

The Role of Laurelwood Gardens in East Coast Rhododendron Hybridizing

Presented by Joe Di Giacomo at the 2018 Rhododendron Festival

Laurelwood Arboretum

May 20, 2018

American Rhododendron Society Endowment Fund Grant

- An Endowment Fund Grant has been awarded by the American Rhododendron Society to Friends of Laurelwood Arboretum to publish a booklet on the role of Laurelwood Gardens and John and Dorothy Knippenberg in East Coast rhododendron hybridizing.
- Grants were awarded in 2017 to the following organizations:
 - \$2,850 – Friends of Laurelwood Arboretum
 - \$1,000 – Planting Fields Arboretum, Oyster Bay, New York
 - \$1,010 – Brueckner Rhododendron Gardens, Ontario, Canada

Continuing the Legacy

“...in 1960 the entire thirty acre garden was presented to the Township of Wayne and will become a public rhododendron park following our lifetime. For this reason we are trying to assemble masses of the hardiest varieties.” Statement by Dorothy Knippenberg made to the New York Rhododendron Chapter, February 19, 1964.



Thousands of Seedlings

“John Knippenberg is preparing many acres of ground with bulldozers and tractors. He has ...countless thousands of seedlings coming along to plant there. He can carry them through to maturity as Dexter did. He is a friendly fellow, and although he makes mistakes, is bound to learn something in the end, and should come up with many worthwhile hybrids. So, I think I will leave the general hybridizing to him....” Stated in a letter from Guy Nearing to Joseph Gable, dated January 7, 1956.



The Pioneer

Charles O. Dexter (1862-1943)

One of the first to undertake a massive rhododendron breeding program at his estate in Sandwich, Massachusetts. Between 1925 and 1940, he produced more than 5,000 crosses a year. Although he was a great hybridizer, he was a poor record keeper. It was not until after his death that his work as a hybridizer was recognized. Many of his rooted cuttings were purchased by Dorothy Knippenberg and grown at Laurelwood Gardens. Years after his death, Dorothy was credited with naming several of his hybrids including 'Burgundy Cherry' (pictured) 'Great Eastern' and 'Powder Puff.' Dexter's estate is now operated as the Heritage Museums and Gardens which contain plantings of 125 of his 145 known Dexter cultivars.



Early Hybridizer

G. Guy Nearing (1890-1986)

Guy Nearing had a strong connection to Laurelwood Gardens. He opened a nursery at Arden, Delaware and quickly became a recognized expert. In 1929, he began to propagate rhododendrons on a large scale at Guyencourt Nurseries in Delaware. Soon thereafter, he started a small nursery in Ridgewood where he grew tens of thousands of plants in an attempt to isolate forms that would be hardy in the NJ climate. In 1947, he moved his nursery to Ramsey after his Ridgewood site was destroyed by a flood. John and Dorothy sent him pollen, and he often sent them the results of his crosses to raise at Laurelwood Gardens. Many of his named hybrids remain in the arboretum today including 'Rochelle' (pictured).



Early Hybridizer & Close Friend

Paul Vossberg (1896-1974) joined the Westbury Rose Company in 1943 where he perfected a method of successfully rooting cuttings of rhododendron varieties previously difficult or impossible to root. He was a member of the original Dexter Study Committee which was formed to locate and evaluate the many Dexter plants growing in gardens along the eastern seaboard. He became a close friend of the Knippenbergs, and he visited Laurelwood Gardens at least once a year. In 1965, he gave a small 15-inch unnamed hybrid to Dorothy to propagate. She grew the plant to its first flower and named it 'Paul Vossberg' (pictured) and introduced it commercially at Laurelwood Gardens in 1975.



