

MID- ATLANTIC RHODODENDRON NEWS AND NOTES

A Publication of the Middle Atlantic Chapter of the American
Rhododendron Society

Vol. XXII No. 3

September 1996

CALENDAR OF UPCOMING MAC MEETINGS

September 27-29, 1996 Richmond Historic Hotel, Richmond VA
(Joint meeting with Azalea & Holly Societies)

May 2,3&4, 1997 Sheraton Baltimore-North Towson MD
(District meeting sponsored by Mason-Dixon Chapter)

Spring 1998 Harrisonburg, VA
November 5,6&7, 1999 Williamsburg, VA
(Eastern Regional Meeting -host MAC)

PRESIDENT'S CORNER AND FALL MEETING - by Ray Doggett

You have recently received your invitation to the September 27-29 joint meeting with the Azalea and Holly Societies at Richmond Historic District Hotel. (If not, PLEASE call 1-800-480-9676 immediately!!) This is shaping up to be an exciting meeting - you will want to be there! This will be a LEARNING TIME info on heat tolerant plants - Propagation of Hollies - Propagation of Azaleas and Rhododendrons. This will be a TOUR TIME - Ginter Gardens have greatly expanded the Rhododendron area, and the Azalea Society contributions to Ginter are now in a beautiful section! You will be extremely pleased if you have not been there recently - Colesville Nursery is so large you tour part by bus! This will be a time of BEAUTY - Member gardens to visit on Sunday, after the early morning program! And the HOSPITALITY ROOM will be SOMETHING SPECIAL! Get your registration in the mail NOW!

Next Spring we go to Towson, Maryland for a joint meeting with Mason-Dixon and Potomac Valley Chapters - more on this later. In the Spring of 1998 we go to Harrisonburg/JMU. But where do we go Fall 97?? Where would you like to go?? Virginia Beach is great (and low cost) in October! Fredericksburg area? Why don't you tell me where you think we should go (careful!!!) I'll get your responses to Doug Jolley and the Board, and they will be strongly considered!

EAST COAST REGIONAL MEETING 1999 - date has been changed to November 5th, 6th, and 7th. We hope we will have as many as 300 attend. Mark your calendar!

FALL MEETING '96, A FEW MORE COMMENTS - Several of our speakers (Dr. Lawrence Mellichamp of the University of North Carolina, Steve Brainerd, President of the Azalea Society of America, and Mike Andruczyk, Greenhouse Supervisor and propagation expert at Norfolk Botanical Gardens) will be new to most of our members and we are looking forward to gaining new knowledge about our favorite plants from them. And of course we always look forward to Bill Bedwell's excellent slides. Our Book Table will be set up. Other highlights include plant sales, auction and Plants for Members sale and we may even have an opportunity to purchase plants at the nursery. A seed table will be available. There will be a Fall Foliage Show of rhododendrons and azaleas and also a Holly Sprig Contest because of our combined meeting with the Colonial Virginia Chapter of the Holly Society of America. (Bring your good rhodo and azalea foliage and even holly sprigs if you have them.) There should certainly be lots of opportunities to satisfy your appetite for new plants at this meeting. New MAC members attending their first meeting will get a free plant. See you in Richmond!

SPRING MEETING 1996 - MAC members enjoyed their getaway to the Brier Inn in Lewisburg, WV from May 31 to June 2. The meeting was well attended. We visited a lovely and unusual garden with interesting sculptures and got to buy plants at a garden center. The mountain scenery was great.

ELECTION OF DIRECTORS - Election of 3 directors took place at the Spring Meeting. The directors are Ron Brown, Walter Przypek and John Buschmann. General Robert Porter and Austin Kennell were elected Directors Emeritus. Since the Spring Meeting, Caroline Watts has had to resign her position on the Board because of her heavy workload. We hope she can join us again sometime in the future.

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS -

William M. Bennett Christiansburg VA 24073

Dr. Norlyn Bodkin James Madison University Arboretum, Harrisonburg VA22807

*Col.R.H. & Jane Goodrich Vienna VA 22181

Parker L. Little Beaverdam VA 23015

Dr. Thomas Munzel Williamsburg VA 23185

Wesley & Judy Olsen, Summersville, WV 26651

*Frances T. Plunkett, Washington DC 20003

* indicates associate member

CONDOLENCES - Our deepest sympathy is extended to Sybil Przypek on the death on August 16 of her sister, Agnes C. Borrer.

