

A Century of Rhododendrons at Longwood Gardens

Peter Zale
Philadelphia, PA



In 1906, industrialist Pierre S. du Pont purchased the property that would serve as the canvas for the creation of Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. His initial motivation for purchasing the property was to conserve a unique collection of mature trees originally amassed and planted by the Peirce family in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The 36-year-old du Pont, like his family members before him, maintained a family interest in botany and gardening and relished the opportunity to create gardens of his own. From the time of the purchase, he meticulously researched, designed and developed many of the garden spaces that nearly 1.5 million yearly visitors associate with the modern Longwood Gardens. Although his primary interest was in formal French and Italian-inspired gardens replete with ornate fountains and trimmed hedges, his savvy as a plantsman and connoisseur grew, and he filled the gardens with plants from around the world. Following the horticultural trends of his time, rhododendrons of many kinds soon became some of his favorites and began to populate various garden spaces.

In addition to being an accomplished businessman, inventor and gardener, du Pont was also a meticulous record keeper. Details of all the plants that he purchased during the development of Longwood Gardens were kept and were ultimately housed at the Hagley Museum (the du Pont family Museum) in Wilmington, Delaware. A surprising number of the plants he purchased are still found in the gardens, but one shortcoming of his record keeping was the lack of maps to accurately describe the garden locations for many of the plants he purchased. To retrace some of the plants purchased and planted by du Pont still extant in the gardens, the “Hagley Project” was initiated in an attempt to match du Pont’s original purchases to actual plants. This project started with the compilation of all of the invoices of all of the plants that Pierre and his wife, Alice, ever purchased or otherwise received during his lifetime. The invoices

were transcribed into a digital database that ultimately swelled to 37,846 entries. Numerous plant groups figured prominently, including boxwood, lilac, rare and exotic trees, and rhododendrons of many types. In fact, over 900 of the entries were from the genus *Rhododendron*—a large number considering that many rhododendron species were only just becoming known in horticulture at the time.

Du Pont was well connected and had the resources to obtain the finest rhododendrons from around the world. He received allocations of Sino-Himalayan rhododendrons from golden age plant explorers such as E.H. Wilson; from famous English plantsmen, nurseries and hybridizers like Knap Hill Nursery and Walter Charles Slocock stationed on the Bagshot Sands of Surrey in Southwestern England; British Lord Lionel de Rothschild; and from progressive Pennsylvania nurseries such as Thomas Meehan & Sons. He benefitted from a truly exciting time in the history of plant exploration and horticultural innovation, but also suffered from the lack of knowledge and skill for growing many of these choice introductions. There was little information on how to grow and maintain these species in cultivation in the Eastern U.S., and many succumbed to the vagaries of the southeastern Pennsylvania climate: cold winters and hot, humid summers. This did not sway du Pont from his quest to continue to prominently display and enjoy rhododendrons.

The crowning achievement of his passion for rhododendrons was the construction of the Azalea House—designed by E. William Martin and completed in 1928. The uncertainty of growing rhododendrons outside prompted du Pont to build this climate-controlled conservatory setting where the difficulties of the climate could be ameliorated. For many years, robust collections of Belgian *Indica* azaleas, Kurume azaleas, species and hybrid *elepidote* rhododendrons and others flowered marvelously in the structure. His dedication to azaleas in particular was commemorated when a Belgian *Indica* hybrid azalea was named in his honor—‘Pierre du Pont’. From 1971 to 1974, the Azalea House was renovated and when it reopened, it was called the East Conservatory and although rhododendrons were still grown there, increasing attention was given to other plants until rhododendrons were no longer the prominent feature of the space.

