



Potomac Valley Chapter

American Rhododendron Society

www.arspvc.org

Fall Newsletter: October 2013

Calendar

- * **October 24, 2013** – White Garden Workday: 9am – Noon
- * **October 25-27, 2013** – MAC ARS Fall Meeting, Virginia Beach, VA
- * **November 2, 2013** – **Potomac Valley ARS Banquet, Normandie Farms**
- * **December 7, 2013** – Arboretum Azalea Cleanup: 10 AM – 3 PM
- * **January 12, 2014** – PVC Regular Meeting, Potomac Community Center
- * **February 28 – March 2, 2014** – North Carolina Plant Trip
- * **March 16, 2014** – Joint Meeting with NV-ASA, Potomac Com. Center
- * **March 27-30, 2014** – ASA Convention, Charleston, SC
- * **April 16, 2014** – PVC Field trip to Pennsylvania Nurseries.
- * **April Date TBD** – PVC Flower Show and Sale, Annapolis Farmer's Mkt.
- * **May 2-4, 2014** – MAC Spring Meeting, Flatwood, WV.
- * **May 16-18, 2014** – ARS Convention, Plainesville, OH

Chapter Officers

President: Bob McWhorter
mcwho@comcast.net
Vice President: Dan Neckel
vaneckel@verizon.net
Treasurer: Phyllis Rittman
prittman@erols.com

Fall Banquet: Ron Rabideau "Plant Hunting in the Himalayas"

Date: Saturday, November 2, 2013

Time: 1:00 PM – 4:00 PM

Where: Normandie Farms Restaurant

10710 Falls Road, Potomac, MD 20854

Registration Deadline: October 28, 2013

We are excited to have Ron Rabideau as our fall banquet speaker this year. Many will remember Ron's excellent talk on plant collecting in Russia a few years ago, but this time he will be sharing his experiences from a 2005 trip that he, Ken Cox, Steve Hootman, and others took to Arunachal Pradesh in the northeastern corner of India. This remote area is located almost entirely in the Himalayas and is bordered by Tibet to the North and Bhutan to the west. It is known to be one of the richest areas for rhododendron species.

The mountainous region of Arunachal Pradesh was closed to travel for many years, partially due to political unrest. Even when a few rare souls were allowed explore, the trek was very difficult due to the rugged terrain in the region. You won't want to miss Ron's exciting story as he and others made their way through deep gorges and across mighty rivers to reach a 13,000 ft. mountain covered with rhododendrons.

To provide some background on the Himalayas and Arunachal Pradesh, there is a brief article about the region in this newsletter. Some facts about its unique topography may help us appreciate Ron's trip.

The banquet registration form is attached to this newsletter. The entrée choices have not changed from



Rhododendron sinogrande

Large Leaf Species from Arunachal Pradesh

last year so please select from chicken piccata, grilled salmon, or vegetarian platter. The price is still \$42. Please indicate entrée choice on the registration form and return with payment to our treasurer, Phyllis Rittman. We must give a final count to the restaurant by Monday, October 28, so please register early. If you haven't paid your chapter dues yet, you can write a check for both and send it with your registration.

Membership in the ARS which includes the affiliation to a local chapter (Potomac Valley) is \$40. Associate membership is only \$10 but you must already belong to another ARS chapter. Make checks payable to Potomac Valley Chapter ARS and return everything to Phyllis:

Phyllis Rittman
prittman@erols.com



Williamsburg 2016

We wanted to update you on the Joint ARS/ASA Convention that we will be hosting in Williamsburg, VA, a few years from now. The dates we have selected are from April 20-24, 2016, which is the opening of Historic Garden Week in Virginia, surely one of the most beautiful times of the year in the region.

We have signed with the Fort Magruder Hotel and Conference Center in Williamsburg. This was the site of the 1988 ARS Convention which was the largest ever on the East Coast, and is an excellent facility that can easily handle 400 to 600 attendees.

We are very pleased with the location and the hotel. We have secured a room rate of \$119 per night but that does include the buffet breakfast for two in the restaurant. That means that the effective cost for the room is well under \$100 per night which is very reasonable. The hotel does provide complimentary high-speed Internet and has ample free parking.