ARS WEB SITE IN PROGRESS - The ARS has a group who have started working on a World Wide Web site for ARS. The group leader is Stuart Celarier who can be reached by e-mail at celarier@rhodie.org. There are currently 10 people active in building the site, one of whom is your editor. The home page will be at <http://www.rhodie.org/~ars>.

GARDEN DEDICATION AT JMU - The turnout for dedication of the Sandra and Kenneth McDonald Azalea and Rhododendron Garden at the James Madison University Arboretum on May 30 was exceptional. After about one week of rain, the sun came out for a lovely ceremony. There were approximately 70 people there, the larger part being MAC members. The staff and Arboretum Advisory Council did a wonderful job in arranging the ceremony. Speakers were Dr. Norlyn Bodkin, Curator; Barbara Wheatley, Arboretum Advisory Council President; Dr. Barbara Castello, Vice-President of JMU Advancement; Glenda Rooney, Assistant Vice-President, Parent and External Relations; and Sandra and Kenneth McDonald. James Madison University President Dr. Ronald E. Carrier dropped by to greet guests.

The Arboretum is in a beautiful setting of mature trees and has a pond with a bridge, nice paths and a shelter building with deck. Some deciduous azaleas were still blooming at the time of the ceremony.

The Arboretum and the gardens within it are the work of the Director, Dr. Norlyn Bodkin, staff, volunteers and contributors. MAC member Ron Brown has spent innumerable hours volunteering there and planting many wild flowers and other plants. He and arboretum staff member Dennis Whetzel and Dr. Bodkin have tackled the hard work of obtaining and putting in place in the rocky soil large numbers of mature plants and caring for them.

In addition to the McDonald Garden, The Middle Atlantic Chapter A.R.S. has a garden there with a growing collection of native azaleas which Doug Jolley with help from Harry Wise and others in the West Virginia contingent have been donating over several years. Both gardens have huge boulders with lovely metal plaques on them, the one for the MAC garden says Middle Atlantic Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. The plaque for the McDonald garden contains a quote from John Muir "Thick clouds of fragrance are wafting from azaleas welling from every corolla like water from a fountain."



Ron Brown and Norlyn Bodkin on a trip to Le-Mac Nurseries to collect plants.



Dr. Norlyn Bodkin on plant gathering trip at nursery.



Sandra and Kenneth McDonald sitting on stone with garden name plaque.



Part of audience at the dedication ceremony at JMU Arboretum on May 30, 1996. MAC members in the photo are Williamson Watts, General Porter (seated), Doug and Davita Jolley, Ron Brown, Ray and Betty Brush and Ronny Brents.



Part of the audience at the dedication ceremony including MAC members Jane McKay, Sybil Przypek, and Alice and Ray (crouched down) Doggett.



Norlyn Bodkin, Sandra McDonald, Glenda Rooney, and Austin Kennell.



Sandra McDonald, General Robert Porter and John Jenkins.

FROM THE MIDDLE OF MAC - by Jane McKay

It's relatively quiet in the rhododendron and azalea garden at this time of year (late July) as far as bloom is concerned. We do have a few flowers still opening on two azaleas, R. 'Balsaminaeflora' and R. 'Kobai' (witches broom). *R. prunifolium* x *R. arborescens*, a deep pink with orange blotch, is just beginning to open. The garden is still interesting, daylilies are gorgeous this year, hostas are blooming, annuals are adding color and the caladiums are spectacular. Our daily walk through the garden includes checking the rhododendrons for buds, always exciting when a plant sets buds for the first time. Most plants in the garden have grown considerably and are looking lush, maybe all that snow last winter helped. It had to be good for something! We enjoyed our first garden tomato this week, delicious! Our tomato plants are certainly lush, they are 7 feet high. We keep tomato blossom end rot in check by adding gypsum to the soil when planting. The periodical cicadas (a.k.a. 17 year locusts) have left, the voles seem to have left us, at least temporarily, the japanese beetles haven't been too bad and we are trying to keep up with the weeding and watering. We have one of the bluebird houses John Buschmann brought to the Spring meeting and two days after putting it up we had tenants. Life is never dull in the garden; there is always something to do and something to enjoy.

