

# RHODOGRAVURE

NEWSLETTER OF THE DELAWARE VALLEY RHODODENDRON SOCIETY :::::::::: WINTER 2024

## *Three conferences, one spring*

Alabama, Maryland, Washington state – why not do all three?

Spring of 2024 – it’s all about critical election primaries, right? The RhodoGravure will be leaving that to the members’ own proclivities. Instead of choosing one candidate over the others, choose a rhododendron conference.

Indeed, if you have the time, there’s really no need to choose – you can go to all three this coming spring.

First up is the Azalea Society of America’s convention in Auburn, Ala., deep in the heart of deciduous azalea environs. Highlights include a guided tour of Auburn University’s Davis Arboretum and its significant collection of deciduous species and hybrids, led by arboretum director Patrick Thompson. Also on the schedule is a visit to the renowned



Rosa and Bob McWhorter’s garden, northwest of Annapolis, will be on tour at the end-of-April District 9 conference.



Don’t get lost at Vancouver’s Van Dusen Botanical Garden, part of the Bellingham conference activities.

Callaway Gardens just over the state line in Georgia. Dates: April 2-4 (Tuesday-Thursday); information: <https://azaleas.org/convention-2024/>.

That will give you three full weeks back home to spiff up your garden before heading for Annapolis, Md., for a particularly alluring regional rhododendron gathering mounted by ARS District 9. Tours include London Town Museum and Gardens, where one of the buildings dates from 1760 and whose 10-acre garden overlooks the South River near its flow into the Chesapeake Bay. Three boffo private gardens are on tour, all with major rhododendron collections. Noted horticulturist Tony Dove will be a dinner speaker. Dates: April 28-30 (Sunday-Tuesday); information: <http://dvchaptersars.org/files/2024Dist9Flyer.pdf>.



Look for 'Tiger' at Davis Arboretum during Azalea Society confab.

Catch your breath and pack your passport before heading west to Bellingham, Wash., for the ARS national convention. Bellingham is a coastal college city that virtually kisses the Canadian border and is actually farther north than Victoria, the capital of British Columbia. As is customary for West Coast conventions there will be numerous choices every day of tours to take and workshops to attend. The Sunday "post-convention" tour is to two noted botanical gardens in Vancouver, Canada (that's why you need your passport). Every ARS member should attend at least one West Coast conference in her life: the things they can grow out there! The gardens are as lush as lush can be, and Puget Sound makes the Delaware Bay seem pitiful. Plus, the Dungeness crab is really fresh. Dates: May 2-5 (Thursday-Sunday); information: <https://www.ars2024.org>.

**Visit the DVRS website:**  
<http://dvchapterars.org>

## *Planting rhododendrons in imperfect soil*

Several accomplished growers give advice on countering high pH

One of the free resources that digitally connected rhododendron enthusiasts should investigate is a discussion board begun in 1998. (Go to <https://groups.io/g/Rhodo> for signup options.) All sorts of rhodo information (and arcana) show up, along with many photos.

In October, a fascinating discussion unfolded about amending soil that is problematic for rhododendrons. Various accomplished growers from Europe and North America chimed in with experience-based approaches (and warnings). Here, with minimal editing, is a transcription of that discussion. The RhodoGravure does not endorse the various recommendations per se (other than being in complete agreement about not using aluminum sulfate), but offers the comments as a shortcut to getting true-life advice from folks who know what they are doing.

Note that on the pH scale, 7 is neutral. Higher numbers are alkaline, lower numbers are acidic. Rhododendrons need a soil pH of 4.5 to 5.5 (conceivably as high as 6.0, but why chance it?).

The discussion began with a Dutchman's request for advice.

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### **Henk Borsje, Oudenbosch, Netherlands:**

There have been many opinions and suggestions on how to make neutral soil, pH between 6 and 7, more suitable for rhododendrons.

I am asking this question because someone asked me if I could beautify the local cemetery. I took some soil samples and found the pH to be in the range of 6.4 to 6.8. Apparently there used to be a limestone church in the middle of the cemetery that was demolished long ago. I can imagine limestone and cement dust being spread over the place. A low-maintenance solution has my preference.

