

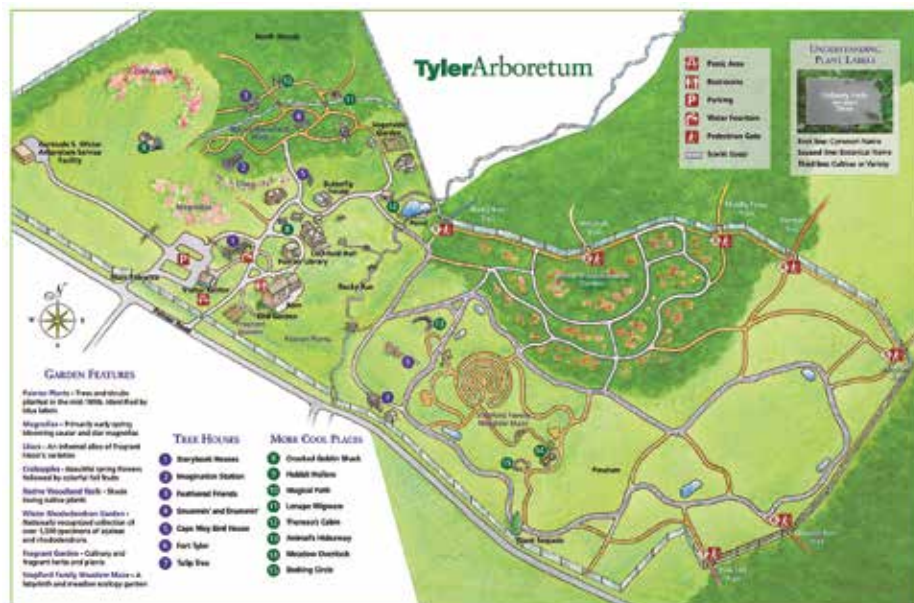
The Tyler Arboretum's Wister Rhododendron Garden: An Evolving Historic Collection

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Photos by
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My journey at Tyler Arboretum began in 2011 when I was hired as the seasonal part-time gardener responsible for the Wister Rhododendron Garden. This garden is John Wister's legacy, a heritage collection of 13 acres (5.3 ha) of hundreds of varieties of rhododendrons and azaleas with a bloom season that lasts from spring through summer. The Garden has undergone significant changes and upgrades over time. As Tyler slowly transitions this collection to a garden design with major focal points, working on these important plants has helped me formulate a strong stewardship approach to managing this renowned collection. In keeping with the Tyler Arboretum Mission, i.e., to preserve, enhance, and share our rich heritage, collections, and landscapes, to create and inspire stewards of the natural world, I now see my role as gardener, historian and preservationist.



Map of Tyler Arboretum.



John Wister dedication plaque.

Brief History of Tyler Arboretum

The story of Tyler Arboretum began in 1681 as a land grant from William Penn to Thomas Minshall. Incredibly, the land never left the family through eight generations of the Minshall/Painter/Tyler family line, dating from 1681 until 1944. Through these years, the property was a working farm and later used as the summer home for the Tyler family. The foretaste of an important arboretum began around 1845 when the fifth generation Painter Brothers, Minshall and Jacob, began to plant numerous species of trees and shrubs for botanical study; twenty-two of these still survive. In 1944, Laura Tyler, a direct family descendent, bequeathed the property as an arboretum. The newly established Board of Trustees soon appointed John Casper Wister as the first Director of the John J. Tyler Arboretum, and he proceeded to quickly build on the Painter Brother's heritage by creating collections of many plant species, one of which was the genus *Rhododendron*.

History/Timeline of the Wister Rhododendron Garden

1960s

Dr. Wister began to develop the Rhododendron Collection in its present location during the early 1960s after his collection near the present Native Woodland Walk became a popular destination during the bloom season. After major clearing, which included working around and saving the best trees and clearing the poorer specimens, he began planting in earnest in 1961 and continued through the next few years. As he stated in 1971 (Wister *et al.* 1971): "The main purpose, from the beginning, was to present a semi-wild naturalistic garden in which plants were grouped and classified by size, season of bloom and color and, equally important, by botanical relationship and by horticultural history."

Through the early 1960s, planting was extensive. The lion's share consisted of rhododendrons and azaleas but oak, pine, hemlock and smaller trees and shrubs that worked well as companion plants were also planted. In a special report (Wister 1966), Dr. Wister stated that, along with creating a beautiful woodland garden, he wanted the collection to "present in an

orderly way as many possible representatives of the different series, species, and hybrids of rhododendrons and azaleas to give a long season of bloom and attractive color harmony that would inspire more and better rhododendron and azalea planting in the Philadelphia area, and that it would be used by expert growers for serious study.”

