

# THE RHODODENDRON NEWSLETTER

## JANUARY 2011

Published by the  
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### **PROGRAMME**

General Meetings are held at the Municipal Horticultural Centre, Jolimont Rd, Vermont. Mel 62 G4 unless otherwise stated.

**A HAPPY AND HEALTHY NEW YEAR  
TO ALL OUR MEMBERS & THEIR FAMILIES.**

### **THE 2011 PROGRAMME : NEW FORMAT**

**FOUR** GENERAL MEETINGS AT NUNAWADING: 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday of the month;

- MARCH 18<sup>TH</sup> 8.00pm The Rothschild Garden at Exbury
- JUNE 17<sup>TH</sup> 8.00pm Neil Puddey
- SEPTEMBER 16<sup>Th</sup> 8.00pm
- NOVEMBER 18<sup>TH</sup> 8.00pm AGM. Andrew Rousen

**FOUR** OPEN WORKSHOPS AT THE NATIONAL RHODODENDRON GARDENS; 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday. By holding these on a Sunday afternoon members who are unable to come at night will be able to participate and we are hoping to interest members of the public in growing rhododendrons and joining the Society.

- FEBRUARY 20<sup>th</sup> – 2.00pm Propagation with Laurie Begg
- MAY 15<sup>th</sup> - 2.00pm Liliams with Mike and Inge Hammer
- OCTOBER 9<sup>TH</sup> – 2.00pm Different groups of rhododendrons.
- OCTOBER 30<sup>TH</sup> – 2.00pm during the Rhododendron Show. Growing rhododendrons in Melbourne.

### **JANUARY 2011**

**SATURDAY & SUNDAY 15<sup>TH</sup> & 16<sup>TH</sup> - LILIUM AND VIREYA SHOW** AT FERNY CREEK HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY 100 Hilton Rd Ferny Creek. Included in the schedule are hydrangeas, roses and other species. Schedules are available from Mike and Inge Hammer Ph: 9755 2176 or FCHS.

**WEDNESDAY 26<sup>TH</sup> AUSTRALIA DAY BBQ at NRG, 6.00PM. BYO everything.** Those who would like to take a walk around the NRG meet near the lunchroom at 5.00pm.

## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

The weather up here in the hills has continued to be cold and wet. We have had 182 mm of rain for December bringing the yearly total to 1530mm. Dry parched ground has been replaced with pools and trenches of mud. But no complaints, it is a wonderful change from the last 10 years. The cold weather has delayed flowering, we still have some rhododendrons in flower as 2010 ends and most of our lilies are yet to start. On the other hand the higher rainfall has prompted very vigorous growth with our garden seemingly overnight turning into jungle. Just as well we have some good loppers and secateurs. Lets hope it is the start of more benign gardening weather for 2011 and onwards and a return to better growing conditions for rhododendrons.

Attendances at the NRG have continued to be far above previous years and there is now some suggestion that the annual attendance figure could get to be as high as 70,000. Our campaign to have the NRG declared Melbourne's cool climate botanical garden has had the effect of better publicising the gardens and has gained some support, particularly from the liberal side of politics. Now that we have a liberal state government, we hope to continue our lobbying once the government has got itself settled into office.

Unfortunately the hall we built at the gardens has now been leased out by Parks to an independent organisation which has turned it into a function centre. In theory we still have access for shows but as we have already found out, in practice our access is severely curtailed although not completely excluded. We had no say in the matter but I wonder if the apparently small rental Parks receives warrants the effective loss of infrastructure that has ensued. Regrettably for us it represents a further degree of isolation from the gardens we created.

Of more immediate concern however is the current state of our society. In the last few presidents reports I have commented at some length on members' lack of involvement with ARS functions and the lack of willingness to serve on the committee. Given this publicity, the committee had some hope that maybe at the last AGM a few more people would step forward. Unfortunately the reverse happened. One committee member did not re-stand, there were no new nominations and then in late December our long standing treasurer Neil Webster indicated that he was moving to the country and thus would need to resign both from the treasurer's position and the committee effective as of the end of January. This means that, from the first of February, we will be in breach of the statutory requirements that we keep proper financial records unless someone is prepared to undertake the task. Without a solution to this problem we cannot continue to operate and as yet we have no solution. We also do not have a vice president and many of the committee positions are unfilled. There is also no replacement for our current Newsletter editor and while Simon has very graciously agreed to continue for one more year, come November that will be yet another unfilled position.