Fort Magruder Hotel and Conference Center

The Fort Magruder Hotel is steeped in history, and was actually built around the site of a Civil War fort. That area has been made into an attractive garden

courtyard where people can relax, take a stroll, or learn about the historical past. The hotel is a mile from Historic Colonial Williamsburg, and close to many other attractions including Jamestown, Busch Gardens, 11 golf courses, and the Williamsburg Outlet Malls. For more about the hotel, check out the website:

www.fortmagruderhotel.com



Fort Magruder Hotel – Garden Courtyard

We will need lots of volunteers to help host this convention and we are counting on you! Our next major effort will be raising plants for the plant sale and Bob McWhorter has already started looking for cutting sources of plants we should propagate. We will also be planning tours and working out the details on the convention program. If you have ideas for speakers or other items, please let us know. Hosting a convention takes a lot of work but it can be fun if we all help!

Local Volunteer Opportunities:

White Garden: October 24, 9:00 AM to Noon

This will be the final work day of the year at the White Garden. We hope you can join us that Thursday so we can get everything ready for winter. Bring your own tools, water, and work gloves. Remember that electricity at the White Garden has been turned off so there are no restroom facilities. Contact Mary Olien at Green Spring Gardens for more details:

Mary.Olien@fairfaxcounty.gov

National Arboretum: December 7, 10:00 to 3:00 PM

Please join us for the fall cleanup session in the Azalea Collection at the Arboretum. We will be raking leaves out of the azaleas, pulling weeds, and getting the garden ready for winter. Bring gloves, tools, water, and something to eat for lunch. You will need to stop by the main building to register as a volunteer. Let Barbara Bullock know if you are coming:

BarbaraBullock@ars.usda.gov

The Himalayas and Arunachal Pradesh

By Don Hyatt

The mighty Himalayas are the highest mountains on earth, but they are also among the youngest. They were formed when the tectonic plate that contains India collided with the plate that contains Asia, but that was only about 50 million years ago. India continues to slide northward under the Tibetan Plateau at a rate of 6.7 cm a year. In 10 million years it may have completely merged with the Asian Plate but for now the Himalayas continue to grow at a rate of about 5 mm a year.

Arunachal Pradesh is located in the far northeast section of India along the front of the Himalayas adjacent to Assam. The area is very mountainous and remote, and parts have never been explored by outside sources. Some areas are so rugged that they remain inaccessible to locals, too.

Due to political unrest between China and Tibet that began about 1950, travel in the region has been severely restricted. There are still boundary disputes between India and China about Arunachal Pradesh which China calls "South Tibet." There was an incident as recently as August 2013. Travel remains tightly controlled.

Depending upon altitude, ecosystems vary from steamy tropical rain forest to temperate deciduous forest, subalpine conifer forest, alpine meadow, to glacier. The diversity of plant life in this region is amazing. Modern plant explorer Ken Cox estimates that at least one hundred rhododendron species grow there, second only to Yunnan in diversity for the genus.

Arunachal Pradesh borders the plains of Assam, a botanically rich area famous for its wealth of plant resources including *Camellia sinensis*, the tea plant. The stark changes in elevation from plain through foothills to rugged snowcapped peaks as high as 23,000 ft has encouraged plant diversification.

Drenched by monsoon rains, that area is one of the wettest on earth, too. Annual precipitation can range upwards to 14 ft per year depending upon the location. There are many rivers, of course, but the most notable is the mighty Tsangpo River. It originates on the Tibetan Plateau near the western end of Nepal, travels



India and region near Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh



over 800 miles to the eastern Himalayas, and then crosses the range in Arunachal Pradesh. It is known as the Siang there, but in Assam, the river is known as the Brahmaputra. Until the 19th century, people did not realize they were all the same river! The Brahmaputra then flows west and merges with the waters of other mighty rivers including the Ganges in the delta area of Bangladesh before emptying into the Bay of Bengal.

It is interesting to note that the Tsangpo predates the rise of the Himalayas. Over the past 50 million years as the Himalayas gradually gained height, the Tsangpo continued its course, cutting through the mountains to create one of the deepest canyons on earth.