The opinions I have read vary a lot. Some of the solutions and their cons:

- Apply aluminum, ammonium or magnesium sulfate. Cons: These all seem to give a short-term boost to the rhododendrons and azaleas. But it must be repeated as these salts will leach from the soil by rain and other watering.
- Mix peat moss into the soil before planting. Cons: Over time the peat moss will decompose and after some years the soil gets packed again. Further, peat moss usage is becoming politically incorrect.
- Mix fine pine bark into the soil. Cons: Pine bark is not cheap in the Netherlands as it is mostly used as big chunks for its decorative value. (Are there any other cons?)
- Select rhododendrons that can withstand neutral soil. Cons: The choice is restricted and public knowledge about which varieties to choose from is not abundant. How high a pH can these plants, which generally are grafted, handle?
- Plant on top of the original soil and apply ample mulch. Cons: I am concerned that the roots may dry out more quickly and more watering is required than when planted in the ground.
- Mix calcium sulfate in the soil. It gives an acidic reaction and is not very water-soluble. I remember an anecdotal story how  $\text{CaSO}_4$ , in the hydrated form, significantly improved the structure of the soil. Is this generally true? Cons: This method has not been tested much. Can the presence of calcium be harmful to the plant?

**Kristian Theqvist, Korpo, Rhodogarden, Turku Archipelago, Finland:**

I have planted rhododendrons on less-than-ideal soil, even on bare rock. I used durable plastic to create moist basins filled with good, acidic soil. The plastic's height does not exceed 10cm (4 inches) to prevent excessive water buildup. Alternatively, a layer of clay can be used to retain moisture. This approach has been successful for eight years now, supporting dozens of healthy rhododendrons. An article describing this method is planned for publication in Journal American Rhododendron Society in the Spring 2024 issue.

**Jack Looye, Centreville, Nova Scotia (previously, Niagara on the Lake, Ontario):**

Our old place in Niagara on the Lake had a pH of between 6 and 7, and rhododendrons seemed to like it, but it was a light sandy loam, and we would mulch every other year or when it was available. We had to water a lot in the summer.

We used to get pelletized sulfur and spread it around in the same manner. We would use mulch and fertilize with ammonium sulfate when we thought about it. Rhododendrons and evergreen azaleas grew well under these conditions.

Now that we live in Nova Scotia, our pH is 5.5, but we found bud set poor until we started using Epsom salts and superphosphate. The ground we are using is a forest where we cut down both hardwood and softwood, and it keeps lots of moisture.

**Ron Rabideau, Camden, New Jersey:**

I've thought about what Henk is asking for years. No easy solution. Aluminum is toxic to plants and is permanent. Don't use aluminum sulfate.

Can you get access to the wood chips from arborists? They often can be gotten delivered for free here in the states. Makes a great mulch and breaks down into a soil amendment something like peat moss. If you use it fresh you need to supplement with nitrogen as the microorganisms that break it down use up

natural nitrogen. Iron sulfate (sometimes called copperas) will lower your pH and add iron. I've found it hard to locate.

**Dorothy Swift, Wickford, Rhode Island:**

Sulfur can be used, spread on the surface layer. Often used to make soil acidic for blueberry growing. You could spread small amounts yearly. It is not terribly fast-acting. Use along with arborist wood chips, perhaps, to eventually get soil suitable for rhododendrons.

**John Weagle, Halifax, Nova Scotia:**

It took me years of badgering Vigoro and CIL to take ericaceous plants off their 2kg boxed aluminum sulfate instructions. They did that but CIL left ericaceous images in the pastel drawing on the front of the box. I think it was David Leach who told me long and ever ago that you might get away with a first light dose, but any followup application would be be lethal.

I would tell customers to use 6-12-12 potato fertilizers instead of fertilizers labeled for rhododendrons, etc., but few took heed.

**Tom Chen, Woburn, Massachusetts:**

The Chicago Botanic Garden ran a performance trial and found that many of the Weston lepidotes did well in mildly alkaline soil. Maybe it also means that the parent species such as *R. dauricum*, *mucronulatum*, *carolinianum*, *kiusianum* and *racemosum* could do well. [Editor's note: The limited study was published in 1991; contact the RhodoGravure if you want a digital copy.]