We get a reasonable number of new members each year but rarely, if ever, do we see these new members coming to our functions. We have nearly 200 paid up members yet are lucky to get 10 to a meeting. This is not enough to warrant organising speakers.

We have asked repeatedly whether we should change the format or time of meetings, organise different sorts of meetings or functions or just what are we doing wrong. The reply has been silence. Speaking for myself I am very rapidly reaching the point where I would

rather be doing other things than working for a society no one seems to want any more. I know that at least some of the other committee members think along similar lines.

We have discussed this issue at committee several times and have now agreed on the following actions. We will reduce the number of newsletters from 6 to 4 both as a reflection of the lack of activity and to reduce workload. We will reduce the number of Friday evening meetings at Nunawading from 10 to 4 in the hope that more people will make the effort to come to less frequent meetings. We will hold 4 public lectures at the NRG over the coming year both to foster interest in rhododendrons and in the hope of stimulating some interest and new active membership.

Even assuming we can find a solution to our immediate problem of no treasurer, if there is no positive outcome from these actions by November the society will be forced to close due to a lack of a constitutional committee and office bearers. In that case the November 2011 meeting is likely to become a final public meeting of all members to decide on the disbursement of the accumulated funds of the society. Our constitution requires that such funds be distributed to similar societies (eg: Emu valley or Ferny Creek), they cannot be distributed to the membership.

There is no doubt the time has come for all members to ask themselves whether or not they want the ARS to continue. We achieved a great deal over our 50 year history, are we still relevant? If you want the society to continue what are you willing to do to ensure this? Apathy is no longer an option. It will not be a case of leaving it to someone else to step up or the current committee continuing on for yet another year. The future of this society is in a very real and immediate sense in your hands.

On a more positive note, on the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of January Ferny Creek Horticultural Society is holding the 3<sup>rd</sup> Liliium and Vireya show. This was the show we initiated in conjunction with Ferny Creek after we abandoned our Vireya shows at Mt Waverley. Ferny Creek have made the show an annual event with some support from ARS committee members. Please consider coming along – the theme this year is Japan, we have a wedding Kimono and some other kimonos on display, some photographic posters, a demonstration if Ikebana and a traditional tea ceremony on the Sunday. Plus of course great flower displays.

Also we have our annual Australia day Barbeque on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January at the NRG. Please consider coming along.

**Mike Hammer**

### **THE SPECIES COLUMN.**

*anwheiense* -Subsection Maculifera.

This species is not well-known here but must be regarded as one of the finest in the Rhododendron genus. The Maculifera series contains a number of superb species, including *morii*, *pachysanthum*, *pachytrichum*, and *pseudochrysanthum*.

This is a compact, free-flowering, and generally hardy plant which should be suitable for most locations in the hills. We have eight plants at Olinda but most are too small to flower at present. We have recently planted another four in the main rockery.

**Name:**

Named after the Anwhei province in Eastern China.

**Distribution:**

This species comes from a fairly wide area (Jiangxi, Anhui, Zhejiang,) in central and Eastern China at altitudes of 1200 to 1800 metres. It seems adaptable to most situations, growing in open, rocky, or shady sites.

**Characteristics:**

This is a compact shrub of 1.5 to 2.4 metres. The foliage is mid-green, up to 10 cm. long, fairly thick, with no indumentum below. The flowers appear in trusses of 6 to 10 and are white, flushed pink, and heavily spotted on the upper lobe. It grows well in the Maddenia walk but I think it should do well in open positions.

**Hybrids.**

Only two hybrids listed and probably not available here:  
Enborne – (*anwheiense* x *aberconwayi*)  
Blewbury – (*anwheiense* x *roxianum*)

**Where to See These Plants:**

Our largest plant is over 30 years old and put on a magnificent display last year in early November. This is located in the centre of the Maddenia walk close to the road and is probably the “Award of Merit” form from Windsor Great Park. There are another 6 plants around the same area which should flower in the next few years.