The azalea selections included native species, such as *R. alabamense*, *R. x bakeri*, *R. cumberlandense*, *R. canescens*, and *R. viscosum*. An extensive amount of *R. schlippenbachii* were planted along the pathways, which added (and still does) early spring bloom and beautiful fall foliage. Glenn Dale azalea varieties and some Gable introductions were massed together for effect, as well as being planted among the large-leaf rhododendrons to add interest.



Rhododendron ‘Duke of York’.

His rhododendron selections began with the Ironclads, which Dr. Wister firmly stated (Wister *et al.* 1971) “should always be the backbone of any collection on the east coast, north of Washington, at least.” Tyler’s collection contains all but three of the original fourteen Ironclads. Missing are ‘H.W. Sargent,’ which was never planted; ‘Lady Armstrong,’ which was lost in 1997 and ‘Mrs Charles S. Sargent,’ which was lost in 2004. Most of the Ironclads were planted in open, exposed areas, but nevertheless, have done remarkably well over the years. Very near to the Ironclads, but in areas more protected from the wind, were planted other tough rhododendron varieties such as ‘Duke of York,’ which is still a large healthy, impressive specimen; ‘Old Port’; ‘Edward S. Rand’ and others.

The major hybridizers of the 20th century are represented in the collection but Dr. Wister set aside special sections for plants from hybridizers like Joseph Gable and Guy Nearing. Without question, the largest group are the many named and unnamed Dexter hybrids. Dr. Wister was a member of the informal committee formed by Dr. Clement Bowers of New York Botanic Gardens in 1945 to search out and evaluate Dexter plants. From 1945 to 1953, this committee visited Dexter’s estate and many private and public gardens and was extraordinarily successful in saving and further propagating important Dexter plants (Livingston and West 1978). The majority of these were transplanted to the Scott Arboretum at Swarthmore College and the Tyler Arboretum, many of which Dr. Wister used in his testing and hybridizing.

1970 thru 2000

The 1970s saw continued plantings, including a joint endeavor by both the Greater Philadelphia and Valley Forge ARS Chapters, whose goal was to develop a rhododendron display garden with emphasis on eastern hybridizers (Landt 1972). Unfortunately, around this same time, the deer population began to increase and this has had a major negative impact on the collection. The planting ceased while deer browsing and an increase of invasive weeds and vines continued to take their toll on the collection through the 1980s and 1990s. Maintaining and preserving the collection then became an uphill and almost hopeless battle (Herald 2005).



Rhododendron ‘Parsons Gloriosum’.

2000 thru 2010

However, the importance of this collection and what was happening to it did not go unnoticed, and Tyler began to address these issues in its Strategic Master



Rhododendron 'July Delight'.



Rhododendron 'Purpureum Grandiflorum'.

Plan of 2000. First and foremost, through generous donations, the ongoing deer issue was tackled by encircling approximately 100 acres (40.5 ha) of the Arboretum, including the Rhododendron Garden, with a twelve foot (3.7 m) deer fence. Positive things then began to develop quickly, while the Tyler staff began (and still are) attacking the invasive weeds and vines. Landscape architect Gary Smith, whose focus is public garden design, was engaged to work on a concept design and master plan for the collection. An irrigation system was installed in 2004 and Robert Herald, a horticultural consultant, was retained to do a comprehensive evaluation report on the condition of the collection, which was completed in 2005. In addition, a committee, which included Tyler Staff and representatives from the local ARS chapters, was formed to work on strategic goals for the collection. Lastly, in 2010 an easy-to-traverse, ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] accessible, pervious asphalt path system was installed which meanders through the garden, enticing visitors to see what rhododendron gems awaits them around the next corner (Ney 2011).