**Paul Chafe, Parham, Ontario:**

My former garden in Sydenham, Ontario, was on clay soil of a limestone base. To grow rhododendrons I removed some soil, surrounded the growing area with logs, then mixed mulch, powder sulfur, and peat. This has worked for 15 years.

My new garden in Parham, Ontario, is on granite – sandy soil with a pH of 5.5 or so. Rhododendrons are just plopped into the ground and do fine. They do better if mulch and peat are added with planting.

**Betty Ann Addison, Minneapolis, Minnesota:**

The sandy soil here is limestone-based and has a pH of 7.3. Over the years we have selected plants that can tolerate the alkalinity. In addition, I can recommend plenty of wood chips, fertilizing with a slow-release 15-15-15.

But the thing that put our rhododendrons into high gear this year was two applications of manganese sulfate (not magnesium sulfate). The Fall 2022 issue of Journal ARS told the story of two Englishmen, one of whom transplanted 800 rhododendrons to a limestone quarry (!). [“Successful Cultivation of Rhododendrons on Limestone,” by Colin Mugridge and David Rankin, JARS 76:4, Fall 2022, Page 6; accessible to ARS members at [www.arsoffice.org](http://www.arsoffice.org).] Unsurprisingly, they looked terrible. But the two men went to China where rhododendrons were growing in the wild in high pH soil. They had the soil tested and it was high in manganese. They spread it on their garden with miraculous results. The rhododendrons all turned green and grew lushly. The best part is that they have found that they don't have to do it over again. The decaying leaves of the rhododendrons release the manganese right back into the soil.

I thought there would be no harm in spreading it on our half-acre, and the rhododendrons have never had such growth and budding. Naturally, I am very excited about this product.

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The RhodoGravure welcomes additional informed suggestions on lowering pH and comments on

some of the tactics cited in this serendipitous exchange. Send them to [mmm19119@gmail.com](mailto:mmm19119@gmail.com).

Regarding manganese sulfate, Betty Ann Addison has informed the RhodoGravure that 50 pounds in granular form was used on about 200 rhododendrons in a half-acre garden, spread at the drip lines. Neither of the local go-to retail outlets for fertilizers and chemicals (Hilltop in Media and Primex in Glenside) carries this soil amendment. A Google search will turn up several brands available through Amazon, eBay or the like.

### *Now vulnerable: Lesser celandine*

The mild, wet December has that scourge of the garden, lesser celandine, sending up new growth already.

If you are willing to use herbicide in your garden, here's your chance. This vile bit of the plant kingdom (*Ranunculus ficaria*) can be killed with Roundup at this stage, but as the weed matures, the herbicide is less and less effective at getting all the way into the little tubers. At this point in winter, lesser celandine is one of the very few plants already emerging, which means that you likely won't be imperiling adjacent perennials, since their foliage has yet to develop.

This tactic will not eradicate a vast swath, and some of it will wait to emerge until later, when other plants are emerging as well, thus making it dicey to spray. But even a little early winter mortality is to be desired.

A tip from the late Paul Meyer, former head of Morris Arboretum: When mixing an herbicide from concentrate, resist the temptation to use a little more of the concentrate to make the spray "more effective." Doing so increases the likelihood that the above-ground growth is zapped but the rootstock survives.

### *Do it the hard way: Grow rhodies from seed*

The ARS Seed Exchange will soon be open for sales. Growing rhododendrons from seed can be a challenge for the first-timer (also some second-timers), but the possibilities are vast.

The Seed Exchange catalogue will have unimagined new crosses as hybridizers from around the world seek to create stunning and luscious and subtle rhododendrons, of every imaginable rhodo color (sorry, no sky blue), with intriguing foliage, fragrance, you name it. There are also wild-collected seeds of species.

The catalogue will be published digitally, and the national ARS's Rhododendron News (emailed to all members) will reveal the date it is available.

