



Potomac Valley Chapter

American Rhododendron Society

www.arspvc.org

Newsletter: September 2009

Calendar

- * **September 20, 2009** – Regular Meeting, Potomac Community Center
- * **October 23-25, 2009** – ARS Eastern Regional, Lionville, PA
- * **November 1, 2009** – Fall Banquet, JR's Stockyards, Tyson's Corner, VA
- * **November 6-8, 2009** – MAC Meeting, Fredericksburg, VA
- * **January 10, 2010** – Regular Meeting, National Arboretum
- * **March 5-7, 2010** – Plant trip to NC Nurseries
- * **March 28, 2010** – Regular Meeting, National Arboretum
- * **April 24, 2010** – Flower Show, National Arboretum
- * **May 14 - 17, 2010** – ARS Convention, Long Island, NY
- * **May 18-25, 2010** – International Rhododendron Conference, Bremen, Germany

Chapter Officers

President: Bob McWhorter

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Vice-President: Richard Mohr

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Treasurer: Phyllis Rittman

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Next Meeting: "Seeking Out Wild Ericas and Native Orchids" by Doug Jolley

Location: Potomac Community Center

11315 Falls Road, Potomac, MD 20854

Time: September 20, 2009 1 - 4 PM

We are excited to have Doug Jolley as our September speaker. He is the past President and current Secretary of the Middle Atlantic Chapter. A retired dentist, Doug and his wife Davetta now operate Windbeam Way Nursery near Heaters, WV. Doug, a masterful photographer, will speak about native Ericaceous plants and wild orchids. He provides an enticing introduction to his talk:

"One of the most interesting plant families we know is the Rhododendron Family. It is officially the Heath Family, or the *Ericaceae*. While many search for new native azaleas and rhododendrons, often other members of the family go unheralded or even unnoticed. Some ericaceous plants are trees while some are measured by a millimeter rule. Often unpretentious flowers are beautiful when viewed through a macro lens. Arguably one of the oldest plant organisms on the earth is a member of this family.

"In addition to the interesting heaths, our native orchids often occupy the same habitat niches. The combination of these two plant families makes for an interesting pastime in seeking them out. This talk will take viewers from the saw palmettos of Florida to the Sierra Nevada range of California.



A Swarm of Ericaceous Plants in the Wild:

R. minus var. carolinianum, R. catawbiense, and R. vaseyi

From the Atlantic coast we will climb into the central Appalachian Mountains searching for members of these families.

"This travelogue will highlight both rare and common members of each family and how they interact with one another in a variety of settings."

Directions: From **I-270 North**, stay in the **Local lanes** and take exit **#4B/ MONTROSE RD WEST**. Continue west on Montrose Rd. for **1.7 miles**. Turn **LEFT** on **FALLS RD (MD-189)**. Continue **1.4 miles** to 11315 Falls Rd on the Left.

Refreshment Duty: Persons whose last names begin with **A** through **H** are asked to bring some refreshment goodies for the table.

Dr. John L. Creech: *Remembering a Legend* *By Don Hyatt*

It is with great sadness that I learned of the passing of Dr. John Creech. He died on August 7, 2009, at the age of 89. As one of the preeminent Directors of the U. S. National Arboretum, he was responsible for many of the facility's salient features and I want to take a brief moment to reflect on a few of his many accomplishments.



Dr. John Creech at the National Arboretum H. Schepker

Dr. Creech had a distinguished career as a plant scientist in the U. S. Department of Agriculture that lasted 33 years. From 1973 until he retired in 1980, he served as Director of the U. S. National Arboretum. During World War II, he also served in the U.S. Army, but spent from 1943 to 1945 in a German prisoner-of-war camp. Always the horticulturist, he raised food on a plot of ground at the camp to help feed his fellow POWs. He was awarded the Bronze and Silver Stars for his valor.

In addition to 10 different plant collection trips to Asia focusing on the introduction of new plant material, some of his most notable contributions to the Arboretum included significant expansion to the Azalea collection, the creation of the National Herb Garden, and the establishment of the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum.

I feel very fortunate to have been able to spend an afternoon with Dr. Creech at the National Arboretum during the 2006 ARS/ASA Convention we hosted in Rockville. I regret that I didn't have my camera or video camcorder with me to record every moment. I really appreciate the above photo

taken by Dr. Hartwig Schepker that day. I will try to share a few of my memories on perhaps the final time Dr. Creech visited the Arboretum.