Moving Forward: 2011 to Present

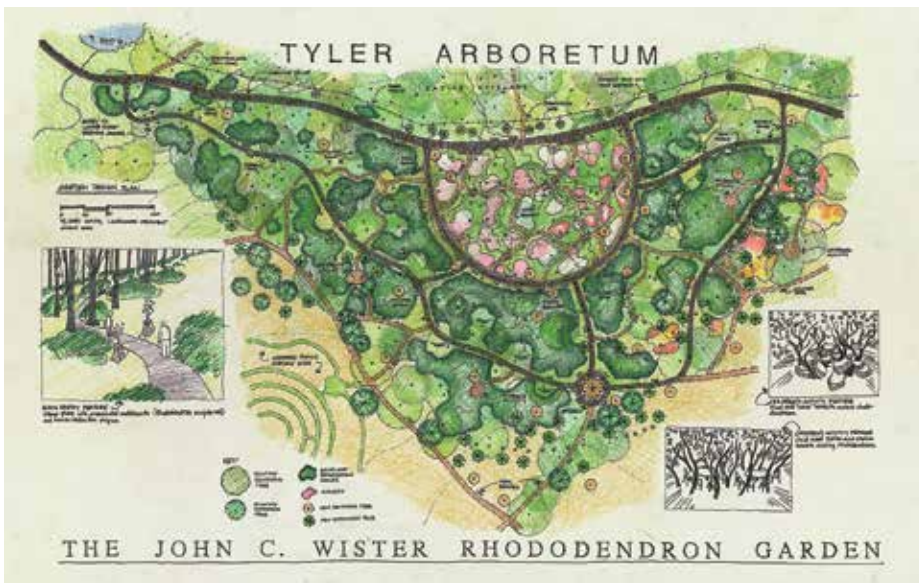
In the fall of 2010, Tyler received funding to hire a part-time gardener to maintain the Rhododendron Garden, and the following spring I was hired, commencing working in April 2011. The first year we planted a number of woody and herbaceous plants along the path system to soften the appearance of the asphalt and to add companion plants to the design. This time was also spent learning the layout of the collection, evaluating the condition of the important rhododendrons and developing a program for much needed rejuvenation pruning, dead wooding and overall garden maintenance, including invasive plant removal and management.



View across the azalea bowl.

Design Plans

This time was also spent reviewing and finalizing the conceptual design plan to develop a garden “destination” to attract both rhododendron enthusiasts and general garden visitors, with the major focus of this design being the central area of the Rhododendron Garden. This section contained many azaleas that appeared to be planted according to the hybridizer and not necessarily by color, making it essentially a collection rather than a garden. This area, now referred to as the Azalea Bowl, sits below the newly installed semi-circular paved pathway and was redesigned to make it a main “destination” (Smith 2002). The intent was to move the existing plant material, both woody and herbaceous, to perimeter areas



Tyler Arboretum Plan with Permission of W. Gary Smith, Landscape Architect.

of the Rhododendron Garden and replant this section with evergreen azaleas. The final design called for colors ranging from white, which would be closest to the path, moving to light pink to dark pink and finally to red at the farthest and lowest point of the Bowl. The bloom period was also considered in order to extend color from mid-season through late-season flowering.

Soon after the existing plants were moved, planting of the evergreen azaleas began in the fall 2012 and continues today, based on funding availability and generous member donations. Some azaleas already planted include 'Girard's Pleasant White,' (Syn. of 'Pleasant White,') 'Helen Curtis,' 'Nancy of Robinhill,' 'Roehr's Peggy Ann,' 'Mrs Mary Schroeder,' 'Cherry Blossom,'

'Takasago,' 'Blaauw's Pink,' 'Roehr's Tradition,' 'Ellie Harris,' 'Hershey's Red' and 'Red Red.' Herbaceous ground cover varieties were also planted to add interest and to contrast with the azaleas throughout the year.

Rhododendron Collection Stewardship

"It is unique - truly an irreplaceable living museum collection," as Robert Herald stated in his Curatorial Evaluation Report on the condition of the Wister Rhododendron Garden (Herald 2005). This viewpoint and a sense of history are always at the forefront of every maintenance decision concerning these magnificent specimens.

While the deer fence successfully addressed that problem, other maintenance issues persist and are being addressed on a daily basis. Invasive weed control is one, and managing an especially damaging woody invasive, Oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), is always a priority. In addition, many of the rhododendrons in the collection had become quite top-heavy over the years and were on the verge of uprooting from the weight of heavy 90° branching. Considerable work still needs to be done, but considerable rejuvenation pruning has already been completed with good results.

The Ironclads in particular have responded well to pruning, maybe another reason Dr. Wister said they should be the "backbone of any collection" (Wister *et al.* 1971). Dr. Wister's "SW53-604" series, one of his Swarthmore 1953 hybrids, have also responded well to pruning with healthy, vigorous new growth. This series was a tangled clutter a few years back and watching their recovery has been especially rewarding. This series contains some of Dr.



View across the azalea bowl..



"The Hosta Overlook" - The hosta garden that overlooks the azalea bowl.



Rhododendron 'Sagamore Bayside'.