Winter is the time to sow the seed indoors. Get how-to information here: <https://www.rhododendron.org/propagation.htm>.

# Calendar

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

**January 16, Tuesday, 7 p.m.** Chapter Board meeting, Jenkins Arboretum.

**January 28, Sunday, 1 p.m.** Chapter meeting, Jenkins Arboretum, 631 Berwyn-Baptist Road, Devon, Pa. Presenter: Trevor Schulte, "On the Trail of the Wild Prunifolium." Mr. Schulte is the Azalea Meadow horticulturist at Morris Arboretum, and last year received the chapter's travel grant. He will recount his trek in Georgia and Alabama in search of *R. prunifolium* in its natural state.

**February 18, Sunday, 1 p.m.** Chapter meeting, Uwchlan Meeting House, 3. N. Village Avenue, Exton, Pa. Presenter: Gregg Tepper, "History and Horticulture of Laurel Hill." Many think of Laurel Hill as a pair of cemeteries flanking the Schuylkill, but they also constitute a 245-acre arboretum, where Gregg Tepper is senior horticulturist, with a venerable and well-curated plant collection amid the monuments and mausoleums.

**March 17, Sunday, 1 p.m.** Chapter meeting, Tyler Arboretum, Edible Garden Building, 515 Painter Road, Media, Pa.

**March 19, Tuesday, 7 p.m.** Chapter Board meeting, Jenkins Arboretum.

**April 2-4, Tuesday-Thursday.** Azalea Society of America Convention, Auburn, Ala. More info: <https://azaleas.org/convention-2024/>

**April 28-30, Sunday-Tuesday.** ARS District 9 meeting, Annapolis, Md. More info: <http://dvchapterars.org/files/2024Dist9Flyer.pdf>

**May 2-5, Thursday-Sunday.** ARS national convention, Bellingham, Wash. More info: <https://www.ars2024.org>

**May 3-5, Friday-Sunday** Chapter plant sales, Jenkins Arboretum and Tyler Arboretum.

**May 11, Saturday.** Chapter Cut-Flower Competition, Jenkins Arboretum.

**May 21, Tuesday, 7 p.m.** Chapter Board meeting, Jenkins Arboretum.



*R. prunifolium*, subject of the Jan. 28 meeting. This specimen was photographed toward the end of July at the home of Carol Segree in Maryland.

K.F. Bernady photo

## Delaware Valley Rhododendron Society

A chapter of the American Rhododendron Society

[DVChapterARS.org](http://DVChapterARS.org)

### Officers

President: Karel F. Bernady (2023-24), 610-827-0113; bernadk @ verizon.net  
Vice President: Jerry O'Dell (2023-24), 610-608-2018; westdell @ verizon.net  
Treasurer: Bob Smetana (2023-24), 610-996-0661, vfarssmetana @ yahoo.com  
Secretary: Kim Kopple (2023-24), kopple.kim @ gmail.com

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Terms expiring 2024: Craig Conover, Darlene Henning, Steve Henning, Maris Ogg, Steve Wright  
Terms expiring 2025: Stuart Brooks, Bill Halberstadt, Linda Hartnett, Perc Moser

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#### Committees

Finance: Bob Smetana, chair

Plant Propagation and Sales: Karel F. Bernady, chair

Membership: Maris Ogg and Steve Wright, co-chairs

Program: Jerry O'Dell, chair

Communications: Michael Martin Mills, chair

Mailing address: 14 Northwoods Road, Radnor, Pa. 19087

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](http://www.rhododendron.org), is a trove.

The Delaware Valley Rhododendron Society is the result of the recent merger of the Greater Philadelphia and Valley Forge Chapters of the ARS, and serves rhododendron and azalea enthusiasts in Philadelphia, Southeastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey and Delaware. The group typically gathers monthly (except July and December) for program meetings, summer picnic, autumn banquet and multiple plant sales. Activities are at various locations, mostly on Sunday afternoons. Dues are \$40 per year, for combined chapter and national membership and a subscription to the Journal. Contact the president or treasurer (see above) for a form or go to [DVChapterARS.org](http://DVChapterARS.org); in the Table of Contents, click on "Join."