

RHODODENDRON



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three
Rhododendromania



[*Rhododendron catawbiense*] is perhaps the most valuable evergreen shrub for ornament ever introduced. In the hands of nurserymen, but chiefly of the Waterers, it has given birth by hybridisation to the most valuable group of rhododendrons in existence – the group which flowers at the end of May and in June.

WILLIAM BEAN, *Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles* (1916)

By around 1810 about nineteen rhododendrons had been brought into cultivation in Europe, including eight American species, five from Europe and the Caucasus, four from Russia and northeast Asia, and *R. indicum* from Japan. Besides the azaleas, discussed in Chapter Two, there were the two alpine species, *ferrugineum* and *hirsutum*, neither of which has ever done particularly well in gardens. There was *R. ponticum* and, recently arrived, the barely distinguishable *R. catawbiense*, plus their relative *R. maximum* ('the best that can be said of it is that it means well', to paraphrase Street¹). The delicate *R. dauricum* was available, along with *R. aureum*, *R. caucasicum*, *R. fragrans* and *R. minus*, but though many were hardy, none had particular beauty.² Therefore, even through hybridization there was little that could be achieved from this raw material, certainly nothing to rival the glory of the Ghent azaleas. All this would be changed, dramatically, by the arrival from India of seeds packed in a tin of brown sugar.

To set the scene, the British East India Company was founded on the very last day of the sixteenth century, and a Dutch equivalent

Rhododendron arboreum, the first rhododendron to be introduced from India, via seeds packed in sugar. Painting from J. S. Kerner's *Hortus sempervirens* (1792).



quickly followed. After this, permanent trading posts began appearing around the Indian coast, and the communities that built up around them needed medical men. Many of these were amateur botanists, and took advantage of their station to discover and, where possible, export exotic plants.

Nathaniel Wallich was a Danish man who, aged just 21, took up the post of surgeon at Serampore in West Bengal, near Calcutta (Kolkata).³ It was 1807, and his timing was unfortunate, for Britain would soon attack Copenhagen, dragging Denmark into the Napoleonic wars. Serampore was occupied, and Wallich ended 1808 as a prisoner of war. He was rescued by a request for an assistant from the ageing William Roxburgh, surgeon of the British East India Company in Calcutta, and director of its botanic garden.⁴

Wallich assisted Roxburgh for three years from 1809, then gradually took over running the garden as his mentor took ill, although not without a battle, for again his nationality counted against him.⁵



A large plant of *Rhododendron arboreum* at Kew.

Roxburgh pined for his native Scottish flora, but Wallich took to Indian plants with a passion. However, the interior of India was hard to reach, due to barriers both geographic and political. Hence Wallich eagerly received seeds and specimens sent from Kathmandu by Edward Gardner, the British Resident there. Among them was the recently described *R. arboreum*. Despite having never seen a live plant of it, Wallich sent some of Gardner's seeds to Britain in 1814, packed in sugar, which neatly protected them from mould.⁶

Rhododendron arboreum is tall, stately and has deep pink to red flowers, so it easily outshone any evergreen rhododendron introduced

to Europe so far, but it was far from hardy. This drawback became a massive stimulus, however, for here was the perfect problem to be solved by the emerging art of rhododendron hybridization.

Crossed with the dowdy *R. maximum*, it gave ‘Lady Eleanor Cathcart’, the beauty that the Waterer Nursery had to rescue from Maidenhead (see Chapter One). With the dwarf alpine *R. caucasicum* it bred ‘Nobleanum’, and with the super-hardy *catawbiense*, ‘John Walter’. Crossed with a *catawbiense* x *ponticum* hybrid, it sired the stately ‘Altaclarensis’ (the name being a Latinization of Highclere where it was bred – and where *Downton Abbey* was filmed). All combined the bright colour of *arboreum* with the hardiness of other species, setting the mould for all rhododendron breeding that was to follow.

For Wallich, the twenty years from 1815 must have been a golden era of joy and discovery. He visited Nepal, Singapore, Sumatra, Java and Burma (now Myanmar), but often his opportunities to botanize were limited, and he relied greatly on seed and specimens sent to him.



Early *Rhododendron* hybrids. Left: ‘Altaclarensis’ (*catawbiense* x *ponticum*) x *arboreum*, 1826).

Right (top to bottom): ‘Nobleanum’ (*caucasicum* x *arboreum*, 1832);

‘Broughtonii’ (*arboreum* x unknown, 1840); ‘*Caucasicum pictum*’

(*caucasicum* x unknown, 1853).