**Alan Kepert.**

## VIREYA SPECIES COLUMN

*R agathodaemonis* [photo page 8]

This species belongs to a very small Section, Section III *Siphonovireya* [according to the classification of Argent *rhododendrons of subgenus vireya* Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh 2006 (“Argent”)]. There are only 9 members of the Section all from New Guinea [save one *R gideonii*] found on nearby New Ireland. Argent says the Section is doubtfully homogeneous, but easily recognised if in flower. Three of the 9 members, *R herzogii*, *R inundatum* and *R searleanum* are better known in cultivation, but though all are in Australia [and I have them all] only *R herzogii* is widely held here. My plants were grown from seed by Andrew Rouse, sourced from Frederic Danet. Frederic is an active collector who is curator of the Lyon, France, Botanic Garden. The species is found from 2500-3450m.

**Name**

The species is named after the mountain from which it was first collected which, in turn, was named for the Greek God Agathodaimon, the good genius, to whom a cup of pure wine was drunk at the end of dinner.

**Description** [largely taken from Argent]

Shrub or small compact tree to 6m. Twigs rounded, tips laxly to densely reddish brown, scaly. **Leaves** 4-5 together in pseudowhorls, spaced 7-20 cm apart. Blade 40-75 x 25-49 mm, elliptic to obvate elliptic; apex broadly acuminate to obtuse, sometimes apiculate or a little

retuse; margin entire; base broadly tapering to the petiole or rounded obtuse, sparsely to sub densely scaly on both sides especially underneath. **Petiole** 9-22 x 1.5-2 mm, grooved above, somewhat flattened and sparsely scaly. **Inflorescence** an open umbel of 6-12 flowers. Flowers trumpet shaped but broadest just above the middle, white or with the tube tinged with pink, with the scent of carnations. **Corolla** 80-100 x 15-29 mm tube 70-85 x 3 x 4-6.5, cylindrical, curved sparsely scaly outside, lobes 10-15 x 0.8 mm .

### **Verdict**

Back in 2006, when *Argent* was published this species was not known in cultivation. Then the differences between this species and *R herzogii* were not clearly established. That still seems to be the case so.

I await the first flowering of my plants with great interest. Thus far the small plants are growing well.

**Simon Begg**

## **NOVEMBER MEETING**

B and T Ferns and Orchids of Silvan was represented by Mark who gave a fascinating talk about the history of orchid collecting. He introduced the subject by stating how we are all 'hunters and collectors' of various things from bottles and dolls to screws and plants. Joseph Banks, being one of the latter, took qualified botanists with him to find plants that could be used for commercial purposes. Seeds and plants were returned to England and enormous interest came from commercial and private collectors who gained distinct status by growing the new arrivals. Plants from the tropics were put into heated glasshouses as it was assumed they needed heat but many died.

Orchids excited many of the upper classes and rival collectors stripped orchids from Central America. Some they even destroyed so that other collectors could not collect them. Collection areas were set up and plants were sent back to the employers where the landed gentry bought them and attempted to grow them. One particular orchid collector was Cattley who successfully grew *Cattleya labiata* from some plants that were used as packing material in a shipment of orchids. Everyone wanted to hybridise and propagate orchids. Propagation from seed was nearly impossible because seeds are like talcum powder and need mycorrhizal fungi to aid the symbiotic association between fine roots and the soil. Plants can carry a seed pod for up to two years and may not release the seeds until the environment is conducive to germination.

Following WW1 a middle class emerged as the lower classes stopped working for the gentry and this resulted in large glasshouses and extensive estate gardens coming into disrepair through lack of staff. After WW2 people had more disposable income and nurseries started propagating in bulk allowing the middle class to buy and collect plants.

From seed to a saleable plant can be three and a half years and they need humidity, good light and a minimum overnight temperature of 13C. They will flower following stress eg keep in a cooler place.

**Marcia Begg**

## **JOTTINGS**

YOU KNOW WHEN YOU ARE LIVING IN 2011 WHEN –

You accidentally enter your password on the microwave.

You haven't played solitaire with real cards for years.

You have a list of 15 phone numbers to reach a family of three.

You email the person who works next to you

Your reason for not staying in touch with family and friends is that you do not have their email address.

You pull up in the driveway and use your mobile phone to see if anyone is home to help carry the groceries inside.

Every commercial on TV has a website at the bottom of the screen

You're reading this and nodding and laughing.

REASONS WHY THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS SO HARD TO LEARN!

The bandage was wound around the wound.

The farm was used to produce produce.