BACK TO THE FORTIES - *The following article begins a series of articles discovered by Dr. Douglas Jolley in an old magazine called The Home Garden. Some of the articles are real treasures and deserve to be appear in print again for today's audience. Doug's thoughtfulness is certainly appreciated by your editor.*

HOW TO GROW GOOD RHODODENDRONS

by G. G. Nearing

from October, 1945 issue of *THE HOME GARDEN*, pp 26-29

A good rhododendron well cared for can be a thing of surpassing beauty in foliage all year, and in May, when it opens its flowers, truly superb. If its needs are understood and provided for, it will increase in size and splendor all your lifetime, even through the lives of your children and grandchildren. And once established, the care it most begs for is largely to be let alone.

So few are the ways in which a good rhododendron can be killed, that it is amazing to see how many otherwise capable gardeners manage to kill theirs, how many more keep the best of plants in the worst of condition. Given the proper soil, rhododendrons need only a 2 inch permanent mulch to keep them in glorious health. But many gardeners will not mulch or will not leave the mulch in place. Their hands itch to use the rake and hoe, two utensils deadly to any ericaceous plant. Nurserymen run the even deadlier cultivator between rows of these helpless shrubs, supposing that because the foliage looks healthy next day, the cultivation must have been beneficial. Although deep and lasting injury results from any disturbance of the soil surface, the rhododendrons may not deteriorate in appearance for months afterward. Then the leaves lose their deep green color, gradually falling and thinning, until there are only

a few at the extreme tips of the branches, while the new growths come only a fraction of normal length.

At this stage the misguided gardener probably applies some chemical fertilizer, another agent of death. The leaves green again, perhaps, a few shoots start with increased vigor - sure indications, one would think, that the chemical was beneficial. Later, when the first frosts of autumn destroy these fine new leaves, who will think to blame the chemical?

Yet most rhododendrons which fail owe their loss to removal of the mulch, disturbance of the soil and misuse of fertilizers. Without any care at all, they will thrive. With the kind of care which improves roses and hydrangeas, rhododendrons die. I do not mean that one disturbance of the soil will kill a rhododendron. Newly transplanted specimens are hardly even affected by such treatment. In any case, if the mulch is replaced soon afterward, and the cultivation not repeated, the plant will usually return to full health in a year or two, having suffered about the same set-back as that caused by transplanting. It is continued cultivation that proves fatal.

Please remember that I am referring to *good* rhododendrons, the garden hybrids, named varieties which have proved hardy when properly handled. Those wild species which in recent years have been substituted for the cultivated plants, are not so reliably satisfactory, while the unnamed seedlings now commonly sold, though descended from the good varieties, have so little merit that it is unimportant whether they die or not. But these too, if they do not die from other causes, will be killed by cultivation and mulch removal.

Even the garden hybrids have their limitations, requiring an acid soil, as do all ericaceous plants, and a climate neither too cold nor too hot, nor yet too dry. In limestone or alkali country, rhododendrons have little hope. Where, on the other hand, the underlying rocks are granite, schist or sandstone, expect these plants to thrive. Peaty soils and some river silts are also to their liking, and they may do well on gravel or sand if these are not too light and loose. Clay, where topped with plenty of rich loam, may also suit them. In all cases the secret is acidity, pH 5 to 6, easily investigated with any soil-testing outfit or by sending samples to your county agent or agricultural experiment station. But where blueberries or huckleberries about, the necessary acidity is assured at that spot.

Where sprinkling is necessary, the water supply must be investigated as well as the soil, for if the water is alkaline, as it usually is from deep wells or from streams which flow over limestone, acidity can seldom be maintained in a soil not strongly acid.

Even in acid soils, it is best to prepare the beds for planting by covering them first to a depth of two or three inches with granulated peat moss, which should then be mixed thoroughly into the top soil by spading. In this way it provided acid organic matter on which the roots can live during the first year, before the mulch becomes fully effective.