He was involved in the introduction of five more rhododendrons: *aeruginosum*, *anthopogon*, *setosum*, *formosum* and most significantly *R. campanulatum*, which gave rise to the hardy ‘Bodartianum’ and other fine cultivars like ‘Waxen Bell’. Meanwhile he passionately built up the living collections of the Calcutta garden, prompting the locals to call it ‘Wallich’s Pet’.⁷ Then in 1835 a man arrived who would disrupt Wallich’s world.

Born in 1810, William Griffith was a botanist of exceptional talent and keenness, who came to Madras as an assistant surgeon in 1832.⁸ Unlike Wallich, his post gave him ample spare time in which to botanize, and he must have been delighted when he was offered the chance to join a botanical expedition to Assam.⁹

Assam had recently been ceded to the British by Burma following the Burmese war. The war had been crippling for both countries, and the financial cost caused the East India Company to lose its monopoly on trade with China.¹⁰ It needed a new source of tea, and a report from the Scottish adventurer Robert Bruce that tea plants grew wild in Assam provided the perfect solution.¹¹ Hence they sent Wallich,



Rhododendron campanulatum ‘Waxen bell’.



Feuding botanists: William Griffith (1810–1845) and Nathaniel Wallich (1786–1854).

Griffith and the geologist John McClelland to go and investigate the possibility of establishing a British tea industry in Assam.¹²

After many weeks struggling through the Ganges basin, the trio were able to spend a month exploring the botanical hotspot of Cherrapunji, which must have been a dream come true for Griffith. He wanted to collect and press everything he saw, but he could not, because they had not brought enough flower press material. Wallich was methodical and selective in which species he gathered, and had packed accordingly. Having patiently learned the methods of botany from Roxburgh, he probably expected the younger Griffith to defer to his judgement, and his methods. Griffith, however, was a raw talent who seems to have felt no need to take advice. Wallich probably told Griffith to collect fewer plants, but Griffith might have countered that it was not his fault they had too few flower presses. Eventually, a furious Griffith caught Wallich removing some of Griffith's specimens from the flower press.¹³

Arriving in Assam with such animosity, the two men predictably had opposing opinions on how to set up a tea industry there. Griffith and McClelland suggested growing native tea, but Wallich was adamant that imported Chinese varieties should be grown. Desperate



‘Wallich’s Pet’: an old postcard of the garden at Calcutta.

to get away from both Griffith and Assam, Wallich left early, and delivered his verdict to the company.¹⁴ This left Griffith free to roam, and he became only the second European to visit the Mishmi Mountains.¹⁵ Then in 1837 he vanished, and newspapers carried stories of his assassination. Wallich’s response to this news is lost to posterity. A year later, however, a battered and dishevelled Griffith staggered across the border out of Burma, having survived a dangerous and illegal collecting trip taking in the Hokong Valley, Ava and Rangoon. His discoveries included *R. griffithianum*, which would eventually exceed *R. arboreum* in its contribution to horticulture, and *R. grande*. He would later botanize and collect in the Khasi Hills, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Simla and Hindoo Koosh, before finally falling in love with Malacca, where he chose to settle.¹⁶

In 1842 poor health forced Wallich to take a two-year break from Calcutta, and Griffith was summoned back from his beloved Malacca to act as caretaker manager in his absence. Griffith promptly wrote a report on Wallich’s ‘mismanagement’ of the garden and set about radically redesigning it along what he felt were more scientific lines. When Wallich returned in 1844, the garden was his pet no longer. Large numbers of trees had been felled, and others badly damaged.

The latter included the very rare *Amherstia nobilis*, precious to Wallich because he himself had discovered it on one of his few trips into the wild. A demoralized Wallich stayed on for three more years, then left for the last time, retiring to his adopted home of London.¹⁷

Griffith returned to Malacca in 1844 to begin a settled married life, but had little time to enjoy it, for he died of liver disease less than a year later. A meticulous and energetic worker, Griffith had used every evening of his travels to examine, dissect, describe and illustrate the plants he had found. According to McClelland, his companion in Assam,

even on his death bed his microscope stood beside him, with the unfinished drawings and papers and dissections on which he was engaged the day on which the fatal symptoms of his disorder came on.¹⁸

Wallich's insistence that Chinese tea should be grown at Assam would lead indirectly to another extremely useful *Rhododendron* species



'Mrs Duffield' – a cultivar of *Rhododendron griffithianum*.

entering cultivation. By 1838 China was locked into a co-dependent relationship with Britain and the East India Company. The Brits were addicted to tea, and the Company paid for it largely by peddling opium to the Chinese people, smuggling it via a thriving Chinese black market.¹⁹ An understandably miffed Chinese government rebelled but lost, and in consequence was forced in 1842 to open up coastal land to foreign visitors.