Wister's important named rhododendrons such as 'July Hope'* and 'July Possibility',* as well as some unnamed plants such as "SW58-604F," which is quite stunning in bloom. Also, in this same section and once hidden behind the tangled mess of cross branching and out-of-control Oriental bittersweet, was found three specimens of *R. cv* "Morris #22-41," a vigorous Dexter hybrid with very attractive and healthy foliage.

Another group that has rebounded quite well to major pruning is the "SW58-333," series whose parentage included *R. maximum* and Dexter #201 (R. John Wister). The specimen "SW58-333B" was cut back hard in 2014, and it is now a very showy plant with beautiful foliage and blossoms.

A Few Favorites

Before I end I would like to add a list of five particularly interesting rhododendrons in the Wister Rhododendron Garden. Along with beautiful bloom, which all of these plants have in abundance, the qualities I look for are healthy foliage and good form and branch structure, which make for a good looking and healthy rhododendron throughout the entire year. Often I'm drawn to a particular rhododendron largely because of how it looks in the off-season. The following rhododendrons fit this description with ease:

1) 'Scintillation'

Appropriately, Dexter's Flagship rhododendron sits in a most prominent location along the paved path for everyone to view its midseason beauty and enjoy its distinctive foliage throughout the year. A true classic in every way.



Rhododendron 'Scintillation'.

2) 'Caroline'

As I began working in the Rhododendron Garden and a particular Rhododendron would catch my eye because of excellent structure and well-shaped branching, invariably it turned out to be a Gable hybrid. His group of 'Caroline' have been contentedly growing here for almost sixty years. After enjoying their beautiful floral display, one needs to look long and hard to find any deadwood or crossing branches, it's that rare. Hats off to Joseph Gable—his 'Caroline' is a remarkable rhododendron.

3) 'Lady of Wynnefield' * SW12506-10

Wister *et al.* (1971) talk about a small group of Dexter plants that the Scott Foundation received from the Dexter Estate in 1945. He described them as "very tall growing with magnificent foliage and very late flowers, blooming here in late June." I knew right away he was referring to the "Lady Series," of which 'Lady of Wynnefield' is a member. This is a large full plant with large sloping foliage that catches your eye, and is strategically located so it can't be missed, as it stands alone along the paved path as one enters the section of the Garden which contains the Dexter hybrids, which are named for the many towns and townships of Cape Cod. A wonderful plant, as are all in the "Lady Series."



Rhododendron 'Scintillation'.

4) 'Nearing-Reid #3A'*

This rhododendron has the distinction of probably being the longest blooming rhododendron in the collection and is a full healthy plant with good foliage and purplish magenta blooms. Another curiosity, the 2018 spring was very wet and humid, and



Rhododendron 'Lady of Wynnefield'.

this plant did not seem to be affected by *Ovulinia* petal blight as many other rhododendron were. This also is an outstanding and attractive rhododendron throughout the year.

5) SW58-295E*

This is one of Dr. Wister's Swarthmore 1958 hybrids with Dexter parentage. It is a beautiful rhododendron with pinkish blossoms, an overall small tree-like structure and good foliage, with no evidence of disease problems, which grows quite well in its out-of-the-way location—a wonderful eye-catching rhododendron.



Rhododendron 'SW58-295E'. *

In conclusion, I hope this verbal excursion through the Tyler Arboretum's Wister Rhododendron Garden has been informative and has provided a brief overview of what's going on in the garden. As the garden design slowly moves forward, maintaining the integrity of Dr. Wister's magnificent rhododendron specimens will always be a major goal because, to repeat what Robert Herald so eloquently stated, the Wister Rhododendron Garden is "truly an irreplaceable living museum collection." (Herald 2005). A view shared by everyone at the Tyler Arboretum.

(Note: The Tyler Arboretum will be on the tours of "The Philadelphia Story: Rhododendrons in America's Garden Capital," the May 2019 International ARS Convention.)



Rhododendron 'True Treasure'.



R. austrinum X *R. canescens*.

* unregistered.

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Jerry O'Dell, the president of the Valley Forge Chapter, is the part-time seasonal gardener at the Tyler Arboretum and is responsible for the Wister Rhododendron Garden. Photos were taken by Tyler Trustee Dave Charlton, a long time Tyler Volunteer and Docent, who contributes as photographer and assists with the Plant Records Department, American Chestnut Orchard and Education Department.



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“The master of the garden is the one who waters it, trims the branches, plants the seeds, and pulls the weeds. If you merely stroll through the garden, you are but an acolyte.”

Vera Nazarian, *The Perpetual Calendar of Inspiration*