



RHODODENDRON SPECIES BOTANICAL GARDEN

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SPECIES PROFILE

Rhododendron triflorum Hook.f 1849

Steve Hootman

The majority of the 30 or so rhododendrons introduced by Joseph Hooker from his 1848-1850 expedition to Sikkim have become well known and, at least in species collections, widely-grown. Showy and impressive species such as *RR. thomsonii*, *arboreum*, *niveum*, *maddenii*, *edgeworthii*, *falconeri*, *hodgsonii*, *griffithianum*, *campanulatum*, *barbatum* and *cinnabarinum* gained the widespread attention and admiration of western gardeners and botanists following this historic expedition into the eastern Himalayas. To this day, these plants make up the "backbone" of a species collection in most gardens and many are commonly used in hybridizing programs.

Not all of Hooker's introductions have gained this lasting popularity, however. For various reasons - whether the lack of a sufficient floral display, hardiness issues, or difficulty in cultivation, several of his introductions, including *Rhododendron triflorum*, remain relatively uncommon in gardens. The lack of interest in *R. triflorum* is probably related to the fact that it is quite variable over its extensive range and many of the more desirable forms, including those considered to have superior flowers such as var. *bauhiniiflorum*, are typically less hardy. Overall, the species is quite ornamental with its beautiful, glossy, smooth and exfoliating, pale to deep chocolate brown bark, aromatic shiny foliage, and late season, more or less yellow, though small, flowers.

Following its introduction by Hooker in 1850, this variable and often common species was widely collected by later plant hunters from throughout its extensive range. *R. triflorum* occurs at elevations ranging from 7,000 to 13,000 feet (2,100 to 4,000m) in the eastern Himalaya from eastern Nepal through Sikkim and Bhutan, including adjacent areas of northern India (West Bengal) and eastward into the mountains of southeastern

Tibet and the northern Myanmar/Tibet/Indian frontier. It was also collected by Frank Kingdon Ward in 1928 from an isolated population in northeastern India (Manipur & Nagaland) where it occurs from 8,000 to 9,500 feet (2,400 to 2,900m). Although quite similar to *R. triflorum*, this new collection was named *R. bauhiniiflorum* due to its distinct range and larger, flatter flowers. This species was reduced to varietal status within *R. triflorum* in 1980 by Dr. Cullen. Forms from the eastern end of the range (southeastern Tibet and adjacent Arunachal Pradesh) were originally described as var. *mahogani* (now lumped into var. *triflorum* and best referred to as *R. triflorum* var. *triflorum* Mahogani Group). These have non-peeling bark and often have a reddish coloring in the flowers, whether a suffusion, blotch an/or spots. These are now understood to be nothing more than color variations within populations. The flower color in Mahogani Group is quite variable and the plants tend to be hardier. Chinese botanists have recently located an amazingly disjunct population of this species which they have named *R. triflorum* ssp. *multiflorum*, distinguishing it on the basis of its very isolated range and in having four to five flowers per inflorescence (versus the typical two or three). They collected this subspecies in the Wuliang Shan of southwestern Yunnan Province, China.

R. triflorum is a lepidote or scale-bearing rhododendron and is the type species for Subsection *Triflora*. It is found in a wide variety of habitats; although, like most rhododendrons it is generally restricted to mountainous situations with cool, humid air and plenty of precipitation. I have been fortunate in having the opportunity to observe this interesting species on both ends of its wide range, noting firsthand the variation and distinguishing characteristics. I first saw this species in the wild in the spring of 1997 while on an expedition to Sikkim where I observed the plant as it was originally described by Hooker back in 1849. The populations of *R. triflorum* in this area are very typical of the eastern Himalayan type (var. *triflorum*), with glossy, dark brown peeling bark and shiny leaves which are bright glaucous-white beneath. It was too early in the season to enjoy any flowers but I was more than impressed with the overall character and beauty of the plants. I noted plants of this species in habitats ranging from shaded

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moss-covered cliffs growing with numerous other Ericaceae to dry, treeless, grassy slopes where it grew with *Rhododendron ciliatum*. Plants grown from seed collected on this trip have been flowering in the nursery for several years now. The flowers are rather small and a bit pale in color but this "lack" of floral display is made up for by the glossy foliage and stunning, smooth and peeling deep chestnut brown bark.