The Horticultural Society in 1843 sent a collector called Robert Fortune to China, but with his range limited, he mainly bought plants from local nurseries, including some *Tsutsusi* azaleas. Then, as he sailed south from Shanghai, he faced terrible danger. Ahead lay five pirate ships, against which his own boat had no defence. Fortune lay below decks with a severe fever. The sailors were terrified; it seemed an inescapable situation.²⁰

Before setting out, Fortune had won an argument with his sponsors that he should be allowed to carry a shotgun. Now he rose from his bed, seeing a slim chance. Fortune ordered his crew at gunpoint to remain at their posts, for speed was essential. He waited until the first pirate ship was in optimal range, and then fired his shotgun into their massed ranks. He was lucky: the shocked pirates scattered, and Fortune's ship sailed past. Two days later they faced six pirate ships, but Fortune had members of his crew dress in his spare clothes and carry levers as if they were guns. This time when he fired, the pirates thought there were more of these fearsome alien warriors aboard, and took flight.²¹

Fortune wrote a book about his exploits, which caused a sensation back home, catching the attention of the East India Company.²² Following Wallich's verdict on Assam, they needed a man to acquire, or rather steal, some tea seeds from China. The Chinese, understandably, shielded their precious monopoly, so Fortune disguised himself as a Chinese man and sneaked inland, accompanied by translators who would always claim Fortune was from a distant part of China. Tea growers willingly gave up their seeds and secrets, quite unaware that they were betraying their country. The seeds in the end proved

useless, for Griffith had been right and native Assam tea grew better in Assam.²³ However, it was the methodology Fortune learned for making perfect black tea that would break the Chinese monopoly and establish a rival Assam tea industry. Fortune aided this further by bringing to Assam many Chinese expert tea growers; how these men coped with being permanently uprooted to a foreign land is an untold story. From Fortune's tea-hunting trips came another of the most important rhododendrons ever introduced: the sweet-scented *R. fortunei*.

Excluding azaleas, the introduction of rhododendrons into cultivation can be broken down into three significant phases, each more than doubling the available species count. The first was everything up to 1848, and the third was the exploration of China in the early twentieth century. In the middle came 28 species from just one man.

Joseph Dalton Hooker was the son of William, director of Kew. He planned to make a full exploration of the Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim, which neither Wallich nor Griffith had been able to visit. Yet he would face a cunning adversary whom Hooker would describe as 'unsurpassed for insolence and avarice'.²⁴

Sikkim had an ageing rajah, but in practical terms the dewan (prime minister) had all the power. Fearing that these British interlopers might interfere with his various dodges and moneymaking schemes, he did everything he could to obstruct Hooker, delaying him for months in Darjeeling. When Hooker finally set off in October 1848, his entourage contained 56 people, of various ethnic origins. They journeyed through tropical forests to Mywa Gola, then ascended over six days to the subalpine village of Wallanchoon, peopled by ethnic Tibetans. Beset by hunger (certain of his men were stealing most of the food), headaches and altitude sickness, Hooker's party continued across the great mountains, gathering rhododendron seeds at as high as 4,000 m (13,100 ft) despite cold fingers and out-of-reach branches.²⁵

Hooker's second expedition began on 3 May 1849, but the dewan inserted 'guides' into Hooker's party, with instructions to make their

route as tortuously long as possible. Hooker was wise to the plan and tried to win the spies over, and some of these diversions at least led to finding rare plants. The dewan began dismantling infrastructure, taking down bridges and stepping stones, blocking roads and banning repairs.²⁶ This greatly reduced the amount of food reaching Hooker's party, but for Hooker, that wasn't the worst of it:

Alas, one of my finest collections of rhododendrons sent to Darjeeling got ruined by coolies falling ill and being detained on the road, so I have to collect the troublesome things afresh. If your shins were as bruised as mine tearing through the interminable rhododendron scrub of 10,000–13,000 feet you would be as sick of the sight of these glories as I am.²⁷

A journey that should have taken one month ended up taking three, through leech-infested country. Hooker's flagging spirits were lifted in October when his good friend Dr Archibald Campbell joined their party. Campbell was the British Superintendent of Darjeeling,²⁸ for whom Hooker named the magnificent *Magnolia campbellii*. When Hooker revealed the scale of the dewan's scheming against him, a furious Campbell dismissed the worst of the dewan's spies from the party, having first 'blackened his face'. Yet the dewan's influence reached even into Tibet, where a party of locals blocked their path and demanded a conference. Campbell obliged, but Hooker suddenly 'put spurs to my pony and galloped ahead to the sandy plains of Tibet'.²⁹ He botanized there for a day before anyone found him, then three more with Campbell and a Tibetan officer whose friendship had been bought with rum.³⁰

Soon afterwards, in a region awash with rhododendrons, Hooker's evening rest was disturbed by a cry for help from Campbell. The sacked spy, the singtam soubah, had returned to implement a new, most vicious plot. Hooker was held back from trying to help Campbell, but

caught sight of him striking out with his fists, and struggling violently; being tall and powerful he had already prostrated a few, but a host of men bore down on him.³¹

Eventually Campbell was tightly and painfully bound. The soubah told Hooker he was free to go, but as the party took their captive towards Tumlong, Hooker stayed 'as near as I was allowed, quietly gathering *Rhododendron* seeds along the way'.³² Somewhere in England's gardens may grow great *rhododendron* plants derived from this very seed, their presence there owing to Hooker's refusal to abandon his friend.

