

GREATER PHILADELPHIA

RHODOGRAVURE

NEWSLETTER OF THE GREATER PHILADELPHIA CHAPTER, AMERICAN RHODODENDRON SOCIETY :::::::::: AUTUMN 2020

Checking in with Frank Brouse

A paragon of B-and-B shrub and tree horticulture

Back in the war years (that would be World War II), a Pennsylvania state forester had the idea of growing Christmas trees on the 30 acres of farmland he and his wife had acquired a few miles from Norristown seven or so years earlier. Not a bad business decision, and before too long some of E.F. Brouse's December customers started asking for a live, plantable tree instead of a cut one. The lightbulb went off, and Brouse Nursery was born.

In residence at the farm was young Frank, who often tagged along as his father made site visits to state forest land in the southeastern sector of Pennsylvania. Soon enough Frank was off to Virginia Tech to get a degree in forestry. And, after serving his country in the military and working for a local landscaper, he went into the nursery business in 1954.

Only someone who has lived in East Norriton since Franklin Roosevelt's first term as president could tell you how much the area has changed. Most of Frank Brouse's boyhood stomping grounds was farms – many of them abandoned farms, it being the Great Depression. There was only one school for the township, an elementary-middle school, after which students went into Norristown for high school. No strip malls or chain stores or fancy hospitals on Germantown Pike, which ran a few hundred feet from home.

And no plastic pots in the nursery trade. Perhaps due to the lessons that a forestry graduate learns from his forester father, Frank never switched over to growing all his plants out of the ground and in flower pots. To this day, his customers are glad. Brouse Nursery is one of the last where the plants are grown on site and dug to order for the landscape trade, plus an occasional direct sale to a certain plant society creating a make-believe tableau at the Philadelphia Flower Show. Here's the truth: a B-and-B plant (that's balled and burlaped for the Bitcoin set) has much higher odds of survival in a customer's garden than something that has spent its entire life in a pot filled with soilless medium.

Brouse Nursery did sell some potted plants for a while, Frank admits, but "they don't survive like the B&B stuff." He has come full circle, he says, now using no fertilizer or sprays, everything in the ground. "You get real plants, not sissies."

Why do so few nurseries grow their own plants? Putting aside cynical musings about dead plants' leading to the purchase of replacement plants, it's easier if everything is in lightweight

plastic pots. You can line them up for display, hide the ratty ones, get deliveries from industrial propagators in stuffed-to-the-gills panel trucks, and turn on the automated sprinkler system timed for the rapid drying of soilless medium. And you never have to – *oh the toil!* – get out a spade and properly dig up a superb 8-foot rhododendron and – *you've got to be kidding!* – securely wrap the root ball in burlap.

According to Harold Sweetman, former director of Jenkins Arboretum, when Frank is confronted with woodies in containers, he “turns his head down and shakes his head” in mild disgust. Sweetman met Frank years ago at an autumn ARS chapter meeting and in conversation lamented that, as a one-person operation in those days, he had little time to deadhead. Frank, according to Sweetman, didn't volunteer to tackle the Jenkins deadheading situation (well, who would?), but he did ask if he could collect seeds. Sweetman also credits Frank with the best piece of professional advice he ever got: joining the International Plant Propagators' Society.

Of course, growing plants in the ground means digging them up when a sale is consummated. So what? Frank has dug 15-foot hollies and trees with 4- to 5-inch-diameter trunks with a 2-ton root ball. No, he does not leave the heavy lifting to young strapping employees. He hasn't had employees for at least 20 years.

Bill Halberstadt, a Greater Philadelphia board member who does landscaping, reports that Frank won't even let him help dig a plant. Anything up to a 4- to 5-foot root ball “I can dig and load myself,” Frank explained. Hand spades only, of course. “Everything gets better by transplanting.”

At one time, Brouse Nursery had more than 300 rhododendron cultivars, but over time, anything that “turned yellow” was discontinued. Nowadays he's focused on *R. maximum*, ‘Roseum Elegans’, ‘Roseum Pink’, and ‘Nova Zembla’. Landscapers want plants that look handsome the remaining 50 weeks of the year. Frank's operation occupies about 6 acres now, owing to division and sale of parts of the tract after his parents died.

What's the future look like? For the overall nursery business: hydrangeas, which Frank says have surpassed rhododendrons. “Young guys, all they know about is container-grown rhododendrons. Plant 'em and they die. You can't kill hydrangeas.”

Personally, the future includes a 92nd birthday on November 19.

Ninety-two! Still digging! As Harold Sweetman says, Frank is proof that “if you keep your body moving, you live a long time.”