In 2003 I observed the rare, disjunct and rather localized *R. triflorum* var. *bauhiniiflorum* in its native habitat while exploring the mountains of Nagaland in the northeastern corner of India. On these isolated peaks, this species grew on steep rocky forested slopes with a very interesting selection of species including *RR. macabeanum*, *johnstoneanum* and *elliottii*. All three, like var. *bauhiniiflorum*, are endemic to the Naga Hills.

As in almost every other characteristic, this species varies greatly in size, ranging from fairly small and seemingly delicate to a large and vigorous thicket-forming shrub up to 20 feet in height. As I have mentioned previously, the bark is much shinier, smoother and more peeling in the typical western (Himalayan) form than that of the eastern populations. The leaves are typically aromatic, somewhat elliptic in shape and up to three inches (c. seven cm) in length. As with the bark, there are obvious differences in foliage characteristics between the western (very glaucous on the underside) and the eastern populations (green or only slightly glaucous beneath); the lower surface is always dotted with tiny brown scales spaced approximately their own diameter apart. The



flowers (late spring to early summer) are borne in a terminal inflorescence of two or three (sometimes four), thus the epithet "triflorum" meaning "three-flowered." The individual flowers are widely funnel-shaped and up to one and a half inches (four cm) across except in the northeastern India population (var. *bauhiniiflorum*) where they are much flatter in shape and one and a half to two inches (four to five cm) across. They range in color from pale yellow to bright yellow or greenish, usually with greenish spots and in the case of the southeastern Tibetan/Arunachal Pradesh populations (Mahogani Group) variously marked or blushed with red or reddish-brown. The calyx is quite small, the ovary is covered with scales and the style is typically smooth.

In cultivation, *R. triflorum*, like most members of Subsection *Triflora*, is vigorous and easy under normal rhododendron growing conditions. It prefers strong light but performs more than adequately in partly shaded conditions. As always, good drainage is essential. The hardiness varies somewhat as would be expected from a species with such a wide distribution. Most forms of this species should be hardy from +10°F. to 0°F. with the typical Himalayan as well as the northeastern Indian (var. *bauhiniiflorum*) forms generally less hardy than those from southeastern Tibet.

I am unaware of any awards this species may have received and the only hybrid I could locate was a cross with *R. xanthostephanum* called 'Butterball.'

ACCESSIONS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE RSF:

triflorum var. *triflorum*

1970/026 (Mahogani Group) Robbins. Flowers tinged red with gold-green spots.

1977/156 Berg. Creamy yellow flowers with gold-green flecks.

1977/423 Larson. Flowers yellow with gold-green spots.

1980/097 KW#6409:RBGE.

triflorum var. *bauhiniiflorum*

1973/026 Robbins:Brydon.

NOTE: We have numerous newer accessions of both taxa grown from seed collected in the wild. These are still under evaluation.

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Rhododendron Species Foundation: Records - 1964 to present.

President's Message

Joe Ronsley

For those of you not already aware of it, Steve Hootman was awarded the Gold Medal of the American Rhododendron Society at the Society's annual convention banquet in San Francisco the evening of April 14th, 2007. This is the highest award offered by the American Rhododendron Society. The citation accompanying the award reads, approximately:

To Steve Hootman—one of the foremost international plant hunters of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and one of the most intrepid; Co-Director of the Rhododendron Species Foundation and Botanical Garden where he maintains a determining role in making the garden a premier garden of its kind in the world, and facilitating the mandate of the Foundation beyond all expectations, especially in regard to conservation, distribution, and education; a lecturer and educator *extraordinaire* on the subject of rhododendrons; a significant contributor to ongoing scientific research on rhododendrons; Co-Editor of the RSF yearbook *Rhododendron Species*; and among the most knowledgeable people in the world on the genus *Rhododendron*—the American Rhododendron Society is pleased to bestow its highest honor, the Gold Medal.