The dewan wrote a letter to the British listing his demands, but it was so long and rambling that the translator didn't read as far as the crucial point about Campbell being held hostage.³³ The letter was left for Campbell to deal with on his return, and therefore weeks passed with no response. Eventually, the soubah allowed Hooker to write a letter himself, directly to the Governor-General Lord Dalhousie (after whose wife *R. dalhousiae* is named).

Kidnapping and hostage-taking might have been an accepted negotiating tactic in Nepalese and Tibetan conflicts, but the proud British promptly sent a military force to Darjeeling with an ultimatum: release Campbell immediately, or face invasion.³⁴ The captors' party now proceeded towards Darjeeling with all the sluggish reluctance of a schoolboy sent to the headmaster's office for punishment. Hooker (now also a captive) and Campbell probably feared at times that they would be killed, either to silence them or simply in a fit of panic. They were finally released on Christmas Eve.³⁵ The dewan's power was broken, and the British went on to annex southern Sikkim in revenge.³⁶

Hooker distributed seed from his discoveries and publicized them with two lavishly illustrated books.³⁷ He was ably assisted by the young botanist Thomas Thomson, for whom he would name *R. thomsonii*, one of five Hooker finds that adorn his memorial tablet in St Anne's Church on Kew Green. Hooker went on to succeed his father





Rhododendron thomsonii, which Joseph Hooker named after his able assistant Thomas Thomson. An image of this plant adorns a memorial plaque to Hooker in St Anne's Church on Kew Green.



A painting of *Rhododendron campylocarpum* by the great botanist Joseph Hooker, who also described this species. This particular form is called 'Honeybell'.

as director of Kew, and unlike many rhododendron collectors lived to a ripe old age.³⁸

Hooker's 28 new species caused major excitement among British rhododendrophiles. The species were mostly tender, so they could only be grown and enjoyed by those fortunate enough to live in a mild part of Britain. Gardeners from more frost-prone climes had to wait once more for the hybridizing nurserymen to cross Hooker's species with frost-tolerant ones. F_1 hybrids could be generated in large numbers, if the buyer could accept a degree of uncertainty about the outcome. Hence earlier plants sold as 'Nobleanum' were simply F_1 s between *caucasicum* and *arboreum*.³⁹ However, production of the best hybrid cultivars, the particular selected clones, took far longer.

The pace of life was slower in those days, which was just as well for these nurserymen. It could take a decade for seeds to produce a shrub ready to flower naturally, but the wait could be reduced dramatically by grafting a sapling onto a mature plant of another species. In this way, Standish and Noble at Sunningdale Nurseries saw the first flowers of *R. thomsonii* in 1857, and immediately began raising hybrids

from it, creating 'Ascot Brilliant' barely a decade after Hooker introduced *thomsonii*.⁴⁰

However, to judge the worth of any given hybrid, a plant grown naturally to flowering age was needed. Moreover, because hybrid cultivars can only be replicated by cuttings or grafting, only twelve new plants per year could be produced at first, which would each themselves take five years before they flowered and could be sold. Hence it might have taken another fifteen years before 'Ascot Brilliant' was available to buy, and then with so few plants available, nurserymen could charge a very high price for near exclusivity. It would typically take another twenty years for the price to drop to something more affordable; in 1886 the newest cultivars cost ten shillings and sixpence, whereas older ones, even the celebrated like 'Lady Eleanor Cathcart', were less than a quarter of the price.⁴¹ Hence over the twenty years following Hooker's travels, over £700 million was reportedly spent on rhododendrons, equalling Britain's national debt.⁴² In 1885 James Veitch & Sons (by no means rhododendron specialists) listed for sale more than 200 rhododendron cultivars, plus separate lists of azaleas and vireyas.

Rhododendrons travelled around Europe, and to and from North America. In 1896 an entire stock of 200 seedlings of *R. griffithianum* hybrids were offered for sale in Berlin, and bought by the Dutch Van Nes Nursery.⁴³ Among these was 'Queen Wilhelmina', a beautiful scarlet-coloured cultivar that would be parent or ancestor to many more, including the very popular 'Britannia'.⁴⁴

One rhododendron cultivar produced by the Waterer dynasty stands above all others, at least in terms of commercial success. Aged seventy, John Waterer had a particular individual cross between 'George Hardy' and 'Broughtonii' that he believed would eclipse anything he'd produced before. As it prepared to flower, his son Gomer made daily pilgrimages to see how this most precious specimen had progressed. Then one day, it was gone!