And if you're looking for a 75-foot Christmas tree this year, Frank Brouse has some, remnants of the tree farm that started it all decades ago. Sorry, no B&B. To get it home, BYO helicopter.

Two chapters and their future(s)

By Karel F. Barnady

To merge or not to merge, that is the question. Over the years the possibility of combining the Greater Philadelphia Chapter and the Valley Forge Chapter has surfaced among members. Actual movement of the two organizations together has occurred by integrating several of our activities. So, should we take the final plunge and unite?

To better understand the opportunities and issues a merger would bring, both chapters selected three members each to form a discussion committee. Representing Valley Forge are Perc Moser, Bob Smetana and Steve Wright. They are joined by Greater Philadelphia members Gary Ammon, Michael Martin Mills and Maris Ogg. In a couple of meetings, the group convened and

outlined the broad reasons for considering a merger and offered the chapter boards several possibilities to evaluate.

Why merge? Chapter membership has been slowly declining. Leadership of the chapters is falling on fewer individuals. Members are aging, giving up homes and gardens for smaller quarters or passing on. At the same time members still enjoy the social activities the organizations bring.

What can we do? Alternatives discussed are: (1) maintain the status quo of two separate chapters; (2) maximize coordination and consolidation of our activities along the lines of recent years; or (3) formally merge the two chapters.

To help frame the issues and opportunities, a meeting of the committee and boards of directors of both chapters was recently held. The attendees were asked to discuss their view of their own membership's likely reaction to the alternatives presented. The consensus seemed to be that xsmore coordination would be desirable. A secondary view was that a merger is the best option to create a stronger leadership to tackle the declining membership problem.

No decisions have been made. The committee has been asked by the two boards of directors to create a plan to increase coordination between the chapters. Your input into this effort is sought.

Editor's note: Karel F. Bernady was one of the three members appointed by the Greater Philadelphia board of directors to be on the joint committee. Due to personal circumstances over the summer, he asked Michael Martin Mills to serve in his place, and thus he was not part of the committee meetings held prior to the joint board gathering.

After months, rhododendrons were again for sale

The annual Plants For Members sale – a propagation-and-dispersal endeavor launched by Dan Layman in the mid-1980s – drew 27 ARS members to Morris Arboretum on Sept. 13, 2020. They came from as far north as Coopersburg, Pa., east from Vineland, N.J., and south from Springfield, Va.

The sale was an outdoor event, though the plants were on tables in a large garage bay at the arboretum operations complex. The longtime customary practice of drawing numbers and admitting buyers in small groups was perfectly suited for social distancing in a time of pandemic, and the pleasant weather allowed (masked) conviviality on the macadam while waiting for one's turn in the sale area.

A total of 227 plants were available, in all four categories (elepidotes, lepidotes, evergreen and deciduous azaleas) and two sizes: small yearling cuttings or tissue-cultured deciduous azaleas, and one-gallon plants. Small plants cost \$5 each, larger ones \$12.

Total sales were 156 plants (69 percent of stock), yielding \$1,516 in gross revenue.

A few weeks later, owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, the chapter ventured into online sales, joining with the sale mounted by Tyler Arboretum. Descriptions and photos of the cultivars were posted on the Tyler website to complement its offerings of other woodies and perennials. The web pages were deftly structured such that when a customer added a plant to her "cart," the number of available plants clicked down one – it was thus not possible to oversell.

The chapter offered 120 plants, a combination of 3-gallon plants grown from rooted cuttings and native azaleas grown from seed by Steve Kristoph. A total of 51 ARS plants were sold, basically half deciduous and half elepidotes. It was clear that the Tyler buying universe was attracted to species. Revenue was \$1,342.

Another advantage of the online sale was that only those plants that were sold needed to be transported to Tyler for buyers to pick up.

Linda Hartnett took the lead in organizing the logistics of these sales, with major help from Perc Moser, Maris Ogg, Michael Martin Mills, Karel Bernady and Bud Gressman. Work on next year's crop has already begun, with a large number of cuttings stuck for rooting in August. In November, grafting will be done under the expert leadership of Karel.

Calendar

All listings should be considered tentative pending coronavirus developments. Members will be advised by email of changes and cancelations.

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.

December 8, Tuesday, 7:30 p.m. Board of Directors meeting via Zoom.

January 10, 2021, 2:00 p.m. Chapter meeting, Morris Arboretum or via Zoom.
Presenter: Steve Wright, Director of Horticulture at Jenkins Arboretum, on gardening with deer.

February 21, Sunday Joint Valley Forge-Greater Philadelphia meeting, Uwchlan Meeting House, Lionville, Pa.