The dump was so full it had to refuse more refuse.

We must polish the Polish furniture.

Since there was no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present.

When shot at, the dove dove into the bushes.

I did not object to the object.

The insurance was invalid for the invalid.

They were too close to the door to close it.

After a number of injections my jaw got number.

There is no ham in a hamburger or egg in an eggplant, neither apple or pine in a pineapple,

English muffins weren't invented in England or French fries in France. Sweetmeats are candies while sweetbreads, which aren't sweet, are meat.

## **CHRISTMAS LUNCH**

A smaller group of members and friends than usual gathered in the lunch room at the NRG for a delicious lunch supplied by 'Hungry Hampers' from Geelong. The weather was threatening rain but fortunately held off. During lunch Mike Hammer challenged everyone present to come up with some new initiatives to revitalize the Society.

Suggestions included

- Meetings at the NRG on the weekend
- Workshops open to the public at the NRG
- Fewer meetings at Nunawading

- Attending public garden shows to encourage new members
- Members on hand at the NRG during the peak flowering season to answer questions.
- Propagation of rarer species to sell.
- Plant sale days

As a result some of these suggestions will be included this year with a mix of evening meetings at Nunawading and weekend workshops open to the public at the NRG.

**Marcia Begg**

## **VOLUNTEER GROUP**

With the holiday season intervening not a lot has been achieved by the shrinking volunteer group. The latest blow was to hear that Jack Morris had had a stroke exactly a year after Bill. Jack is in the Austin Repat and working hard to regain his fitness. His speech is good and the physios are working him hard to get him walking again. We hope to see him up and active soon. Best wishes Jack.

The last eighteen months has taken a huge toll on the group starting with Alan Walker who lost the use of his right hand after a rose thorn infection and is fortunately now driving and working as hard as before. The Olinda Primary School sends its pupils to the NRG for propagation lessons with Alan. He is great with the kids.

Bill Taylor had a major stroke in December 2009 and the 'boys' have been busy this year moving and planting hundreds of plants from his nursery into special areas at the NRG. Recently fresh mulch has been added to protect them from the summer heat and to retain moisture and they are looking good.

Elizabeth Xipell is another who had a tough year but has fortunately recovered very well after a brain tumor and is back on track helping Alan Kepert record plants with the GPS for the database.

Laurie Begg, Tom Noonan and Michael Hare are out there doing the mulching and planting while Prue Crome is rejuvenating all the rockeries and our newest volunteer Alex Pottage is slaving away weeding and potting up in the nursery.

John and Carole Quinn are moving to northern Tasmania in January, another loss to the Vic branch but we wish them well in their new garden.

They are all doing an excellent job with occasional help from the Parks Vic rangers/gardeners especially Wally Lobbezoo who is also an ARSV member. Without this group the NRG would certainly be worse off.

New participants are very welcome and gain a lot of experience, expertise and information from the combined talent of these members. As you can see there is a huge range of garden activities and each person works in their area of choice from a couple of hours to all day. The group would love some more members and anyone interested can ring Michael Hare (ARSV Secretary) on 0418 340 240 or turn up any Tuesday for a cuppa at 10.00am or 12.00pm and meet the group. No qualifications necessary, you can learn on the job and/or bring your own areas of expertise to share with the group.

**Marcia Begg**



*Rhododendron anwhiense*  
Photo by Alan Kepert



*Rhododendron agathodaemonis*  
Frederic Danet's Photo from Chris  
Callard's website



**Mary Wooldridge (2<sup>nd</sup> from left) and Matt Mills (4<sup>th</sup> from left) visit the NRG to deliver pre-election promises.**



**R "Choir of Angels" "Beechmont" Xmas 2010**

## **LASTING CARE FOR RHODODENDRONS**

By DAVID MILLAIS, Millais Nurseries, UK

SO YOU CHOSE your 'perfect' rhododendron, planted it with love and attention, and enjoyed it every year while it flowered and brightened up the garden every spring ... Fast forward ten to fifteen years, and in your annual review of the garden you spot a messy looking plant, with dull pale green leaves, covered in bud blast, looking old and bony with hardly any vigour and a sparse habit, mingling with other plants in the border. Oh dear, what has gone wrong?