Nurserymen of the day were careful and secretive, for their new hybrids were both trade secrets and potential fortunes. This is

probably why the parentage of many early hybrids is unrecorded. Hence this vanishing act had to be an inside job, or a fluke. Nursery employees did sometimes take home the odd hybrid as a perk of the job, and not all knew which plants were precious. Sure enough, after several days of cold sweat and searching, the plant turned up in the front garden of an employee's cottage, and was duly returned.⁴⁵

Though John would not live to see it, the plant was worth the trouble. Its pink flowers faded with age, but in a stroke of branding genius, Gomer chose the name 'Pink Pearl', turning this into a virtue. Easy to remember and prettier than, say, 'Broughtonii' or 'Blandyanum', this name undoubtedly helped its success with the public.⁴⁶ It won awards and the public praise of Queen Alexandra.⁴⁷ Then racehorse owner Fred Hardy ordered a whopping 150 of them from Gomer, confident of selling some to his friends, after which Gomer never had to advertise the plant again.⁴⁸ It was still a best-seller in 1937. Even in 1963 it was described as 'the only name people know' for a hybrid rhododendron, regardless of its having been superseded in



'Queen Wilhelmina', a bright red hybrid of *R. griffithianum*, whose birth in Berlin is shrouded in mystery.

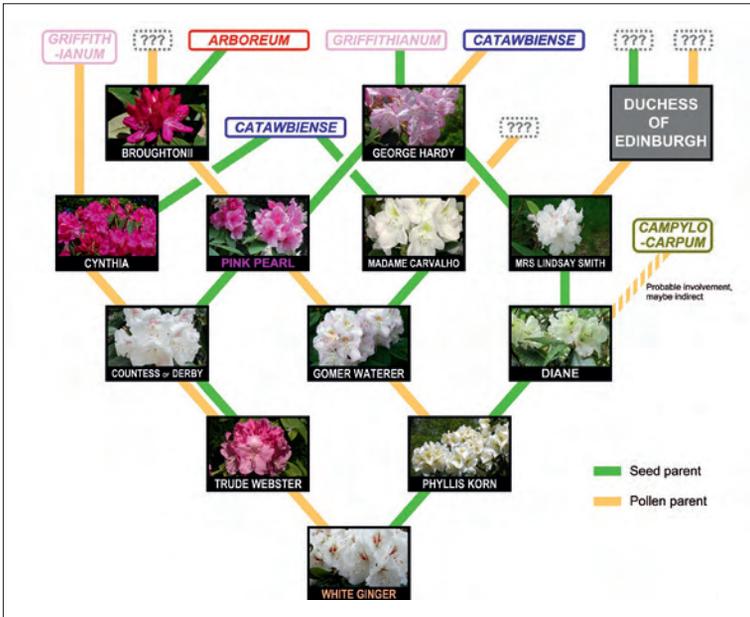


The 'Pink Pearl', the most commercially successful rhododendron hybrid of all time.

quality.⁴⁹ Unlike fragile, high-maintenance beauties such as the 'Loderi' group, 'Pink Pearl' was utterly dependable, and anyone could grow it. It is still on sale today.

Inevitably, mass popularity brought scorn and contempt. By 1954 some regarded it as 'the lowest of the low',⁵⁰ the cultivar equivalent of *R. ponticum*. To a later commentator, it formed with 'Nobleanum Venustum' and 'Cynthia' a hideous triumvirate of 'bloated heads of rubbery blooms of knickers-pink, dildo-cream and gingivitis-red'.⁵¹ No plant can hope to please everyone.