April 10, Saturday Annual banquet. Presenter: Nancy Bell of Mount Cuba Center.

May Plant Sale and Cut-Flower Competition plans to be announced.

June 3-6 ARS national conference, Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia, Canada, hosted by the Atlantic Rhododendron & Horticultural Society. Current plans are for both an in-person convention and a digital streaming version for those unable or unwilling to travel due to the pandemic.

Spring and the pandemic

Given the utterly unknowable state of affairs that will greet us in the late winter and spring months, all chapter ARS activities are in a state of flux.

Meetings are scheduled in January, February and April, but may be converted to Zoom computer events or canceled.

The chapter board is exploring plant sale options; last May, the planned joint sale with Tyler Arboretum was canceled (well before the pandemic, Morris Arboretum announced it would no longer conduct a plant sale, thus the switch to Tyler). A Tyler sale remains in the mix of options for the coming year, as do other possibilities.

If there is a Cut-Flower Competition (truss show), it will be at Jenkins. Which chapter will be in charge and dates and times are unresolved.

The Philadelphia Flower Show will take place in June, outdoors at FDR Park in South Philadelphia. The board is awaiting terms of participation from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society before deciding whether to create an exhibit.

A valuable resource

Odds are, many folks are not taking advantage of all that the ARS national website has to offer for members. The RhodoGravure central office considers the national membership directory to be indispensable, and all it takes is being a member of the ARS to get access to it.

There is a slight hurdle. An ARS member must register, creating a username and password. To do that one must know her/his membership number. Yes, you have a membership number, and this may be the only time you ever need to use it (it's useless at tollbooths or casinos). Four times a year, the number arrives in ARS members' mailboxes and gets promptly put in the trash can. On the wrapper of the quarterly Journal, the membership number is printed directly above the member's name. (Can't wait for the next Journal to arrive? Contact ARS office manager Katherine Sterner at member@arsoffice.org or 631-533-0375.)

With membership number in hand, go to the main webpage of the national ARS: www.rhododendron.org. Next, click on the "Chapters" tab. The last option in the drop-down menu is "Member (OARS) website," upon which one should click. Up pops a three-column, text-filled page labeled "OARS: Office of the American Rhododendron Society." All of the left-hand column and some of the right-hand column are accessible to members.

If this is a first-time visit, the member must register. It's not particularly obvious, and the location is not all that sensible, but in the first box in the left column (access to the Journal in electronic form) there is a click-on for registering. (In the interest of saving ink, the RhodoGravure declines to make further comment on the organizational nature of the national ARS website.)

Fill out the form with the all-important member number, and access to the membership directory, back issues of the Journal and other goodies is granted. If a user wants to get someone's phone number or email, then read a 1999 Journal article, well, it might involve logging out and logging back in (the RhodoGravure declines to make further comment . . .). On future visits to the main webpage, don't forget that these member-only privileges are not found under the "Membership" tab of the home page, but under "Chapters" (the RhodoGravure declines . . .).



Sadly, adieu to Betty Bernady

Elizabeth Ann (Betty) Bernady, wife of ARS leader Karel F. Bernady, died on August 30 after a long illness. She was 78 years old. A family-only service was held in Maryland, limited due to pandemic concerns.

Betty was born in Baltimore, during the first summer of full U.S. participation in World War II. She and Karel were married in 1964. In addition to Karel, she is survived by her daughters, Jeannette and Valerie, five grandchildren, and two sisters.

Many chapter members recall Betty's welcome presence in the kitchen of the Uwchlan Meeting House, as a key member of the team that laid out the feast following the annual joint meeting of the Greater Philadelphia and Valley Forge Chapters.

Her cooking was so delectable that, when her illness had incapacitated her, Karel reported losing some weight. Quilting, painting and sushi outings were other pursuits, but it's no stretch to say that her great happiness came from her family and their accomplishments.

When social conditions permit, a celebration of her life will be planned by the family.

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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 quarterly Journal of the ARS, and fosters plant research and conservation. Its website, www.rhododendron.org, is a trove.

The Greater Philadelphia Chapter typically gathers eight times a year. Sunday afternoon meetings are held September, October, and January at Morris Arboretum. February through August we are mobile, with a banquet, plant sale and picnic at various sites. Several events are held in conjunction with the Valley Forge Chapter of the ARS. Latest meeting information may be found at www.GPChapterARS.org.

Dues are \$40 per year, for chapter and national membership and a subscription to the Journal. Contact the president or treasurer (see above) for a form or go to www.GPChapterARS.org; click on “Join us.”