x (R. catawbiense var. album Glass x Elizabeth (forrestii ssp. forrestii Repens Group) x griersonianum)

Cultivar – **Sue Gunn** (R*) introduced 1992 Breeder: Don Craig
Parentage – (Nova Zembla x R. *yakushimanum*) x (R. *catawbiense* var. album Glass x Elizabeth (*forrestii* ssp. *forrestii* 'Repens' x R. *griersonianum*).

**These Five Kentville hybrids have *R. yakushimanum* *as* the pollen parent..**

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1. Minas Maid [Photo John Weagle]
2. Minas Snow [Photo Don Craig ]
3. Minas Peace [Photo Don Craig]
4. Minas Rose Dawn [Photo Don Craig]
5. Sue Gunn [Photo Don Craig]

Craig identified this young plant in a May 1970 slide photo as "yak FCC XXXX". This is the Wisley yak referred to by Steele as the lesser form. In 1968 Lionel de Rothschild named it Koichiro Wada.

**REVIEWS**

DR. D. CRAIG: EXBURY, WINDSOR GREAT PARK, WISLEY
12 OCTOBER 1984 GENERAL MEETING

*Dr. Craig's fine talk was illustrated with slides from his spring 1984 travels to the Continent and England; in addition to the famous rhododendron gardens, members were treated to some slides of scenery and palaces of south Germany, Austria, and Zurich. At Exbury, Dr Craig spent the afternoon with Baron de Rothschild and his wife, and next day toured the 250 acre estate located on a hill above the Solent River in South England, with de Rothschilds' head gardener. The estate, very famous for the vast rhododendron gardens and hybrids created by the present Baron's father, is characterized by countless pathways with one million gorgeous plants, beautiful old trees and extensive use of japanese maples. There were close-ups of many different rhodos, including 'Ivers Red', 'Dairy Maid', 'Jenny'. The Exbury 'azalea bowl' and the winter garden', featuring plants with huge florets and two-foot long leaves, brought exclamations of awe from Dr. Craig's audience. His pictures of Windsor Great Park included the Wall Garden for vines and alpines made of bricks from the World War II London bombing; the Dry (or Scree) Garden for plants from warmer and drier climates; the Punch Bowl tiered with thousands of obstusum azaleas; and the extensive Heather Garden created from a former gravel pit. Lastly, there were slides of Wisley, the training garden of the Royal Horticultural Society, featuring the rock garden, the rhodo garden, and the peat garden. There were also slides of the Wisley 'Illustration Gardens' which demonstrate how to achieve great effects in small suburban gardens.*

The review in the RSCAR newsletter of Craig's 1984 slide presentation.

Steele's reference to the F.C.C Yak at Wisley is important to note for a couple of reasons:

- A piece in the Jan 1969 issue of the Quarterly Bulletin of the American Rhododendron Society says "*A letter received in August from Dr. A. F. Serbin indicated that Mr. de Rothschild had been asked if he would care to name the F.C.C. form of R. yakushimanum, the original plant of which is located at Wisley. Mr. de Rothschild apparently then requested that this F.C.C. form be named after Mr. Wada, the man who sent the first two plants of this species to the Western Hemisphere. As most A.R.S. members know, there were two plants in this shipment, one of which found its way to Wisley and an eventual F.C.C., the other remaining at Exbury. In the 1969 Rhododendron and Camellia Yearbook, under "Additions To The International Register," we find the name 'Koichiro Wada' with the following notation. "The name now given to the F.C.C. form of yakushimanum ".*
- Craig had a May 1970 slide of a small plant showing new growth, identified by him simply as "yak FCC XXXX" - the lesser form according to Steele's information. During a 1984 European trip, Craig went to Windsor Great Park where Steele had such associations, to Exbury where he spent some time with Edmund de Rothschild, and to Wisley where he photographed the Wisley *yakushimanum*. Craig showed his slides from this trip at an RSC Atlantic Region (RSCAR) meeting, no doubt to everyone's great pleasure, and no doubt the Wisley Yak and relatives were a matter of great interest. Those were the days of close questioning, slide by slide, by an engaged audience. I can imagine the lively and entertaining exchange on that occasion.