But this may not even be your own well tended garden. Unfortunately there are all too many old parks and gardens open to the public where the plants need massive attention and a good sort out. Rhododendrons planted with care and enthusiasm are now languishing in overgrown collections where the original owners may have moved on, or where knowledgeable Head Gardeners have been replaced by contractors. Even in gardens benefiting from National Lottery funding, it seems that the structure of the garden is more important than the original plants. I have seen mature rhododendrons, already stressed after years of growing under dense trees which nobody would thin, butchered in height and consigned to a slow painful death by moving them under a dry, dense canopy of huge chestnuts. The original area was then cleared for a pseudo-authentic Union Jack garden!

With correct planting and maintenance, even some of the fussier dwarf rhododendrons should be good for more than 50 years, while hardy hybrids should perform for more than a century. However, as a little plant, fresh from the nursery, grows into a big plant, so its requirements change over the years, and it will need more and more nutrients and water. Likewise, over the course of time so the growing conditions surrounding the plant will change. Soon a larger plant can find itself exploring shadier places, boxed in by other plants. Alternatively, it can stick its head over the fence and find the full force of a cold easterly wind. And that is before allowing for unsuitable positions, blocked drains, dry summers and climate change!

### **SOIL FERTILITY**

Everyone knows the basics for rhododendrons: well drained, moist acid soil (pH 5.0–6.0) with good humus content. Beyond that it gets a bit more interesting. John Ravenscroft, who has recently sold Bridgemere Nurseries in Cheshire, only ever grew one crop of rhododendrons on the same piece of land because they never performed so well after replanting in the same spot. Having thought about that, I tend to agree that the best crops we have had over the last 20 years have been when we have planted in a fresh field. I do not know if this is rhododendron allelopathy or a replant disease, but it does suggest that plenty of new compost should be used if replanting rhododendrons in the garden.

Whilst beneficial mycorrhizal fungi can be of great help in establishing conifers and trees, those currently available serve no use with rhododendrons. However, there are increasing numbers of products to help improve soil fertility using beneficial bacterial and fungal products such as humic compost, worm cast compost and tonics such as Revive with which we have had good results. We also use compost tea, but that needs fresh brewing and using within 24 hours.

### **PLANTING DEPTH**

This may seem elementary, but rhododendrons are surface rooting. They have a wide but shallow rootball which rarely goes down deeper than the depth of a spade. That fine, fibrous

rootball needs all the aeration it can get. It hates being buried, and does not like a weight of compost or soil on top. At an arboretum that ought to know better, I have seen huge 'tree-pits' dug for rhododendrons with a mini-excavator, and had to tactfully tell the gardeners that they would have been better digging a wide shallow hole rather than the graveyard they will end up with. A plant in a deep hole will settle even lower, and end up too wet and buried with leaf litter. For examples of successful planting, take a look at the Bruns Rhododendron Park in Northern Germany, or the accompanying picture of a wet hillside garden in Perthshire to see rhododendrons almost placed on the surface with compost mounded around. At the RHS Wisley Gardens, Colin Crosbie, Curator of RHS garden Wisley, has spent many winters on Battleston Hill gently lifting up sick plants and replanting at a higher level where they had been planted too deeply after the storms of 1987 and 1990. The results have been outstanding and have contributed to the huge improvements in the collection over the last few years.

Following on from this logic, care must be taken not to mulch too deeply on top of the rootball; several years' worth of mulching with 50mm compost or bark chippings can soon bury a plant. Evidence of this can be seen when branches emerge from the soil in places other than from a single stem. Occasionally I have seen weed control fabrics underneath a mulch surrounding rhododendrons, and the results have always been very disappointing. I believe they contribute to poor aeration, upset moisture distribution with wet and dry spots, and they prevent new rhododendron roots from developing right where they need to: into the surface mulch and leaf litter.

## **SPACING**

Perhaps as a Nurseryman, I should not complain, but overplanting is so easily done. It is hard to imagine that 3 year-old hardy hybrid occupying a space 2m x 2m in 10 years time. Nobody wants to see great patches of bare soil with space for weeds to develop in a new border, but a lot of planting is too close, and although it really needs thinning and moving after 5–6 years, few people do that. A common moan amongst rhododendron enthusiasts is that they don't have room for any more treasures, but go to High Beeches Garden in Sussex to see plants on a good spacing, where they have room to develop and show their true characteristics. Other benefits include much better air flow around the plants, and far less risk of Powdery Mildew and other fungal diseases.