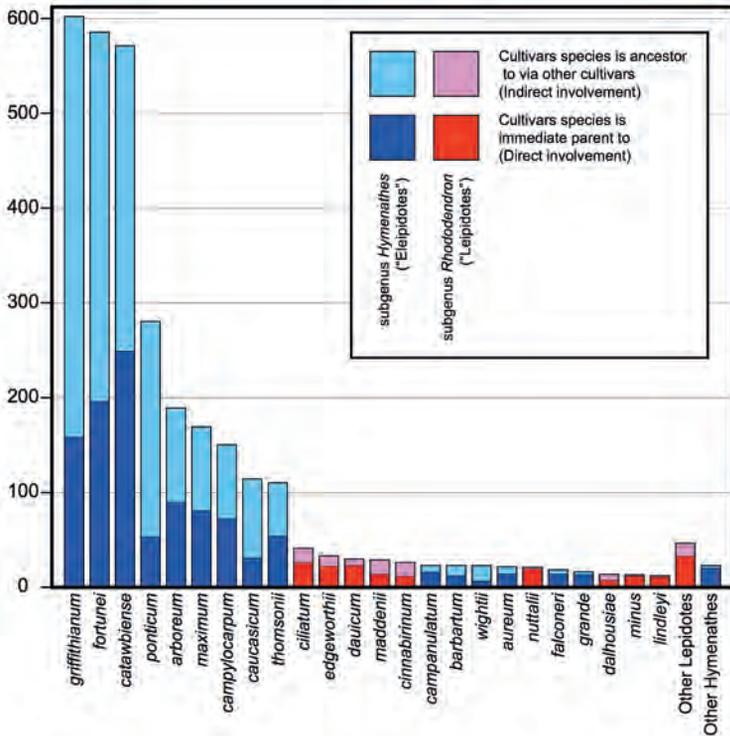
Ironically, a few of the detractors of 'Pink Pearl' may well have been happily growing some of its progeny. Plants like 'Souvenir de Doctor S. Endtz' and 'J. G. Millais' had names to appeal to the connoisseur, just as 'Pink Pearl' did to the everyman. 'Pink Pearl' crossed the water to Holland and North America to sire many of its children,⁵² and a genealogy of recent American cultivar 'White Ginger' shows the importance of 'Pink Pearl', and also *R. catawbiense*, which is ancestor to all but two of the family tree.



An illustrative genealogy of rhododendron hybrids involving 'Pink Pearl'. Note how only three or four species are certainly involved, whereas in four places a parent's identity is unknown.

The bonanza of rhododendron hybrids raised and sold during Victorian times was based upon a small cluster of species. Excluding azaleas and vireyas (which had their own quite separate histories in gardens; see chapters Two and Four), about fifty *Rhododendron* species had been introduced by 1960. Among these, just nine species have dominated the production of rhododendron hybrids, accounting for about 85 per cent of recorded instances of direct or indirect ancestry between them.⁵³ Each had something specific to offer; of the pre-Hooker species, *catawbiense*, *maximum* and *caucasicum* gave hardiness, *ponticum* vigour, and *arboreum* tall stature plus reddish flowers. Only three of the nine came from Hooker: *griffithianum* gave the largest flowers, *campylocarpum* offered for the first time a yellow tint, and *thomsonii* had glorious red waxy bell-shaped flowers.⁵⁴ Completing the top tier was *fortunei* from China, an all-rounder whose particular virtues were seven petals and scent.

Among the nine, *catawbiense*, *griffithianum* and *fortunei* come out as the most important. The latter two gave the spectacular but half-hardy ‘Loderi’ siblings (see Chapter One). Breeding in *R. catawbiense* could ensure full hardiness, even when crossed with a tender species, making it the most important shrub ever introduced to Britain, according to Kew curator and woody plant expert W. J. Bean.⁵⁵ Examples include ‘Cynthia’ and ‘George Hardy’, both hybrids with *griffithianum*. A *thomsonii* x *fortunei* cross gave the almost fully hardy ‘Luscombei’. A significant early *catawbiense* x *ponticum* cross was ‘Cunningham’s White’, at first grown for its own sake but now the most popular grafting stock for new cultivars.⁵⁶ Before 1910 *R. campylocarpum* was barely used, but from 1924 onwards Walter Slocock of Goldsworth Nurseries



Bar chart showing the number of named cultivars directly and indirectly descended from different *Rhododendron* species, from subgenera *Hymenanthès* (blue) and *Rhododendron* (red), based on data at www.hirsutum.info, accessed August 2015.



'Goldsworth Yellow', an F₁ hybrid between *R. caucasicum* and *R. campylocarpum*.

registered twelve hybrid cultivars from it.⁵⁷ He is said to have been a fabulous but brusque character, who marched around his nursery with numerous paper notes pinned to his coat to remind him of what needed doing.⁵⁸

All nine of the top species belong to subgenus *Hymenanthes* ('lepidotes'), so Rhododendromania was, more or less, about this group alone. Why, then, was that other great group, the 'lepidotes' of subgenus *Rhododendron*, nearly ignored? By 1860 about 21 *Hymenanthes* had been introduced, versus thirty lepidotes, hence species availability was not the issue.⁵⁹ Some lepidotes were simply lacking in horticultural merit, like the alpenroses *ferrugineum* and *hirsutum*, whereas *minus* just looks like a small *R. ponticum*. Generally, lepidotes have smaller flowers than *Hymenanthes*.