Pierre du Pont died in 1954, but he had endowed the gardens, to perpetuate his hobby and provide the means to further develop it into one of the great gardens of the world. Longwood then transitioned from a grand private garden into a public garden, and the first director, Dr. Russell Seibert, a visionary with training at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was at the helm in this important period in the garden’s history. One of Seibert’s key contributions was the establishment of the plant exploration program, and his major contribution

to the genus *Rhododendron* was through this program.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, there was a lack of plant diversity in American nurseries. One of the plant groups particularly poorly represented at the time was that of vireya rhododendrons—the rhododendrons from high elevation in the tropics of Southeast Asia and Oceania. Seibert knew of their tremendous potential for conservatory plantings at Longwood and in 1970, sponsored USDA plant explorers Joseph Higgins and Walter Hodge on a trip to New Guinea to collect vireyas and other unknown and potentially useful plants for Longwood. The trip was tremendously successful and resulted in the introduction of many previously unknown rhododendron species. Among them were species such as the deliciously fragrant white flowered *R. konori*, the flamboyantly colored and exceptionally variable *R. zoelleri* and several undescribed species.

Many collections of both of these species were ultimately grown at Longwood, but few made it out of the Research Greenhouses. The lack of knowledge on how to grow these highland beauties in a lowland climate ultimately resulted in failure due to “heat exhaustion.” It should be pointed out that during the time when these introductions were being made, container cultivation of plants was in its infancy in the United States, before modern soilless container mixes were commonplace. Even though the original plants may have failed, the metaphorical seeds of an idea were planted. There was renewed interest in vireyas and other warm-temperate and tropical rhododendrons for conservatory plantings, and with new collections being made from new explored regions, there is ongoing hope that vireyas may one day soon feature more prominently in the Longwood Conservatory, the fruition of Seibert’s original vision. As a side note, there were many successful ornamental plant introductions from the New Guinea expeditions—most notable were a group of *Impatiens* species that were first hybridized at Longwood Gardens to create the New Guinea *impatiens*. Twenty selections, the Circus Series, were released by Longwood in the late 1970s, and today they are an industry standard that adorn the gardens of millions worldwide. Two years later, garden breeding was halted due to intensive interest and the adoption of subsequent cultivar development by the floriculture industry.

Seibert was also a savvy plantsman and paid attention to the great rhododendron hybridization trends and interests of his time. Being a keen plantsman, he sought out rhododendron selections from hybridizers such as Dexter, Gable, and Nearing. These represent some of the most successful rhododendron plantings in the history of Longwood Gardens. Many of them still exist, and these are a testament to the utility and beauty of these introductions. Mature plantings of ‘Atroflo’, ‘County of York’, ‘Montchanin’,

‘Westbury’ and ‘Windbeam’, among many others, still excite garden guests every year.

Rhododendrons continue to play an important role at Longwood Gardens, and native American azaleas and their hybrids continue to be a focal point of Peirce’s Woods, which is a garden focused on native American plants. This collection forms the backbone of an understory rich in large swathes of native woodland forbs and ferns. Native azaleas are also a “core collection” at Longwood, and azaleas are designated in our plants collections policy as one of a few key groups that will continue to be evaluated in the Research Nursery, where new plants are continually being planted and assessed for inclusion into the gardens proper. New emphasis will be placed on developing a collection of azaleas not currently in the garden and evaluation of plants from the more recent hybridizers including Koon, Sommerville and Strickland. Recent staff plant explorations to Vietnam and the Republic of Georgia have resulted in new and exciting rhododendron introductions that can be used in either indoor and outdoor gardens. Of particular note are the recent inclusion of both large leaf and maddenia rhododendron species that may serve either as conservatory plants and possible substitutes for vireyas.

Over the last century, rhododendrons have played a prominent role in the evolution and development of Longwood Gardens. It is one of few plant groups that transcend changes in staff, design intent, garden renovations and collections development initiatives. Renewed interest in them through recent hybridization trends and plant exploration initiatives are paving the way for another century of these charismatic plants at Longwood Gardens.

Peter Zale, Ph.D., is associate director of conservation, plant breeding and collections at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Longwood, one of the premiere public gardens in America, will be one of the tours of “The Philadelphia Story: Rhododendrons in America’s Garden Capital,” at the May 2019 International ARS Conference.

No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden.

Thomas Jefferson