One of those close questioners would have been John Weagle, who met Steele in 1971, was a founding RSCAR member, and later worked with Craig to digitize the KRS breeding records. I wondered to John: Could Steele's *yakushimanum* 'from the Rothschild estate' be the one still thriving in Boulderwood, and could it have been a parent of the Kentville hybrids? John's reply made it clear that I had gotten into a bigger story than I had imagined:

Craig labelled this slide as "Wisley 84 R. yakushimanum". Despite the poor quality of the scanned image, the charms of this seductive species still show - the dense habit, the abundance of trusses, the qualities of the foliage. What was Craig thinking as he took this photograph? Don Craig Photo.

- *"the Boulderwood yak is a 'Mist Maiden' (yakushimanum x smirnowii), received by Steele from David Leach in the early '60s, the same cross as its sibling 'Pink Parasol'."*

Aha! certainly not the 1965 Exbury *yak* - which sounds as though it went to Bayport, and not a 'pure' yak

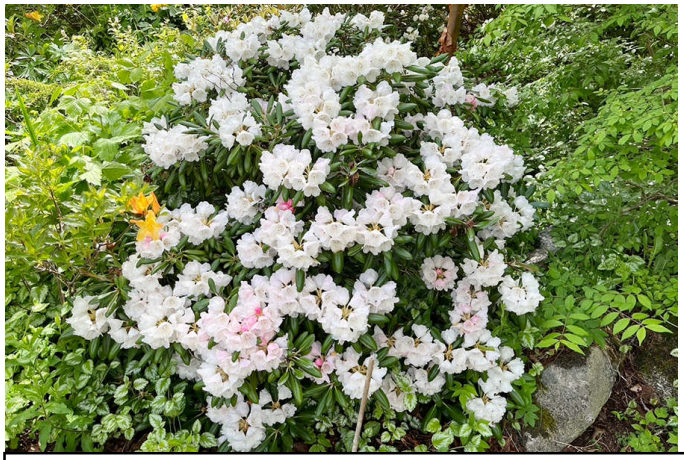
- *"the Captain had both 'Koichiro Wada' and 'Exbury' at Bayport, as well as 20 or more of his own" yak" selections."*
- *"The west coast yak hybrid, 'Ken Janeck' is of the same parentage as 'Mist Maiden'. Joe Harvey was the first to declare Leach's plants hybrids. We all called them yak Mist Maiden, yak Ken Janeck because the wholesalers called them that even though we knew better, supposing the magic of yak would spur people to plant them.*

Edmund de Rothschild visits the Kentville Research Station in June, 1983, the week before Rhododendron Sunday. Kingsbury Photo for the Halifax Chronicle Herald.

Joe Harvey was a founding RSCAR member who had a breeding programme and wanted to know the origins of the "yak" plants he'd been given. It was his 'Ken Janeck' that I knew in the Ritchie Drive garden. In the Journal of the American Rhododendron Society, Harvey writes: "*No sooner had I flowered, cross-pollinated and distributed seed from my yaks than people started whispering suggestions in my ear that these yaks were not really pure - that they were, in some degree, of hybrid origin. Now this was rather upsetting and I did not really want to hear such talk.*" This takes us back to Steele's note about the "controversy", which centered on which "yaks'" were pure and which were not. His article about clones is here: https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JARS/v42n4/v42n4-harvey.htm.