There can be little doubt that members of the Rhododendron Species Foundation will approve this award with enthusiasm, as did those ARS members attending the award ceremony, where applause was accompanied by cheers! And the supporting letters for the nomination indicate a world-wide recognition both of Steve's work and of the significance of the RSF's contribution to international horticulture.

Steve, along with Ken Cox who received the Medal last year, must be responsible for reducing the average age of Gold Medal recipients considerably.

But there is more to this event of which RSF should be aware. When I first began the nomination process it was my intention to nominate both Steve and Rick to receive the award jointly. In fact, that was the nature of my initial correspondence. But I quickly learned that international support for such a nomination would not be forthcoming. This was not because of any negative feeling, but because the nature of Steve's work has the much higher international profile, while Rick works effectively but quietly behind the scene. It became simply a matter of practical politics. The fact that Steve's role is possible because Rick is at home in the much less glamorous role of 'minding the shop' does not catch the imagination in the same way. Rick has assured me that he is happy and comfortable in the role he plays. But he should know that all of us at the RSF fully appreciate his fine work, and that he too is an award winner in our hearts.

The work of both our Executive Directors, then, is award winning, and whether or not it is 'reflected glory,' all members of the RSF should be proud of both of them.

Director's Report

Rick Peterson & Steve Hootman

Hopefully, you received your *2007 Rhododendron Species* yearbook earlier in the summer (if not, please let us know!). There have been many positive comments and we extend a sincere and hearty thank you to Prudence Holliger who spent many hours putting it all together. Prudence is already working on volume three for 2008. For members who joined the RSF since the publication of volume one last year we regret there are no copies of the first edition available; however, we are working on a way to offer it either on a CD or through the website as a download. We will keep you posted.

The RSF Board of Directors met at the end of April for the spring meeting in conjunction with the Annual Member's Meeting. We would like to welcome the following four new members to the board:

Christopher Brickell, of Pulborough, England, has a long and distinguished career in horticulture. He is particularly associated with the Royal Horticulture Society where he was first Senior Scientific Officer and Botanist and then Director of the RHS Garden Wisley and then Director General of the RHS from 1985 to 1993. He has been highly involved with the nomenclature and taxonomy of plants

His work in the field of nomenclature and taxonomy of plants is well known by his association with the International Society for Horticultural Science, the International Union of Biological Sciences, and as founding member of HORTAX (The Horticultural Taxonomy Group). Chris is the author of many books and articles on horticulture and gardening and he has participated in a number of botanical expeditions around the world.

Donald Hyatt, of McLean, Virginia, retired after 33 years of teaching math and computer science, his last position being Computer Systems Laboratory Director at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology. His first passion, however, has always been plants and he developed the family garden near Washington, D. C. into a showpiece that has been featured on many garden tours. Don has been involved with both the American Rhododendron Society and Azalea Society of America for many years; he has studied the east coast azaleas and rhododendrons extensively in their native habitats and written numerous articles on them.

Garratt Richardson, of Seattle, Washington, is a physician and he joined the RSF as a member in 1992. His interest in species rhododendrons has led him to travel to Asia to study and experience them in the wild; he has traveled a number of times with Steve on botanical expeditions. Garratt is also a RSBG volunteer working at the plant sale fundraisers, often bringing his own rhododendron seedlings, selling them, and then donating all of the income to the RSBG! He has also joined the volunteer "Thursday Crew," a group that does construction projects and maintenance primarily in the nursery.

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Richie Steffen, of Federal Way, Washington, began his career in the nursery industry until he was hired at the RSBG as Nursery Manager/Propagator in 1995 where he worked for six years. After a botanical expedition to Turkey in 2000 he moved to his current position as Coordinator of Horticulture at the Elisabeth Miller Botanical Garden in Seattle. Richie lectures, teaches classes, and he has traveled to botanize in Chile and Costa Rica. His volunteer activities at the RSBG include the plant sale fundraisers, selling at the Garden plant sales area, and being a seminar instructor.