Eventually everything depends on the mulch, a layer of loose vegetable matter insulating the soil surface against heat and cold, and by its decay feeding the network of fine roots spread out directly under it. If it consists of oak leaves, these do not rot much until the second year, but neither do the roots of a new transplant reach up to the surface to any great extent during the first season. The older the plant, the more effective and more necessary the mulch.

The best mulches remain loose and porous, and as they rot produce soil acids. Also they must not blow away in the wind or be washed off. A mixture of oak leaves and pine needles is nearly ideal, but any leaves are better than none, and they can be anchored by breaking up small twigs to throw over them, or merely by adding raked-up trash or weed-straw. Chopped cornstalks, used with good effect in some nurseries, do not look well in ornamental plantings. Salt hay, though recommended, mats down too densely, and should be mixed with leaves. Peat moss is not a satisfactory mulch unless exceptionally coarse - the grade known as stable litter. Lawn clippings, if used, must be spread thinly. In the end, the old leaves of the rhododendron itself accumulate under it to help form the best of mulches. But whatever materials are used, about two inches of them should be added every year without disturbing what is already there.

When weeds come up through the mulch, as very few will if it is properly maintained, they must be pulled by hand, and may be added to the mulch. Unsightly, you think? Well, remember that it will not remain so, for soon the plants, responding to this genial accumulation, grow and spread until they cover it

with their lower branches, after which hidden from sight, the tree-leaves will lodge there without help from the gardener.

Since the mulch feeds the plants as well as protecting the roots, no fertilizers are really needed. Those intended for the vegetable garden, as well as lime, wood ashes and nitrate of soda, are actively poisonous because alkaline. Organic fertilizers such as cottonseed meal or manure which has been exposed to the weather for at least a year (fresh manure is poisonous), may if necessary be added to the surface of the mulch in early spring, but not in summer or early fall.

Soil acidifiers should be applied only in emergency, and then with caution. The best is ordinary sulfur (flowers of sulfur or dusting sulfur), which should be sprinkled thinly, hardly thicker than you would put salt on a beefsteak. But beware of other chemicals. One almost universally recommended by writers, landscape gardeners and seed dealers, all in good faith is actually a deadly poison, undoubtedly killing tens of thousands of rhododendrons throughout the country. It appears at first to do no harm, but after a few months, unless the soil is porous and the chemical quickly washed away by heavy watering, tip growth becomes slender and pale, more and more leaves discolor and drop, until eventually the plants die.

Water rhododendrons during dry weather in spring and early summer, very heavily just before flowering, and afterward when the new tips have lengthened but not yet hardened. But do not water them, unless absolutely necessary, from September first until about a month to six weeks before the normal arrival of really hard freezing weather; here in northeastern New Jersey the end of the non-watering period comes about November fifteenth. During this time withhold water from all evergreens except the hardiest pines and spruces. No doubt you have been advised to water generously during time referred to, for some writer made the mistake years ago and has been copied in many books and articles ever since. Watering forces new growth and fills the stalks with sap, inviting disaster if the early frosts strike suddenly. Instead keep the plants moderately dry, which encourages them to harden and prepare for winter. When watering is resumed, however, a thorough soaking is beneficial, and this was the substance of the original, much misquoted advice concerning fall watering. Rhododendrons like half shade, but the best hybrids will endure any condition from heavy shade to full sun, blooming more freely in sun but with the foliage a better green when shaded. The most favorable shade is that cast by the north wall of a building, while oak, tulip poplar, hickory, pine and such deeply -rooting trees provide excellent conditions. On the other hand maple, elm, linden, buttonwood, and similarly surface-rooting trees, take up too much of the nutrients intended for the rhododendrons, which can be maintained under them only by heavy applications of rotted manure or cottonseed meal in early spring, copious spring and summer watering.

Exposure to northerly and westerly winds strains the endurance of even the hardiest rhododendron. Such positions are for gale-defying spruces. Rhododendrons luxuriate behind a wall or windbreak.

Do not plant pachysandra, periwinkle or ivy under the rhododendrons. In four or five years, such ground covers will rob the soil of all food and moisture.