When planting a hardy hybrid near a wall or fence, remember to plant it at least a metre away to allow it to form a well balanced plant, or else it will fall forwards and collapse in later years. If planting near a hedge, then it should be at least 2–3 metres away to allow for the hedge to grow and be trimmed. Unfortunately rhododendrons don't put up a good fight against *Leylandii* and other tall conifers!

## **LIGHT OR SHADE**

There is a widespread myth that rhododendrons prefer shade conditions but visit any modern Rhododendron Nursery and you will, hopefully, find healthy plants with deep green foliage growing in almost full sun. A sunny position will encourage strong well branched growth with a compact habit. The great storms of 1987 and 1990 felled millions of trees, but for those rhododendrons which had suffered under heavy shade, it was a blessing to see the skies, and their habit really improved over the next few years. Shade promotes soft whippy growth, prone to mildew and other diseases, and flowering is often poor. The main benefit of shade is to lengthen the flowering period and preserve the blooms, and overall I would suggest the best balance is about 15% shade, enough to take the glare off the flowers, but

maintain a strong plant. The exceptions would be the June and July flowering plants when the sun is that much stronger, and a few varieties we have found whose leaves scorch in sun such as *R.* 'Snow Queen' and *R.* 'Seven Stars'.

We have all been to overgrown gardens and poorly maintained parks where rhododendrons are struggling in deep shade, with long spaghetti like branches reaching skywards to find the light. Not a bloom in sight at eye level, and sometimes the only hint of flowering is the spent petals on the floor which have cascaded down from the very tops of the poor old plant. So call in the tree surgeons, fell a few trees, lift a few crowns and let your plants see the light before it is too late!

### **ANNUAL MAINTENANCE**

Rhododendrons are light feeders and do not need much fertilizer. Once the plants are established, a good mulch every few years will be of more use than additional fertilizer. I only recommend fertilizer for the first year or so after planting, or if the plant is looking poorly. The easiest to apply is a 12 month slow release product formulated for rhododendrons with plenty of phosphate and potash. Shake it on, and scuff it in during March, and it will last all year.

Deadheading can be a tedious task if you have a garden the size of Exbury (where teams spend weeks deadheading every year) but it can also be therapeutic after a day at work, especially if you have a chilled glass of your favourite tippie nearby. Deadheading prevents a lot of energy being wasted on seed production, and helps to maintain a nice bushy shape. You can often see 3–4 new shoots growing out where the flowers have been deadheaded, but only one shoot where the seeds have been left to grow. Each of those new shoots contributes to a bushy appearance, and can support more flowers next year. If deadheading is too big a task for you (or you have finished your drink!) it is well worth concentrating on young plants or those which are sparse or a little sick.

As the season progresses, don't forget the watering. Many rhododendrons originate from monsoon areas with heavy rains in June. Research has proven that June–July is the time that flower buds are initiated for the following year, so if the plant is dry you don't get the flowers. After this, the plants can take less water, but look out for the warning sign of droopy leaves, which indicate that the plant is too dry. Rain water is best, but tap water is better than no water. A good soak once per week will make the roots search for water, and is better than frequent light sprinkling.

### **PRUNING**

To obtain a well branched plant, a nurseryman will pinch new single shoots back to a leaf whorl in May or June, which will encourage 3–5 new shoots to grow, and therefore make a bushier plant with the potential for more flower buds the following year. Whilst generally it is not necessary, this is something that any gardener can do with their larger plants too, particularly with wayward shoots which are getting spindly. If you prune in June, you can enjoy the flowers, and there is still plenty of vigour in the plant to grow new shoots and hopefully set some flower buds for the following season. By pruning in June over several seasons, and ensuring it was well fed with fertilizer and water, I have transformed a 2 metre leggy plant, which was really only fit for the bonfire, into a decent bush.

