

# GREATER PHILADELPHIA RHODO GRAVURE

Newsletter of the Greater Philadelphia Chapter, American Rhododendron Society :::::::::: Winter 2018

## *An introduction to pruning*

Surprise: The time to take on big dudes is March

**By Albert J. Muller**

Pruning any plant is an art and not a science. All gardeners have a different picture in their mind's eye as to what they want their plants to look like in their gardens. There is no hard and fast rule that governs this. In some people, the thought of taking a pruning clipper to one of their plants strikes terror in their hearts, and some of these are otherwise very knowledgeable gardeners. This is true of some rhododendron growers as well as growers of other plants.

I will never forget what Edwin Costich, the very knowledgeable nurseryman and manager of the Hicks Nursery in the 1950s, told me: "You will never hurt a tree or shrub by judicious pruning, but you could do it more harm by not pruning it, especially after transplanting it."

Mature elepidote rhododendrons confront the majority of growers with a difficult decision.

One thing I dislike in a rhododendron is seeing a skeleton with many long ill-defined branches. I know that there are varieties (e.g., 'Sappho') that love to grow that way. Many people do not like to grow such plants, even though their trusses are truly beautiful. Answer: don't let them get that way. Regular pruning takes time, but with that problem plant, let it know who is boss.

When I have a mature plant that I want to "contain" for as long as I can, I have found that I am never satisfied with the first cutting. Therefore, I don't even try to do a finished pruning in one pass. I start by pruning one or two years' growth on the longest branches. Now, step back and see what can be pruned further, and do it. At this point, I frequently realize that I don't miss what I have just pruned, so I step back again, make the final assessment of what I want the finished plant to look like and do it.

When cutting some branches below the last flush of growth, latent growth buds on a majority of the leafless branches can be counted on to fill in with new growth, if at least one third of the branches hold viable leaves to produce food to sustain the plant.

It is also a good idea at this time to check for "inside" limbs that have become "shaded out" and weak. These should be pruned out to increase air circulation.

When is it best to do pruning? If one is going to do superficial trimming, this can be done right after the plant is over bloom. However, if really drastic plant reduction is planned, it should be done the latter part of March. True, you are going to lose flowers, since rhododendron flower buds are produced the previous late summer or fall.



Peter Herpst photo

"I don't do windows," said the person who also didn't do pruning.

## *Let the winter meetings begin*

Graceful transitions in January

The holidays are over, it's too early to be fussing with your income tax return, and it's highly doubtful there's much you'll be doing in the garden. In other words, you need a Rhododendron Society meeting to restore your equilibrium.

"Creating Graceful Garden Transitions Through Ecological Restoration" will be the topic of our January 14 speaker, Julia Detwiler. A Chestnut Hill resident with a master's degree in landscape architecture from Temple University, she now works for the Montgomery County Planning Commission. Part of her presentation will focus on a restoration plan she devised for Meadowbrook Farm, the storied estate of J. Liddon Pennock, now part of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. There she confronted fastidious formal gardens that abruptly met woodlands with minimal transition. She came up with a woodland restoration scheme and a nature trail connected to the Pennock garden, thus "integrat[ing] the natural and formal elements of Meadowbrook Farm while retaining its unique character."

We gather in the Morris Arboretum Widener Visitor Center (at the top of the driveway) at 1:30 p.m., Sunday, January 14. Cookies, coffee and conversation will precede the 2:00 program. The cookie component is a matter of serendipity; consider this an invitation to contribute to the nibbles. When arriving at Morris, say "rhododendron meeting" at the entry kiosk and you will be admitted without charge. In the event of bad weather, an email will be sent; non-email members

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Truss Show: Michael Martin Mills; Philadelphia. Flower Show: Linda Hartnett

The American Rhododendron Society is a horticultural organization devoted to the genus *Rhododendron* – which includes azaleas. At the national level, the society holds annual conferences, publishes the excellent, full-color quarterly *Journal of the ARS*, and fosters plant research and conservation. Its website, [www.rhododendron.org](http://www.rhododendron.org), is a trove.

The Greater Philadelphia Chapter gathers eight times a year. Sunday afternoon meetings are held September, October and January at Morris Arboretum. February through August we are more mobile, with a banquet, plant sale and picnic at various sites. The latest meeting information may be found at [www.GPChapterARS.org](http://www.GPChapterARS.org).

Not already a member? Dues are \$40 per year, which includes chapter and national membership and a subscription to the *Journal*. Contact the president or treasurer (see above) for a member form or go to [www.GPChapterARS.org](http://www.GPChapterARS.org); click on “Join us.”

## Register goes digital

Perhaps you recently overheard a longtime rhododendron grower say something along the lines of “Oh, ‘Duchess of Fife,’ that’s a really old variety – don’t know anything about it.” Or maybe you’re a home hybridizer thinking of naming one of your knockout creations ‘Dressed to Kill.’