I have always attributed my interest in azalea hybridizing directly to Dr. Creech and I was happy that I had a chance to tell him so that afternoon. It was probably in the mid 1960's, before Dr. Creech had become Arboretum Director, when my parents took me for the annual trip to see the azalea display. Dr. Creech had set up an exhibit of evergreen azaleas to explain about hybridizing and asked people to vote on their favorite seedling.

All of the azaleas were from the same cross, and I remember being enamored by the subtle variations in color, flower shape, and size. The flowers ranged from pale lavender to pure white, and some had occasional purple flecks. Every azalea was beautiful and it was hard to decide, but that was the point I realized I wanted to make my own azalea crosses. The large hose-in-hose white must have won the popularity poll that day. Creech named it for the First Lady, 'Mrs. L.B.J.'



Creech Azalea Introduction: 'Mrs. L.B.J.'

One of Dr. Creech's greatest contributions surely is the world-class bonsai display at the Arboretum. He was the one responsible for obtaining that initial collection of dwarf trees and viewing stones, and that soon led to the National Bonsai & Penjing Museum, undoubtedly one of the finest collections outside of Japan.

That afternoon we walked through the Bonsai Pavilion including some of the "back rooms" while Dr. Creech shared so many marvelous stories. As we walked under the row of huge Cryptomerias flanking the main entrance to the

Pavilion, he remarked how difficult it was to locate those matching specimens. He was glad to see that they were still growing so well.

We admired the various bonsai trees on display and he seemed to know each one personally. In work areas behind the scenes, he even recognized some of their original pots. He had a sparkle in his eye as he reminisced about so many little details during his tenure at the Arboretum.

Japan had offered the U.S. a collection of bonsai trees to honor our Bicentennial, so Dr. Creech and an assistant traveled to Japan to see that it became reality. Like any good plant collector, he brought back every plant possible on that trip, 53 bonsai, many of them centuries old, plus 7 viewing stones. Creech said there was no question that he would accept the priceless gift to our country, but he just wasn't sure how he was going to get them safely back to the United States.

He told us it would be easier to be forgiven rather than to get permission from the government in advance to do what needed to be done in order to guarantee safe shipment. Rather than packing the trees in crates and sending by standard methods that could damage them, he decided to charter a huge 747 jet and fly them home, first class. He had no idea how to pay for the shipping expense but he would worry about that later.

They first removed all the seats from the plane, then secured the bonsai to wooden pallets, and finally bolted them down so they wouldn't shift. By the time all the trees were loaded, there was no room for people so they curled up underneath the plants for the long flight home. The bonsai arrived in perfect condition but he admitted he was stiff. We thank you Dr. Creech! You will be missed!



Bonsai Specimen at the U. S. National Arboretum

Historic Garden Bulldozed

Chalk up another victory to the developers. The historic home and garden of Frederick O. Coe in Bethesda is no more. Approximately three years prior, members in the Greenwich Forest Community started seeking approval from Montgomery County to assign historic status to the lovely home and garden. It was situated on one of the highest points in the entire county.

In 1962, Dr. Henry Skinner cited the Coe garden as one of three best private gardens in the Washington D.C. area, comparable to McCrillis Gardens and the home of Frederick P. Lee. It had more mature plantings including many Dexter rhododendrons and native azaleas under a canopy of high shade. The Coe Garden was established in the late 1930s and must have had some spectacular specimens, similar to many of the plantings in Margaret White's landscape.

Community leaders had received assurance that their petition to consider the Coe Estate for historic designation would be reviewed by the Planning Commission on August 12, 2009. They had been promised that no permits would be approved prior to July 6th so they thought they were safe. However, that decision was appealed without public notice and permits were issued secretly. Early on the morning of July 2nd, a demolition crew appeared at the Coe property and by 10:00 AM, half the house had already been destroyed. At that same time, community leaders received their first notice of the decision.

Apparently, some specimen plants were removed from the property, possibly going to Landon School, Brookside, McCrillis, or sold to developers. In the meantime, large trees on the property and on a county right away behind the estate have been cut down so that Sandy Spring Builders can build three McMansions on what used to be the quiet beauty of Coe Garden. For more details, refer to the July 23, 2009 article in Washington Post by Miranda S. Spivack.