In a way, the Tsangpo is similar to the New River that runs from Virginia westward into the Ohio River. Ironically, the New River is actually one of the oldest rivers on earth. It was flowing west to the Mississippi more than 700 million years ago when continental plates slammed together to form Pangaea. That caused the Appalachians, and over millions of years as those mountains reached altitudes comparable to the Himalayas, the New River kept flowing west and must have created an impressive gorge. When the plates started to pull apart again, about 250 million years ago, the Appalachians stopped growing and over time, those peaks have eroded into the rolling mountains we know today. The New River Gorge in West Virginia remains a testament to the awesome power of water.

The Tsangpo Gorge in Tibet is legendary. With an average depth of 7000 ft and length of 150 miles, it exceeds the size of the Grand Canyon. At its deepest part, the gorge is 19,700 ft deep where the river passes between two enormous Himalayan peaks only 13 miles apart, Namcha Barwa (25,531 ft) and Gyalha Peri (23,930 ft). It is hard to visualize that area since 13 miles is comparable to the distance, as the crow flies, from Potomac, MD, to Alexandria, VA. Imagine two enormous peaks higher than North America's Mount McKinley (20,332 ft) so close together with a rushing river carving a channel in between them!

Not only is the canyon nearly impossible to inspect on foot or by raft, it has been difficult to even observe by satellite because of the perpetual shadows cast by those high mountains. In places, the canyon walls are only 75 yards apart with cliffs 4000 ft high! The volume of water passing through the Tsangpo Gorge is greater than the Colorado in the Grand Canyon. During catastrophic floods which happen frequently in the spring, it is orders of magnitude greater.



R. cinnabarinum

Parts of Arunachal Pradesh are so incredibly remote they had never been accessed by plant explorers and certainly not properly botanized. In 1924-25, noted plant explorer Frank Kingdon-Ward did reach that gorge but he was not able to enter due to the narrow access, steep cliffs, rushing waters, impenetrable thickets, leaches, tigers, bad weather and many other ills. This remote area was apparently the inspiration for Shangri-La in Hilton's 1933 novel, Lost Horizons.



R. arboreum ssp. cinnamomeum

There are many rhododendrons species native to India and the Himalayas. *R. arboreum* and its many subspecies are likely the most common. In Sri Lanka, the form *R. arboreum ssp. zeylanicum* is predominant. It has deep red flowers. In the Himalayan foothills, *R. arboreum ssp. arboreum* can become a tree as high as 100 ft tall. *R. arboreum ssp. delavayi*, grows to 30 ft, and is more shrub-like. Both have red blossoms. There is also *R. arboreum ssp. cinnamomeum* which has red, pink or white flowers. The lighter colors are said to prevail at higher altitudes.

In that same region from Bhutan through Arunachal Pradesh are many large leaf species that become trees like *R. sinogrande*, *grande*, *falconeri*, and *kesangiae*. Leaves of *sinogrande* can reach up to 3 ft long!

There are also lepidotes such as *R. cinnabarinum* which are widespread in the entire region. This species is quite variable with many subspecies, all having bell-shaped flowers ranging from yellow to orange to red. At lower elevations, a number of fragrant tropical species are found in Arunachal Pradesh, such as *R. edgworthii* and *lindleyi*.

Since it is not likely that I will ever tour these regions myself, I will have to live vicariously through other plant explorers like Ken Cox and Ron Rabideau. Be sure you come to the fall banquet so you can hear about Ron's exciting Himalayan adventure!



R. degronianum ssp. *heptamerum* (*R. metternichii*)

Thoughts on Rhododendron Species

By Don Hyatt

The late Hank Schannen of RareFind Nursery often used the phrase “the species look” when talking about rhododendrons. Although hybridizers have been able to create new and colorful flowers in their hybrids, the reality is that many of the species have much more attractive foliage. Since flowers only last a couple of weeks at best, it is desirable to have rhododendrons in our gardens that have stunning foliage that we can admire the other 50 weeks of the year.

I do have a number of rhododendron species in my garden, and they are my best foliage plants. I have tried a lot of species over the years but many forms will not take our heat and humidity. For the benefit of our newer members, I will discuss some that do well.