The second key point was hardiness, especially for those lepidotes that were otherwise most appealing. All of *dalhousiae*, *edgeworthii*, *ciliatum*, *formosum*, *maddenii*, *nuttallii* and *veitchianum* were listed by James Veitch

& Sons in the 1880s as 'stove' or glasshouse plants, alongside the vireyas. The last five belong to the *Maddenia* group, which combine delicate beauty with some of the best scents in the genus, but most can only be grown outdoors in the mild western extremities of Britain, if at all.⁶⁰

Of course, beauty and hardiness can be combined through hybridization, but Victorian hybridization was very much by trial and error; certainly no one yet knew the simple rule that lepidotes cannot cross with *Hymenanthes*.⁶¹ Breeding programmes were largely based, as we have seen, around a few key species, and the natural course of action for *Maddenia* species would have been to try and breed them with *R. catawbiense* or its hybrids for hardiness, which would not have worked. Indeed, the more *Hymenanthes* hybrids were produced, the more it would seem that trying to cross *Maddenia* species with anything but themselves was a lost cause.

This, then, likely accounts for the great overshadowing of lepidotes during Victorian times. For glasshouses, *Maddenia* species were suitable, but they lacked the crucial advantage of small size enjoyed by the vireyas, nor could such a range of visibly distinct hybrids be raised from among them. They did, however, have one trump card, for they are the smelliest of the 'smellies', or scented rhododendrons.⁶² Among the first hybrids involving *Maddenia* was 'Fragrantissimum' (*edgeworthii* x *formosum*), possibly the most strongly scented rhododendron in existence. One catalogue described it as: 'A most desirable addition; flowers white, tipped with delicate rose; one flower is sufficient to fill with delicious fragrance a good sized house.'⁶³

'Fragrantissimum' probably cornered the market on tender scented rhododendrons, despite being 'leggy' (tall and straggly). Most other *Maddenia* hybrids would come much later, raised where they could survive outdoors such as at Caerhays in Cornwall, or in New Zealand.⁶⁴ Had Victorian breeders known the rules, perhaps more would have crossed *Maddenia* species with the fairly hardy *R. dauricum*. As it is, the only recorded hybrid of this parentage raised before 1927 was 'Praecox', *ciliatum* x *dauricum*, which by hybrid vigour is hardier than

either parent.⁶⁵ *R. ciliatum* was also successfully crossed with *glaucophyllum* and *virgatum*.⁶⁶

Even among the lepidotes, species seem to cross less readily than within *Hymenanthes*, suggesting greater genetic separation between subgroups of lepidotes. ‘Fragrantissimum improved’ was a repeat of the *edgeworthii* x *formosum* cross, but unlike the original it turned out to be sterile.⁶⁷

Arguably the best individual species among early lepidote introductions is *R. cinnabarinum*, which is half-hardy and unusually can have orange flowers, which delighted the great explorer Kingdon-Ward.⁶⁸ Its subspecies and variants may range from yellow to crimson, and between them are involved in at least fifty cultivars, many of them also involving *R. maddenii*, and most raised after 1915.⁶⁹ Had *cinnabarinum* been a *Hymenanthes*, it might have been used far more extensively. However, its particular charm, hardiness and range of possible colours perhaps make it a species not easily improved upon by hybridization.

Cultivar creation is a form of art, an attempt to achieve perfection in four dimensions, for their beauty shifts over time. Some



Rhododendron ‘Fragrantissimum’ at Trebah, Cornwall. Possibly the strongest scented rhododendron cultivar in existence. The name would not be allowed under current cultivar naming conventions, because it sounds too much like a species.

Colour forms of *Rhododendron cinnabarinum*.

The leftmost three, including the darkest one, are subspecies *cinnabarinum*; the other four are ssp. *xanthocodon*. Both may be orange or magenta, and colour is not useful for telling the subspecies apart.



rhododendron cultivars also bear magnificent names; for example, ‘Hello Dolly’, ‘Holy Moses’, ‘Jingle Bells’, ‘Miniskirt’, ‘Oz’, ‘Potato Peeler’, ‘Smiley’s Pinkadilly’, ‘Walloper’, ‘Whopper’, ‘Witchdoctor’ and ‘Wizard’ are all the creations of the irrepressible American hybridizer Halfdan Lem.⁷⁰ ‘Potato Peeler’ was inspired by a customer who proclaimed that he would need to peel large numbers of potatoes to cover the bill for his plants.