### **REGENERATION**

Eventually in the lifespan of a rhododendron, it is possible that it loses condition due to excessive shade or drought, or that it has simply grown too big for the place it was planted



in. The question of what to do with these huge plants is one I am frequently asked now that those planted in the boom years of the 1920s and 1930s are reaching an age when they can be a problem. Plants which were originally planted metres away from the path are now ready to drench you as you brush against them in the rain, or even prevent the home delivery van from ever reaching your house. All too frequently the easy option is to grab the hedgecutter and simply cut back the offending

branches. However, within a few years the 'face' of the bush is vertical, and within a few more years the top has grown over and can form a tunnel. By now the sides are sparse and have few leaves or flowers, and to my mind the plant serves little purpose, but unfortunately it is a sight seen all too frequently in many older collections throughout the country. Really it is time for major regeneration, but this can certainly change the character of the garden at least for a few years.

I have a rule of thumb that if you can prune a shoot with a pair of secateurs or loppers, then pruning **straight after** flowering is the best time, but if the branches are thicker, and you need to use a saw, then late winter is best because the plant is full of energy with rising sap in spring, and this will force more dormant buds to break out from the stem. The other rule of thumb is that rough barked rhododendrons will normally respond to heavy pruning, but that smooth or peeling barked plants are more likely to die. You have been warned!

Unfortunately, there is usually no half way point when sawing back into old plants. If you cut back more than 50cm, then you will have lost all the foliage, and regeneration from those spindly old branches will be sparse and will certainly not produce the desired bushy habit that you are looking to recreate. Far better is to cut hard back, taking out all the thin twiggy leafless branches which may have spread many metres from the original planting place.

There are various schools of thought about the best practice for heavy pruning. I used to think that pruning a large overgrown plant to 1.50m stumps was appropriate, but that can still leave a leggy base. Although I have seen the National Trust at Sheffield Park prune old hardy hybrids down to 30cm stumps with reasonable new shoot growth in spring, I do believe it is useful if possible to retain the odd small leafy shoot to help draw the sap up the old stems. Some people recommend hard pruning one side of the plant one year, and the remainder the next, but in some ways this prolongs the 'battle scarred' look for a further year. I now recommend pruning old hardy hybrids to about 1m above ground level, and old dwarf rhododendrons to about 30cm, so that subsequent growth looks good and well balanced after only one year. This process is equally applicable to both deciduous and evergreen azaleas, but is not recommended for any weaker growing plants such as some of the species. Likewise, I would avoid varieties where the leaves are retained for only a year or two, and those with a more tree like open habit whose gnarled old mossy trunks can have a character and charm all of their own. If plants are already showing signs of stress with little new growth, then heavy pruning can easily be the death of them. Try to improve their vigour

first with fertilizer and mulch, or simply rogue them out and replace with some nice new varieties.

On a practical note, by far the easiest method is to hire a reputable tree surgeon to cut the branches and feed them into a large wood chipper which will devour monster plants in no time. So long as any potentially diseased material is removed and burnt first, then the wood chips can be directed onto the ground around the plants and spread as a good mulch up to 40mm deep. Do not spread these un-composted chips too deep or they will lock up the available nitrogen, and new leaves will be too yellow.

During the first year, it is important to make sure there is as much vigour in the stumps as



possible to force long dormant buds into growth. Feed well with slow release fertilizer, apply a good mulch, and water during any dry spells. The emerging shoots can be vulnerable to damage from frost and animals, and growth can be soft and prone to attack by insect and mildew. The other concern is with grafted plants, so watch out for different types of foliage emerging from any rootstock suckers and pull these off as soon as possible. If the growth is really vigorous, it would be best to trim any long spindly shoots back to avoid wind damage and encourage a bushier habit. It is highly unlikely that flower buds will be set during the first year, but by the second year the new growth should have hidden most of the old stumps, and it is likely that they will set flower buds.

When one of my customers first moved into their house in 1980, there was a wide grass strip between the rhododendrons and the drive. By last year they had one of the most colourful drives in the area, but the plants were about 5 metres in height and spread. The grass strip had long gone, and the plants were creeping across the drive and about to scratch the Bentley, so I advised the owners to cut back as described above. They were out on the day the work was done, but when they arrived home they were so horrified by the devastation to their lovely bank of plants that after several stormy phone calls, I really feared litigation! Six months on, and they were delighted with the result and offered to eat humble pie. Of the 40 plants cut back that day, only two had *R. ponticum* rootstock suckers (which were growing there already), and only one failed to re-grow properly.