So who were the pollen parents in the Kentville programme? Were they 'pure'? John says *KRS first used 'yakushimanum' as a pollen parent in 1965 as cross # 6502 (catawbiense var. album 'Glass' x yakushimanum) with no mention of its source. In 1966 KRS used a yak as a seed parent in #6605, #6606 and #6607 - again no source for the yak, but likely a plant Steele left with Swain. One is walking on thin ice speaking of true yak in a parentage. Crosses made in the UK using yak were most likely true yak - Wada or Exbury. I think thanks to Exbury & Wisley and the small size of England, everyone got the true species' pollen by mail, live and sooner. Steele likely had good true pollen BUT he also visited Leach on occasion and I know pollen of yak was never refused. Leach's "yak" pollen got around to all the Eastern North American hybridizers; by the 1990s West Coast breeders had true yak and "yaks", adding to the confusion. The Danes of course never erred in this matter and avoided the mass confusion. In N. America, Fred Serbin who was highly astute, Evelyn Jack [ARS Gold Medal 1970], and the Greigs [Ted and Mary ARS Gold Medal 1966] had the true species thanks to their connections. What KRS and Steele used is a matter of conjecture. When I look at the Kentville hybrids, I reckon true yakushimanum may have been used in "Minas Peace" and "Minas Snow". As for the others, I'd say these days they'd be a very hard sell as they are poor colours, not such fine foliage, and have been largely superceded by better cultivars.* There we have it. The irony of John's reference to a 'hard sell' is the lack of commercial success for any of the KRS cultivars, with the exception perhaps of R. "Minas Grand Pre" (*catawbiense* x *williamsianum*)

Remembering that R *yakushimanum* is at home in a windswept coastal environment, Weagle concludes, *"it is quite likely that Leach's problems were due to its being a true yak. I believe his true yaks died out. The culprits were likely the Ohio heat, humidity and steamy nights."* I think we can relate to this as we see the impacts of global warming on species that have no time to adapt. But in our increasingly windy environment, R. *yakishumanum* is quite at home in Nova Scotia, as evidenced by two pure "Koichiro Wada" and two "Exbury" thriving in Anitra Laycock's Prospect woods. All came from the Rhododendron Species Foundation, two in 1991 and two in 1995.



Pure *yaks*: *R. yakishumanum* Exbury (L) and *R. yakishumanum* Koichiro Wada, side by side in Anitra Laycock's woods in Prospect. All came from the Rhododendron Species Foundation, two in 1991 and two in 1995. John Weagle photos.

**THANKS to our second 'post-war' rhodo men:**

George Swain Ontario 1916-1985

Richard Steele New Brunswick 1915 2010 ARS Gold Medal

Donald Craig Nova Scotia 1924-2011 ARS Pioneer Award.

& to my informants in one way or another since 2018:

John Weagle (ARS Gold Medal 2021), Walter Ostrom, Joe Harvey, Peter Hicklin, Rick Swain, Colin Craig, Sterling Levy, Carol Dancer, Debbie Hall, Kathleen Hall, Tom Waters, Bob Pettipas, Pat Pelham, the Nova Scotia Museum, Stephen Archibald, and, at the very beginning, Peter Hicklenton.

**Rabbit Holes to explore**

https://exbury.co.uk/

https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JARS/v18n1/v18n1-leach.htm

https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JARS/v23n1/v23n1-wada.html

https://atlanticrhodo.org/archives/articles/fifty-years-testing-breeding-rhododendrons-nova-scotia/

https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JARS/v42n4/v42n4-harvey.htm

https://www.rhododendron.org/awards.htm

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Exbury Overview 1984 Don Craig Photo.

# Vireya cultivation at Pukeiti

**Andrew Brooker Rhododendron Collections and Projects Officer**
**Taranaki Regional Council**

*"In company with Mr G. Herman Slade, who is now visiting New Guinea, I have collected several plants of R gracilentum (F.Mueller) at Edie Creek, New Guinea. On the suggestion of Mr Slade, I am delighted to be able to send you one of these plants."*

This extract from a letter from Mr John Womersley to the Pukeiti Rhododendron trust in March 1960 signalled the start of a growing relationship with the Malesian rhododendrons (vireya). That one solitary plant arriving via airmail was the catalyst for the generosity of collectors and collections around the world in contributing to a young, growing collection of rhododendron taxa in the Southern Hemisphere, where the aim was to "grow as wide a representation of rhododendrons as possible..." (G Smith et al)

With the arrival of the Malesian species there came with them the conundrum of how to best grow them in our climate, which is much removed from the highlands of Papua New Guinea, Malaysia etc. New Zealand is a temperate rainforest climate with varying climatic conditions from one end to the other, though not as extreme as some. For Pukeiti the soil type is volcanic ash formed over hundreds of years, relatively free draining and fertile. The rainfall is reliable, around 3,500mm (140 inches), but can vary from year to year.