When the flowers have faded, break or cut each cluster at the base, being careful not to injure the new shoots starting just below. If seed capsules are allowed to remain on the plant and ripen, they so drain its energies that few new flower buds are formed for the following season.

For insects which sometimes eat the young foliage, spray in summer with arsenate of lead, or better with a mixture of that and Bordeaux, the latter to control leaf canker and other fungus diseases likely to injure the leaves. If lace bug attacks, spray with Black Leaf 40 and soap while the pest is young, covering the undersurfaces of the leaves thoroughly on two successive days to make sure of a good kill. *[Editor's comment: Contact your Extension Agent for current recommendations as Nearing's recommendations are out of date and may not be legal.]*

But for the most part, rhododendrons take care of themselves, and an occasional spraying will keep them very near perfection. Neglected, they still look well except for minor blemishes.

And now, by way of conclusion, a word on the regions which, climatically, rhododendrons like or dislike.

Ideal climate prevails along the coast of Washington, Oregon and part of northern California, where

not only the older garden hybrids, but the new tender hybrids originating in the south of England flourish, and even a good proportion of the Asiatic species can be grown. Eastward from that coast, the climate soon becomes too dry, as are the summers in much of California.

A second but less favorable area extends along the Atlantic coast from about Boston south to the Delmarva Peninsula, inland to the Finger Lakes of central New York and along the mountains to the Carolinas. In the same latitudes of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys are scattered areas free from limestone where the soil will support rhododendrons, but these regions diminish westward because of increasing tendency to drought and extremes of temperature. In the South, where these rhododendrons cannot be grown at low elevations, *R. chapmani*, native of western Florida, could probably be made the foundation of a new hybrid race, if someone had the enterprise to breed it with compatible lowland species from China.

THE GARDEN - by Sandra McDonald

This has been an overwhelming season in the garden, starting with preparations for our trip to Scotland in May. We still have not caught up. Scotland was beautiful and had many wonderful plants (which you will be seeing when Bill Bedwell gives his great slide presentations), but it was cold. When we got back to our garden in late May, it was like a jungle. There was so much growth while we were away! There is still a lot of pruning to be done. We have had quite a lot of rain this season, though it was spotty for some people. Our area reservoir is full and I do not expect any watering restrictions this year. Temperatures for the month of July and through mid August have been cooler than normal, with the daily highs not even matching the month of August's average daily high of 85 degrees. The heat does seem to have finally moved in now that it is late August.



Our yard has become a wildlife refuge in spite of the neighbor's three cats. Birds have been feasting on my tomatoes and the apples, peaches and pears on my dwarf trees. The birds peck holes in the fruits, then the wasps come. Last year the peppers did well, but this year I think the rabbit that seems to be living in our yard has been feasting on the pepper plants - even the hot pepper plants! Last year the neighbor cat managed to catch my two gold fish and eat them, leaving only a few scraps on the patio. The rabbits and squirrels seem to be able to outsmart the cats as they are still around pestering my plants.

The crape myrtles are lovely this year. We seem to dismiss them because they are so common, but flying in to the city of Norfolk, the crape myrtles were really gorgeous from the sky. My red *Rhododendron prunifolium* is in full bloom. My *R. serrulatum* is not blooming yet, though George McLellan says his is blooming. A red form of the butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*, has been blooming a long time and still looks good. Purple plants have been especially nice in the garden this summer. The purple *Verbena bonariensis* which came back from last year was wonderful. The purple flowering oregano *Origanum laevigatum* 'Herrenhausen' was also striking.

REPORT OF DISTRICT NINE DIRECTOR, ARS BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING, OBAN, SCOTLAND, MAY 6, 1996- by Jean Beaudry, District 9 Director.

The meeting in Oban, Scotland was wonderful. I saw members from all of the chapters in our District Nine enjoying themselves in the gardens, in Oban, and in the meetings. We should encourage those who attended to share their slides with us in upcoming chapter meetings so everyone can see the wonderful big leaved rhododendrons that we only dream about. There were many items discussed in the Board of Directors meeting and I will highlight those I think may be of most interest to you. The Chapter Presidents will have complete agendas and minutes from the meeting for your review.