Member Notes

We extend our sincerest sympathy to Diana Nichols who lost her husband recently.

We are glad that Jane Goodrich is on the mend after a recent operation to implant a pacemaker.

The Ericaceae: *The Heath Family*

Rhododendrons are members of the Heath Family, more formally known as the *Ericaceae*. Since all flowering plants are placed into one of approximately 60 different families, most of those families are rather large and diverse groups and the Heath Family is no exception. It contains approximately 125 different genera and more than 3500 species. Of course, our society's primary focus is on just one genus in *Ericaceae*, that of the *Rhododendron*.



Dexter Rhododendron Hybrids at Heritage

When we look at the variation among the different rhododendrons species and hybrids, it is hard to believe they all belong to just one genus. When people think of “rhododendrons” the typical image is probably the large leaf Dexter and Gable hybrids that grace our gardens. We also have our native species, the purple *R. catawbiense* and white *R. maximum* of the Appalachian Mountains. There are many wonderful Asian species that are often grown as much for their foliage than the blossoms, like the lovely *R. yakushimanum* with its compact habit and striking leaves with heavy felting underneath called indumentum. All of these larger leaved rhododendrons are grouped together under the heading Elepidotes.

There is another subgroup of rhododendrons called the Lepidotes. The plants are usually smaller in stature with smaller leaves and flowers that look like azaleas. They are distinguished by are tiny scale-like structures found under their leaves that can be easily seen with a hand lens or microscope. Some favorite lepidotes include the



R. minus var. carolinianum near Mt. Pisgah

blush pink hybrid ‘Winbeam,’ the dwarf yellow Japanese species, *R. keiskei*, and the native *R. minus* var. *carolinianum* pictured in the wild above. I would love to be able to grow some of the lovely blue and deep purple lepidotes like *R. augustinii* or *R. impeditum*, but many of those plants are native to cool Alpine regions and are very difficult in our warmer climate.

Of course, all azaleas are rhododendrons, but it is surprising how many people do not realize that fact. The evergreen azaleas that grow everywhere in our region are not native plants. They all come from Asia. Many varieties we grow today have actually been in cultivation for hundreds of years, such as the variety ‘Pink Pearl’ (‘Azuma-kagami’) which was highly prized in Japan over 300 years ago. It is still a favorite today.

We do have a wealth of native azaleas in the United States, at least eighteen species and still counting. Many of us flock to the Appalachian Mountains each year to catch the bloom of favorites like *R. vaseyi*, *R. calendulaceum*, and the hybrids on Gregory Bald.



‘Pink Pearl’ - A 300-Year Old Evergreen Azalea Hybrid

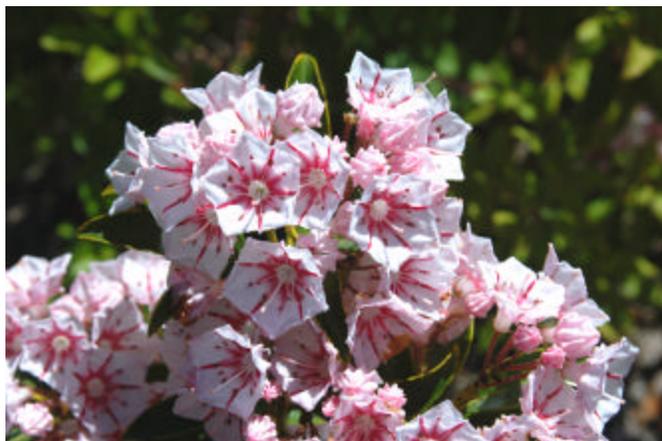


Heath Plants (Erica sp.) in the Landscape

There are certainly enough rhododendrons in the genus to keep us all busy for many lifetimes, but what about the other members of the Heath Family? Most of them are woody shrubs but there are other plant types including trees and vines and even a few strange plants that have no leaves or any chlorophyll at all.

The most obvious members of the Heath Family are certainly namesake of the genus, the heaths themselves. Heaths are placed in the genus *Erica*, and include delicate winter and spring blooming varieties so popular in many rock gardens. Flower colors can range from white to pink or even red. Closely related is the genus *Calluna*, the famed Scottish Heather that turns so many hillsides in northern England and Scotland to an amazing the rosy pink and purple in late summer. Members of both genera are not as easy to grow in our area because they seem to prefer cooler summer temperatures.