As the collection grew in number, then Curator, Graham Smith, began experimenting with different media and preparations to show the plants to their best. In the early days frosts were a big problem for these most tender of rhododendrons, temperatures dropping to -3 degrees Celsius regularly in our winter. Not a problem for the temperate species and hybrids but a bit problematic for the vireya as at the time they were planted outside.

Fig 1: *R. malayanum* in pong pot.

Fig 2: vireya cultivars plunge planted.

To overcome this, tree fern logs were used to create cosy mounds to allow airflow to disperse cold air and add drainage, another challenge to overcome. It was found that by hollowing out the stumps of the tree ferns we were creating natural pots which enabled the roots to spread into the structure itself thus replicating their more natural environment, keeping in mind that vireya are predominantly epiphytic.

Light factors are also important to develop good plants that flower reliably, again keeping in mind that epiphytic nature where the plant will establish where the conditions will suit it the best. At Pukeiti the margins of our bush environment, with a north facing aspect, provided just this for our young collection. Some of the originals from the 1970's can still be found today nestled out among the ferns where they were first planted and as the climate warms for us, we are adding more, mostly cultivars, to extend the flowering season for the rhododendron collection.

A large roof structure has evolved over the development of the garden to house the more precious of the vireya collection. In 1976 it began as a single glasshouse with supplementary heating for the winter. This was landscaped to highlight the plants in a relatively natural setting. The footprint of the glasshouse, however, didn't allow for the display of all that Pukeiti was growing at the time and by 1989 an extension was planned that was more open and airy, providing more opportunity. Here, as with the originals outside, the tree fern logs added the drainage and support elements that the plants needed. Two more extensions added over the following decades saw the footprint extend to 400 square metres enabling a larger range to be put on public display

Fig 3: vireya walk from café end.

alongside other plants that enjoyed the same growing conditions. For the most part these structures were open sided as the protection needed was from the very regular annual rainfall rather than cold. Fig 3 vireya walk from café end.

Fast forward to today and a roof structure now stands eight metres tall with an elevated walkway to give the visitors a different aspect to appreciate the collection from. But, as with all developments in a garden soil, modification/ change is inevitable and for some of these plants we were starting again to get the conditions just right. This has meant the careful assessment and addition of composts and fibre to address nutrition and drainage. Better management of the irrigation system, remembering that this is all under cover to limit over saturation along with plant selection have all played a part.

Pukeiti has a vireya collection of 105 different species of the genus, many of which are highly endangered and feature prominently on the red list. We have been privileged to have had several collectors contribute to this as referenced in the opening paragraph making the collection significant in an international context, but for the most part the species are less flamboyant than the cultivars available in New Zealand and thus less popular to the gardener.

Fig 4: *R christii* temporary planting.

Fig 5: R. 'Frosted Candy' x *R. konori*.

To enable a viable display of year-round interest in vireya at Pukeiti we have amassed a collection of cultivars, most of which are plunged pot and all into the garden to bloom, then be swapped out once over. Plants then get to recover in the nursery until they are in bloom again and the cycle continues. This means the small nursery at Pukeiti holds a collection of key cultivars and species where we monitor health, propagate as required as well as disseminate to an extension of Pukeiti, our ex-situ program. Perhaps an article for another time. .

A brief word on growing media: In the 1980s we were shredding old tree fern logs and mixing this with composted pine bark to create a suitable growing media for our vireya. From an aeration and drainage point of view this worked exceedingly well but leached nutrient very fast requiring additional dressings two – three times per year. Nowadays we are using a commercial media which blends composted pine bark (in NZ this is from *pinus radiata* using a byproduct of our forestry industry) with coir, pumice and a balance of macro and micronutrients to develop our plants. Changes in recipes trialled overtime has created a blend that is balanced for our plants and growing environment, reducing losses and the need to use supplementary side dressings. A medium grade orchid bark mix is also proving ideal for us, keeping aeration and drainage balanced in our humid environment.¤

Fig 6: Shadehouse back up

Exbury Punch Bowl 1984  Don Craig Photo.

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