At last, you can track down some definitive information with your keyboard. In December, the *International Rhododendron Register and Checklist (Second Edition)* went online in a searchable pdf format. It is, with 6,000-plus entries, a hefty digital file.

The first edition was published in 1958 by the Royal Horticultural Society, the International Cultivar Registration Authority for rhododendrons. The 2004 edition is vastly expanded, published as an expensive two-volume set. In recent years, the only way to get a copy was through the used-book market. Annual supplements have registrations through 2016.

To be sure, no compilation of rhododendron and azalea names will ever be complete, but IRRC is the almost certainly the closest to that goal. A key word in its title is “checklist.” The 2004 edition includes all registered names and as many non-registered names then at hand. It is surprising the number of hybrids by Delp, Gable, Dexter and all manner of British breeders that are not actually registered, but they are listed in IRRC. (Note that the supplements have only registered names.)

There are no pictures in IRRC (what, you wanted the book to weigh 15 more pounds?), and the format of the text is very terse and rigidly presented. But it holds a trove of information, and fortunately there is a companion pdf to guide a new reader through the abbreviations and format of the entries. A large glossary is included, which helps with those arcane botanical terms such as “cuspidate” and “spathulate.”

To access the digital IRRC, go to [www.rhodogroup-rhs.org/publications/bookpdf](http://www.rhodogroup-rhs.org/publications/bookpdf). The file is so large that you may wish to download it to a thumb drive to avoid eating up space in your computer. Each of the 12 annual supplements is a separate (small) file, so definitive searching means checking each of them as well the main IRRC.

As for ‘Duchess of Fife’? It is indeed a British oldie, pre-1889, a lepidote whose flowers are “large, cream, with a pale red flush.” And, sorry, but you can’t name anything ‘Dressed to Kill’ – it’s already a *vireya* registered in 1991.

## Winter meetings

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may call 215-901-1034 or 267-246-2571.

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As is our custom in February, we combine with the Valley Forge Chapter for the annual joint meeting at the Uwchlan Meeting House in Lionville, Pa.

Ron Rabideau, hybridizer and plant expeditioner, will speak on “*Rhododendron* Species for the Mid-Atlantic Region.” We tend to think of Asian species as ill-suited for our climate, but Ron will introduce us to the likes of *R. oreodoxa* var. *fargesii*, *R. dilatatum* and others that we can grow without moving to the West Coast. Also: “weird forms of *catawbiense*.”

A special feature of this meeting will be an auction for a pair of tickets to the Philadelphia Flower Show preview party. This is a lavish affair on Friday evening, March 2, the day before the show opens to the public. Abundant food, multiple open bars, gorgeous flowers, and some pretty snazzy people as well (“black-tie optional”). PHS sells individual tickets to the Preview Party for \$500 or more. Proceeds of our auction will defray costs of the exhibit at the show.

The joint meeting is Sunday, February 18, 2:00 p.m. (Directions will be emailed with a reminder a week before the meeting.) There will be an abundant spread of savories and sweets, plus wine, after the presentation.

# Pruning

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Let's look into the physiology of why late winter is the proper time. It is important to know that food stored in the top of the plant is highest during the growing season, but lowest from December to March. Therefore, it follows that heavy pruning late in the growing season depletes the amount of food reserves available to be translocated to the root system for overwintering and root growth. If this food is depleted, this will inhibit normal root growth and cause possible dwarfed top growth the following spring or possible loss of the plant. Conversely, March pruning will allow for a greater quantity of food available to fewer buds to encourage quick recovery and stronger growth. Also, it provides for new growth starting before hot weather to give it a better chance to develop without deformities.

Sometimes one obtains a plant from a fellow rhododendron grower that may need some attention. At times, I find a plant that is branching too high to suit me. One spring, I had such a plant with the most prominent set of five beautiful whorls of foliage, which were too high on the stem. It also had a side branch of three foliage whorls slightly lower on the stem. If I planted this plant as it was, I know that I would never be happy with the bare bottom. So, I gulped hard and cut the full top growth of five off, knowing that the leaves on the remaining three would easily sustain the plant and that I felt I could count on some latent buds to grow lower down on the stem. It didn't take long, and it didn't disappoint me.

Here is a system that I have used many times on younger, fast-growing plants that I want to contain. In the first week of June I cut off all new growth. A second flush is produced by the plant rather quickly and with a good number of multiple shoots. Some varieties regularly produce flower buds

## January bloomers: A day trip

It's been more than a half-year since we've had rhododendron blossoms at hand, and there are two months till the forced trusses strut their stuff at the Philadelphia Flower Show. Here's an idea for taking in some January flowers.

Planting Fields, the bravura Long Island arboretum created by W.R. Coe, boasts a whole room of vireya rhododendrons. The collection is now about five years old, quite handsomely displayed, and bloom time is basically year-round.