Major re-generation does have its place in so many gardens at present, but owners and visitors need to be prepared for the complete change in character within the garden. With this in mind, it is good to select one area at a time, which is kinder on the budget and the eye. It gives a chance to find and expose plants that have been swamped for years. Dark vertical maze-like paths will become colourful again and the tangle of weak wayward spreading

branches will be gone. You might even find the long lost space for a few new rhododendrons!

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*2010 and the author David Millais, owner of Millais Nurseries, Farnham, UK*

## **THE 2011 PROGRAMME : NEW FORMAT**

NB The Rhododendron Newsletter will be produced quarterly this year. Issues will be sent out by email or post in January, April, July & October. Contributions would be greatly appreciated. Committee meetings will be held at 5.00pm before General Meetings & as necessary.

**JANUARY** - Newsletter

**SATURDAY & SUNDAY 15<sup>TH</sup> & 16<sup>TH</sup>** - LILIUM AND VIREYA SHOW AT FERNY CREEK HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY 100 Hilton Rd Ferny Creek. Included in the schedule are hydrangeas, roses and other species. Schedules are available from Mike and Inge Hammer Email [ingedora@gmail.com](mailto:ingedora@gmail.com) Ph: 9755 2176 or FCHS.

**WEDNESDAY 26<sup>TH</sup> AUSTRALIA DAY BBQ at NRG, 6.00PM. BYO everything.** Those who would like to take a walk around the NRG meet near the lunchroom at 5.00pm.

**FEBRUARY**

**SUNDAY 20<sup>TH</sup> 2.00PM.** National Rhododendron Garden Propagation workshop with Laurie Begg. Everyone is welcome to bring cutting material of any species they wish to propagate.

**MARCH**

**FRIDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> 8.00PM** General Meeting at Nunawading. The Rothschild Rhododendrons at Exbury.

**SATURDAY AND SUNDAY 19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup>** Tesselaars Gardening and Rare Plants Expo, Monbulk Rd Silvan. The Rhododendron Society will have a plant stand. Volunteers needed please. Ring Marcia 9751 1610 if you can help for a couple of hours.

**APRIL** - Newsletter

**MAY**

**SUNDAY 15<sup>th</sup> - 2.00pm** National Rhododendron Garden Liliiums with Mike and Inge Hammer.

**JUNE**

**FRIDAY 17<sup>TH</sup> 8.00pm** General Meeting at Nunawading. Neil Puddey

**JULY** - Newsletter

**SEPTEMBER**

**FRIDAY 16<sup>Th</sup> 8.00pm** General Meeting at Nunawading. Speaker to be advised.

**OCTOBER** - Newsletter

**SUNDAY 9<sup>TH</sup> – 2.00pm** National Rhododendron Garden Different groups of rhododendrons.

**SATURDAY 29<sup>TH</sup>-TUESDAY 1<sup>ST</sup> NOVEMBER - RHODODENDRON SHOW.**

**SUNDAY 30<sup>TH</sup> – 2.00pm** National Rhododendron Garden during the Rhododendron Show. Growing rhododendrons in Melbourne.

## **NOVEMBER**

**FRIDAY 18<sup>TH</sup> 8.00pm** AGM and General Meeting at Nunawading. Speaker to be advised.

## **DECEMBER**

**SUNDAY 11<sup>TH</sup>** is a tentative date for the Society Christmas lunch.

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## **ARSV COMMITTEE 2010**

There are vacancies on the committee and new committee members with enthusiasm and new ideas are desperately needed.

**PRESIDENT:** Michael Hammer Ph: 9755 2176

**VICE PRESIDENT No 1:** Vacant

**VICE PRESIDENT No 2:** Vacant

**TREASURER:** Neil Webster, Ph: 9859 3622

**SECRETARY:** Michael Hare, 9844 2232

Simon Begg (Editor) & Marcia Begg, Ph: 9751 1610

Inge Hammer, Ph: 9755 2176

Valerie Marshall, Ph: 9803 4434

Cynthia Sladen, Ph: 9561 8874

Alan Walker, Ph: 9726 8836

Elizabeth Xipell, Ph: 9859 9934

## **SOCIETY PICASAWEB SITE**

Visit <http://picasaweb.google.com/ARSVic> for the latest pictures.

Arising from the conference there are many new pictures:

\* of the conference

\* of NRG

\* of each of the gardens and venues

\* of delegates

For the "Beechmont" Picasaweb site visit <http://picasaweb.google.com/simonwbegg>