The Executive Committee voted at its June meeting to restore the Life membership level. To receive a Life membership someone must donate a sum of \$5,000 at one time. When the gift is received \$1,000 will go into general operations and the remainder into the Endowment Fund, which differs from before when all the funds went into operations. A Life member receives all the benefits of a Family membership for life. For more information please call the RSBG office.

VOLUNTEER CORNER

Rick Peterson

Fran Harrison, a long-time volunteer, passed away this summer and we extend our sincere sympathy to her family. Fran began volunteering in the Foundation's Lawrence Pierce Library in the early 1980's. While not a trained librarian, she learned from volunteers Margaret Young and Barbara Mate who had retired from library careers. After Barb move to Oregon and Margaret retired from the RSF Fran carried on alone until her health declined a couple of years ago. Before she was unable to come anymore Fran worked with our office volunteer Nancy Meyer to complete a full inventory of the book collection and update the database. Fran and her efforts will be well remembered and appreciated.



Fran Harrison (right) and Margaret Young (left) working in the Lawrence J. Pierce Library at the RSF.



After advertising for volunteers in the fall 2006 newsletter we were fortunate that long-time members **Pat & Jean Cummins** from the nearby city of Kent responded and began volunteer-

ing in the nursery. When Jean discovered that we had been without a volunteer librarian for some time she offered her years of experience working in her church library. Of course, we were happy to accept and Jean is bringing the book collection up-to-date. Thank you, Jean! And thank you Pat for your volunteer transplanting in the nursery!

VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR 2006

Regretfully, there was not enough space in the spring issue of the newsletter to publicize our volunteer of the year for 2006. At this time, however, I take great pleasure in announcing **Paul Thompson** of Bothell, Washington as the volunteer with the most recorded hours last year. Paul is a retired electrician and he and his wife, RSBG board member Diane Thompson, became actively involved with the Garden in 2003. That year, during the final phase of construction of the propagation greenhouse, Paul offered to install the electrical system at a savings of over \$21,000 to the RSBG. Because Paul was retired, there was some difficulty with finding a company that would let him work under their license. This obstacle was resolved in due time and Paul spent 255 hours working on the project.

Before the new propagation greenhouse was built four large Douglas firs were removed in the nursery. These conifers shaded an area where many rhododendrons were being grown on in containers. The plants were then exposed to the intense afternoon sun causing many to sunburn. Long-time member/volunteer Pat McDowell donated funds for a shade structure and Paul Thompson headed up the construction project. About this time the "Thursday Crew" was born and Paul led this group of volunteers in building the nursery shade pergola. Paul and his team have continued with many other construction and maintenance tasks, including renovation of the former propagation greenhouse into the new Vireya greenhouse.

The staff extends very grateful thanks to you, Paul, for your selfless support and dedication. You are a great guy and we do so appreciate your contribution of time and energy that has put the nursery light years ahead of where it might be otherwise.

Carol Alpiner
Rick Always
Frances Burns
Koen Camelbeke
Susan Castner-Paine
Linda Christensen
James Cocks
Cheryl Fisher
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**Rhododendron Species
Botanical Garden**

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Contributions (4/1/2007 - 7/31/2007) THANK YOU SO MUCH!

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Garden Campaign

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Nursery Projects

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In Memory (1/1/2007 - 7/31/2007)

In memory of Esther Avery

Fran Rutherford

In memory of Warren Berg

ARS Juan de Fuca Chapter



We are very grateful to the above contributors for their thoughtfulness in choosing the RSBG for their gifts.

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2007 Calendar

February

14 –18 NW Flower & Garden Show

March

17 – Spring Work Party & Potluck
30/31 – **Spring Plant Sale**

April

28 – Annual General Meeting

June

2 – Volunteer Picnic & Work Party

August

4 – Evening in the Garden

September

22 – **Fall Plant Sale**

December

8 – Volunteer Christmas Party

Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden

FALL PLANT SALE

Saturday, September 22, 2007
9:00pm - 2:00pm

**at Weyerhaeuser Corporate
Headquarters
west middle parking lot
Federal Way, Washington**

**Find great plants and
support the Garden at the
same time!**