A particularly auspicious time to make the drive to Oyster Bay might be Sunday, January 28, when Planting Fields puts on its Paradise Garden Festival, noon to 4 p.m. There will be free admittance to the Main Greenhouse (huge! and filled with tropicals) and the Camellia House, no parking fee either. For \$5 a person, you can tour Coe Hall, the 65-room pre-Depression mansion, which is otherwise closed until spring. Live music is scheduled in all three buildings, plus a short presentation titled "The History of Winter Gardens" (12:30 and 2:30). Of course if it's balmy, there's the vast garden to explore looking for "winter interest."

For address, directions and more information, call 516-922-8678 or 516-922-8682, or go to <http://plantingfields.org/event/paradise-garden-festival>.

on these new shoots while others do not.

Lastly, I must say I realize that many experienced growers have their own way of pruning and growing and I respect their knowledge. However, the above follows the old gardeners adage, "this is what works for me."

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The late Albert J. Muller was a longtime member and a former president of the New York Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. He grew up on the famed Phipps estate in Long Island, where his father was the grounds superintendent. Al was a frequent contributor to the New York Chapter newsletter, with whose permission this is reprinted.

## Calendar

**Important:** If you do not receive this newsletter electronically, you will not receive email reminders a week before events. Please use this calendar to mark your own.

**January 14, Sunday, 1:30 p.m.** Chapter meeting. Morris Arboretum. Speaker: Julia Detwiler, "Creating Graceful Garden Transitions Through Ecological Restoration." See article, Page 1.

**January 21, Sunday, 2 p.m.** Valley Forge Chapter meeting. Jenkins Arboretum. Speaker: Jerry O'Dell, "Evolution of the Tyler Rhododendron Collection."

**February 18, Sunday, 2 p.m.** Joint Great Philadelphia-Valley Forge meeting. Uwchlan Meeting House, Lionville, Pa. Speaker: Ron Rabideau, "Rhododendron Species for the Mid-Atlantic Region." See article on Page 1.

**February 27, Tuesday, 10 a.m.** Flower Show set-up. See article on Page 4.

**March 3-11** Philadelphia Flower Show. Convention Center.

**March 15, Thursday, 7:30 p.m.** Valley Forge meeting. Speaker: Scott Guiser on herbicides. Jenkins Arboretum.

**April 14, Saturday, 6 p.m.** Annual Chapter Banquet. Speaker: Stephanie Cohen, "The Plant Diva." New location: Sunnybrook Golf Club, Plymouth Meeting, Pa.

**May 11-12, Friday-Saturday** Plant sale. Morris Arboretum.

**May 12, Saturday** Joint Greater Philadelphia-Valley Forge Flower Competition (truss show). Morris Arboretum.

**May 21-26, 2018** ARS Annual Convention, Bremen, Germany.

**June 19, Sunday** Picnic and chapter Annual Meeting. Henry Foundation for Botanical Research, Gladwyne, Pa.

**August 9, Sunday** District 8 Cutting Exchange and Auction.

**Autumn (dates to be set)** ARS Eastern Fall Conference, Chattanooga, Tenn.

**November 3-6** New Zealand Rhododendron Association annual conference, Nelson, New Zealand.

**May 16-19, 2019** ARS Annual Convention, Desmond Hotel, Malvern, Pa.

# *The Flower Show beckons*

Members are sought to help create a mythical garden

Rhododendrons and Florida are not a combination that readily comes to mind, but it will be the springboard for the Greater Philadelphia Chapter's exhibit at the Philadelphia Flower Show the first week of March: "A Mythical Garden Along the Escambia River."

To be sure, we're not talking about elepidotes at Mar-a-Lago. Far west in the Florida Panhandle, between Pensacola and the Alabama state line, is a region replete with deciduous azaleas and water, making this indoor evocation an apt exhibit for the Flower Show's overall theme, "The Wonders of Water."

Numerous hybrids of species endemic to the area will be part of the exhibit – 'My Mary', 'High Tide', 'Kelsey's Flame' and more – along with dogwood, redbud, ferns, trillium and primula, placed along a little bit of stream, a sliver of the Escambia if you will.

ARS members are needed for two aspects of this endeavor. First is set-up, which will take place Tuesday, February

27, starting around 10:00 a.m. at the Pennsylvania Convention Center. Linda Hartnett will again be the wizard of this endeavor, but this year she'll be recovering from shoulder surgery, and therefore a robust crew is essential. It's typically not a long day, and it's always fun to see the rest of the show in its creation phase. Plus, Chinatown and Reading Terminal Market offer great lunch options.

To join the set-up crew, contact Linda at 215-287-0731 or [lindahartnett@gmail.com](mailto:lindahartnett@gmail.com). Likewise for breakdown, which takes place Sunday evening, March 11, starting at 6:00 p.m.

Docents are key to the exhibit – these ARS members interact with the attendees of the Flower Show, answering questions about rhododendron culture, and talking up membership in our club. And what a deal it is: free admission to the Flower Show (instead of \$30 a person). Michael Mills coordinates the docent schedule; reach him at [mmm19119@gmail.com](mailto:mmm19119@gmail.com) or 215-527-7145.