Two very popular plants in the Heath Family that we often see in rhododendron gardens are Mountain Laurel, *Kalmia latifolia*, with its lovely flowers in shades of white to pink that bloom in



Kalmia Latifolia – A Striking banded form on Wayah Bald

late spring, and Japanese Pieris, *Pieris Japonica*, with its dangling clusters of white blossoms in early spring.

There is a genus of plants that belongs to the Heath family that are much more important as food crops than ornamental garden subjects. That is the genus *Vaccinium*. It includes not only the ever-popular blueberries that grow on bushes of varying size but also cranberries that are tiny vines that grow in cool bog regions.

Perhaps less frequently grown members of *Ericaceae* but still popular ornamental foliage plants include the glossy leaved *Leucothoe* and the striking blue foliage *Zenobia*.

There are some rather diminutive plants that I admired for years but didn't realize they belonged to *Ericaceae* until many years later. Those include Trailing Arbutus (*Epigaea repens*) that I used to see on wildflower hikes here in Northern Virginia with its flat, evergreen leaves and creeping vine habit with those wonderfully fragrant white flowers in May. Wintergreen or Teaberry (*Gaultheria procumbens*) with its aromatic foliage is also a heath, and its use as a flavoring is well known.

Another heath I remember vividly from childhood is Pipsissewa (*Chimaphylla maculata*). It used to grow in large patches in the woods behind my home and I always admired its striking deep green and white foliage and delicate white flowers. My grandmother said it made a wonderful herbal tea “good for the kidneys” but she could never get us to try any of her country remedies, especially after the time she got some Poison Ivy roots mixed in with the Pipsissewa and spent a lengthy stay in the hospital recovering from her spring tonic.



Pipsissewa – An Ericaceous Woodland Groundcover

There are trees in the Heath Family including *Oxydendrum arboreum*, the Sourwood or Lily of the Valley Tree. It has long dangling racemes of greenish-white flowers that appear in summer and they remain on the tree throughout the autumn creating a lovely contrast to the red fall foliage.



Sourwood – A Flowering Tree in the Heath Family

Perhaps the strangest plants in the Heath Family are a few saprophytes, plants that have no leaves or chlorophyll and get all of their nourishment from decaying organic matter, similar to mushrooms. One that grows in our region is the Indian Pipe or Corpse Plant (*Monotropa uniflora*). I had no idea it was in this family. It has short, waxy white stalks that emerge from the ground after a rain. This species used to be grouped with several similar species in their own family but they were moved into *Ericaceae* recently due to DNA research. Some of our rhododendrons have no leaves, but those are usually the dead ones.



Indian Pipe

Dues Are Now Due!

At the May Annual Meeting in Everett, WA, the ARS Board rescinded a major dues increase that had been approved at a prior meeting and replaced it with a more modest dues structure. They created a new “Regular” membership category at \$40 per year that replaces two former categories:

Individual at \$35 and Family at \$44. Chapters will now retain \$10 of the dues instead of \$8 so that means Associate Membership will increase. We hope you will all remain members. Dues notices are included with this mailing.

The ARS Seed Exchange: *A Potomac Valley Chapter Responsibility*

Beginning September 1st, Norman Beaudry will take over as Chairman of the ARS Seed Exchange. He will need the assistance of our Potomac Valley Chapter to take on this massive task. To contact Norman about the seed exchange use this email:

arseed@gmail.com

Fall Banquet: “Three Seasons of Color” Speaker: *Bruce Feller*

JR’s Stockyards, November 1, 2009

Be sure to keep November 1st free - you don’t want to miss our Fall Banquet. Our East Coast Vice President, Bruce Feller, will be our keynote speaker and he will tell us how he and his wife, Marianne, are able to maintain “Three Seasons of Color.” They will share his secrets about maintaining a colorful garden from fall through winter and into spring when the flowers bloom.

The Fellers have a lovely home on Long Island that is landscaped with choice rhododendrons, azaleas, maples, dwarf conifers, and other plants. Few people can match their horticultural expertise since they raise every plant to perfection.

The Banquet Registration Form and additional details accompany this newsletter.



The Feller’s Home on Long Island, NY

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