- Sonja Nelson, our Journal editor now has a new address and phone number. It is
- Barbara Hall has asked to be updated with names and phone numbers of all chapter membership chairpersons. You can send this information directly to Barbara.
- The Life Membership fund is under funded. If you are a life member and wish to make a donation to the ARS it would be appropriate to make it directly to that fund instead of the Endowment Fund.

- The Seed Exchange made about \$3500.00 this year. Expect more interesting species seed in the next year as George Woodward has hired someone at the Species Foundation to make specific crosses.
- Eleanor Stubbs and her committee have just completed the first ARS flower show guidelines. The booklet is called *The American Rhododendron Society Flower Show and Judging Guide* and will be made available to us all well before next Spring. Eleanor did a good job and I know that all the flower Show Chairpersons will be happy to have it.
- Home Page for the ARS is a project being headed by Herb Spady. He has found an interested ARS member to work on starting it up for us. Initially it will have lists of good doers, public education information, who to contact to join the ARS. The possibilities for the future seem endless such as hybridizers groups, literature, perhaps advertising for nurserymen. Stay tuned!!!
- Dick Cavender reported that there are only 140 orders so far for the proposed new book by Peter and Kenneth Cox. We all agreed that this will be an important addition to our species library. If you want to place an order check the Journal--Dick is taking the U.S. orders.
- There was a very long discussion when the subject of a dues increase was brought up. There had been no prior notification to Board members so most were taken by surprise. At present the ARS is not over budget. Those who proposed the increase felt that it would be better to do it now, not wait until later and risk a budget overrun. After many motions, amendments, much discussion it was decided to increase the dues by \$3.00 per year starting in January of 1998. Your Director did not vote with the majority as I feel that it was not necessary at this time.
- George Ring has just been appointed Chairperson of the Long Range Planning Committee. As he had just accepted the position his report was short. After giving his report he suggested that a biannual summary of the Board of Directors be put into the Journal.
- It was announced that the Honors Committee had recommended two Gold and two Silver Medals. At the Annual Meeting on Wednesday the 8th we found out they were given as follows: Hans Hachtman and David Chamberlain--Gold; John Basford and Gert Peterson--Silver. At the Board meeting when this subject was discussed Bud Gehnrich said that he is going to review the process for Medal selection and perhaps recommend some changes in criteria.
- There were several committee reports which all have a similar and familiar theme. The Membership committee, the Publicity committee, and the Publication committee reported on attracting new members, education for members and the general public, keeping the members we have. Personal contact is most important from the simplest call to a fellow member to see if they are coming to the next meeting to speaking with your local nurseryman to encourage him to sell plants that perform well in your area. Each of these committees has a plan of action which you will hear more about in the near future.
- The newest AD HOC committee for Plant Awards and Ratings headed by Dick Gustafson had reviewed the entire rating system and had specific recommendations
 - modify the current Awards procedures by making them easier, limiting the number of Awards given, emphasize plants grown without much difficulty
 - ARS should publicize these award plants and encourage greater availability
 - Drop the rating system (the Board voted for this)
 - Discontinue the Garden Gems program, but use the idea along with the recommendations of the Public Education committee.

I hope to see each of you at your upcoming Chapter meetings. Remember we should decide on a District name. Two chapters, Mason Dixon and Potomac Valley have said they preferred the name Chesapeake which was suggested by Helen Myers of Mason Dixon. What do the Middle Atlantic members say? It would be nice to have this in place by the time of our next District meeting in the Spring of 1997 in the Baltimore area!

SPRING FLOWER SHOW RESULTS - (not yet available for publication)

GARDENS OPEN TO NEW MEMBERS - New members are encouraged to visit members' gardens in their area. The officers and board members have agreed to show new members through their gardens if the member will call ahead and arrange a convenient time. Telephone numbers and towns are listed below.

MIDDLE ATLANTIC CHAPTER OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS

Memberships and renewals should be sent to Ray Brush, Treasurer, PO Box 266, Madison VA 22727.

Annual membership dues are \$25 per year.

Miscellaneous inquiries may be sent to the editor (address below) for forwarding to proper individual.

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