Most of the Asian species I grow are from either Japan or Taiwan which must have a climate similar to the DC area. My two favorites are “*R. metternichii*” (I still use its former name) which has glossy deep green leaves, and *R. makinoi* which has very narrow leaves. Both species have lovely pale pink blossoms. Since both species have a fuzzy coating on the foliage called indumentum, as the new growth emerges, the color is white which gives a second impressive display.



Japanese species *R. makinoi*

A Japanese species that most of us are growing is *R. yakushimanum* (*degronianum* ssp. *yakushimanum*). It has many forms including ‘Ken Janeck’ and ‘Mist Maiden’ which are taller. There are compact and dwarf forms, too, but some can be more difficult to grow.

R. hyperythrum is a very tough plant. It has white flowers and is becoming a popular parent for developing heat and disease resistant hybrids. The new Southgate Series of rhododendrons from Southern Living are hybrids of *R. hyperythrum*. The species is native to the island of Taiwan which is much farther south than Japan, so it seems to be very heat tolerant. The root system is exceptionally strong, and George McLellan reports that it came through unscathed when his garden in Gloucester, VA, was inundated with a three-foot saltwater storm surge during Hurricane Isabel in 2003. Most other rhododendrons were killed.



Taiwanese species *R. hyperythrum*

I do have some species from China that perform very well. *R. adenopodum* looks very similar to *metternichi* but with light lavender pink flowers. *R. anhweiense* has smaller, recurved leaves and ball-shaped trusses of light pink. *R. fortunei* has large flat leaves that only stay one year, but those big fragrant trusses of lavender pink to white are lovely. Its matt green foliage looks like many common hybrids, especially the Dexters, but that may be due to the fact that the species was used frequently in breeding.

Sadly, many of those spectacular species from China and Tibet are not easy for us to grow. I am reminded by a quote from Joe Gable who was lamenting the problems he faced in Stewartstown, PA. He said bluntly, “How I wish I could grow it long enough to see it bloom.” The problem is that our summers are too hot and our winters too variable with warm spells followed by freezes. That will easily kill plants that are unable to adapt to such extremes. I will never admit to how many I have killed over the years!

Whenever I travel to the West Coast, I enjoy seeing gardens where people are able to grow those more difficult species. While attending the ARS Convention in Seattle this year, I visited the Rhododendron Species Foundation which I usually try to see, but I was also able to visit the lovely garden of June Sinclair.

The RSF is always a treat, and after Steve Hootman's many trips to the wild to collect plants, they have now amassed the largest collection of rhododendron species anywhere in the world. June's species garden is filled with mature specimens, and you feel as though you are actually in the Himalayas.



Huge Rhododendrons in June Sinclair's Garden

The magnificent blue-flowered *R. augustinii* from China and Tibet was at peak in both gardens. I have always coveted that plant and although we may not be able to grow it in our area for long, some of us are trying to develop hardier hybrids in that color range.

One of the coveted species on the West Coast is a compact and very dwarf elepidote called *R. proteoides*. It grows at 12,000 to 14,000 ft in China and southeast Tibet, and has been used quite a bit in hybridizing to create low growing plants with compact habit. It takes a long time to bloom and being from an alpine area, it prefers cool temperatures so it won't live for us. Its leaves are a little over an inch long, a stark contrast to *R. sinogrande* that grows in the same general region.



Dwarf Elepidote Species: *R. proteoides*

A large-leaf species that more of us should try to grow is *R. calophytum*. This species is from Szechuan and north Yunnan in China, and seems to be fairly heat



June Sinclair inspecting *R. calophytum*

and cold tolerant. It takes many years to bloom but even so, the foliage is quite dramatic. I actually have a cutting that was rooted from Wil Smith's plant which has been hardy in Pennsylvania. Mine has already been through some difficult summers and is still alive!

I have admired the narrow leaf rhododendrons like *R. makinoi*, but there is one from China and southeast Tibet with even narrower leaves, *R. roxieanum* var. *oreonastes*. The foliage is pencil-like and the blossoms are white, but it is a shy bloomer. I kept one alive in a pot for nearly 10 years but it never flowered. I received one as a dinner favor in Seattle this year and it is still alive. I never give up on a plant until I have killed it at least three times so this will be my second try. I have only killed *sinogrande* once. There's hope!



R. roxieanum* var. *oreonastes

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