The French seemed to prefer painting rhododendrons to breeding them, for the plants turn up in a 1922 painting of the Palace of Versailles (the American artist William Posey Silva’s *Rhododendron-Versailles*), and in Edouard Manet’s *Spring* (1881). Manet’s health was failing by this time, yet the painting bursts with young life as its title suggests. The rhododendrons are very much the backdrop; one (top left) is in flower but it is barely noticeable, and removing it would

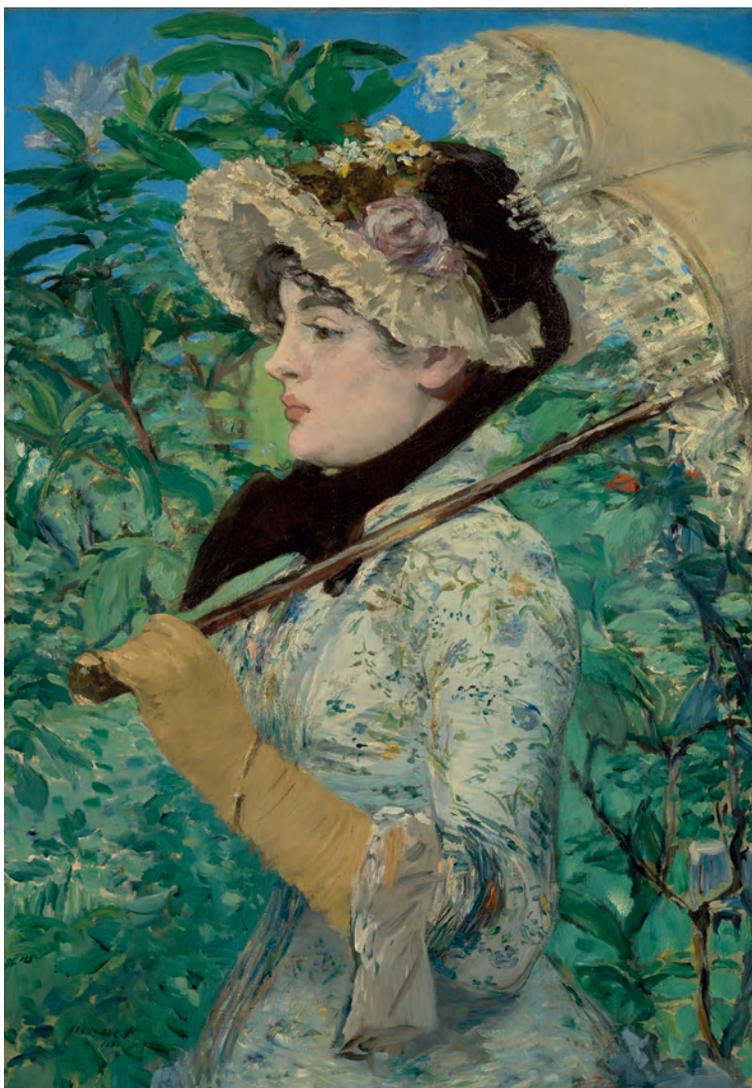


Left: the common mallow, *Malva sylvestris*, whose French name *mauve* gives its name to this colour. Middle: garments dyed with mauveine. Right: *Rhododendron niveum*, which fell from favour when the colour mauve became too common.

not change the feel of the painting. Its main subject, young actress Jeanne Demarsy, looks as if she would not welcome the competition for attention. She radiates a quiet determination to succeed, and would later enjoy fleeting glory in Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers*, playing Venus; however, the painting would far eclipse her. It was the last great Manet painting to leave private hands, sold for a record \$65 million to the Jean Paul Getty Museum.⁷¹

Just as rhododendrons influenced painters, so events outside of horticulture affected the popularity of certain rhododendrons. Aged just eighteen, William Perkin had been trying to synthesize the expensive antimalarial drug quinine from aniline, a far cheaper chemical that was an easily available extract from coal tar. He failed, but instead created a strong purple dye. Showing remarkable entrepreneurial spirit, he brought it to market as the first ever synthetic dye, mauveine.⁷² It surged in popularity after Queen Victoria wore it in 1858, and mauveine even affected the English language, bringing the French word 'mauve' into common use ('mauve' is the French word for the common mallow, *Malva sylvestris*). Mass production made mauveine progressively cheaper, and *Punch Magazine* was soon complaining of women afflicted by 'Mauve Measles'.⁷³

Soon even the working classes could afford to wear dye-coloured clothes for the very first time, as long as they were purple, which inevitably made the upper classes turn against the colour. At the same time,



Edouard Manet, *Spring*, 1881, oil on canvas, featuring young actress Jeanne Demarsy in front of Rhododendrons, with a flower visible in the top left corner.

R. ponticum was becoming increasingly ubiquitous (see Chapter Eight), all of which meant that purple rhododendrons were suddenly seen as vulgar. A major casualty of this was *R. niveum*, a purple-flowered species introduced by Hooker.⁷⁴ This previously popular species fell dramatically from favour, and was purged from many gardens, although spectacular specimens remain in the Lost Gardens of Heligan.