Early Hybridizer

Joseph G. Gable (1886-1972) produced rhododendrons and azaleas with finer flowers and tougher plants at his nursery in Stewartstown, Pennsylvania. For over 40 years, he experimented with rhododendrons and azaleas trying to raise rare species and create new hybrids. Several of his early creations found their way to Laurelwood Gardens. He named some of his hybrids after family members. His 'Caroline' (pictured) was named for his daughter, Caroline. It was used by Dorothy Knippenberg as a "parent" for her 'Caroline Gem' which she raised at Laurelwood Gardens in 1955. Today, the arboretum is home to many of his rhododendrons and azaleas.



Long Island Hybridizer

Nathaniel Hess helped to found the New York Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society in 1951 and served as its President from 1957 to 1960. John and Dorothy were active members of the New York Chapter. He introduced many West Coast classic rhododendrons to our cold East Coast climate at his gardens in Sands Point, Long Island. He showed that the tempering effect of the Long Island Sound favored the culture of a large collection of exotic rhododendron varieties. In 1972, he created a new hybrid that he named 'Dorothy Knippenberg' which was registered in 1992 with the American Rhododendron Society.

R. 'Dorothy Knippenberg'

Elepidote. ('Scintillation' seedling, open pollinated). Seed collected (1972), G (1977), N, I (1982), and REG (1992): Nathaniel Hess, Sands Point, NY.

Very fragrant, openly funnel-shaped flowers of heavy substance, with 7 smooth-edged lobes, are 4" across x 2.5" long, white with moderate reddish orange (179C) dorsal spotting. The light green calyx is 0.1" long, and there are no stamens. The ball-shaped truss of 14 flowers is 6.5" wide x 6.5" high. Leaves are elliptic, mucronate (apex) and rounded (base), 5" long x 2.5" wide; moderate yellow green (147B above, 147D below), and glabrous.

The shrub has a spreading, well-branched habit, holds its leaves 2 years, and is very floriferous, blooming mid May. It is 5' high x 5' wide 14 years from seed, and is hardy to at least -5°F.

Baldsiefen Nursery

Warren Baldsiefen (1922-1974) started a nursery in Rochelle Park in 1964, and he soon outgrew its location and he moved his nursery to Paramus before finally settling in Bellvale, NY. The cuttings that became 'Burgundy Cherry' and 'Dexter's Pink Satin' which Dorothy raised at Laurelwood Gardens were purchased from Baldsiefen Nursery in a collection of numbered Dexter rooted cuttings. She purchased hundreds of rooted cuttings from his nursery over the years. Her named hybrid 'Laurel Pink' (pictured) was available for sale at the nursery at one time.



West Coast Hybridizer & Close Friend

Ted Van Veen (1916-2003) took over the management of Van Veen Nursery in Portland, Oregon upon his father's death in 1961. The nursery became one of the largest purveyors of rhododendrons in the nation by the early 1970's. In 1959, John and Dorothy visited the nursery with Paul Vossberg. It was the start of a life-long business relationship and friendship. Over the years, the Knippenberg sold and shipped thousands of cuttings from rhododendrons to Van Veen Nursery. Upon Ted's death, his daughter, Kathy, took over the management of the nursery, and she propagated our new 'Laurelwood Sunset' azalea (pictured) for us. Sadly, Kathy passed away in 2016.



'Laurelwood Sunset'

Unnamed evergreen azalea hybridized in 1975 by Dr. Al Fitzburgh at his home in Caldwell, NJ.
"Cherokee Chief" selfed.



Cuttings from the unnamed evergreen azalea sent to Van Veen Nursery in Portland, Oregon in 2015 for custom propagation.



'Laurelwood Sunset'

Rooted azalea cuttings returned to Laurelwood Arboretum in 2017.



Rooted azalea cuttings bring potted at Laurelwood Arboretum in 2017.



'Laurelwood Sunset'

Potting azalea cuttings at Laurelwood in 2017.



Potted Azalea cuttings in 2017.



'Laurelwood Sunset'

Registration of 'Laurelwood Sunset' with the Royal Horticultural Society



New cuttings of 'Laurelwood Sunset' being propagated at Laurelwood Arboretum in June 2017.



Rhododendron Propagation

Lower Greenhouse

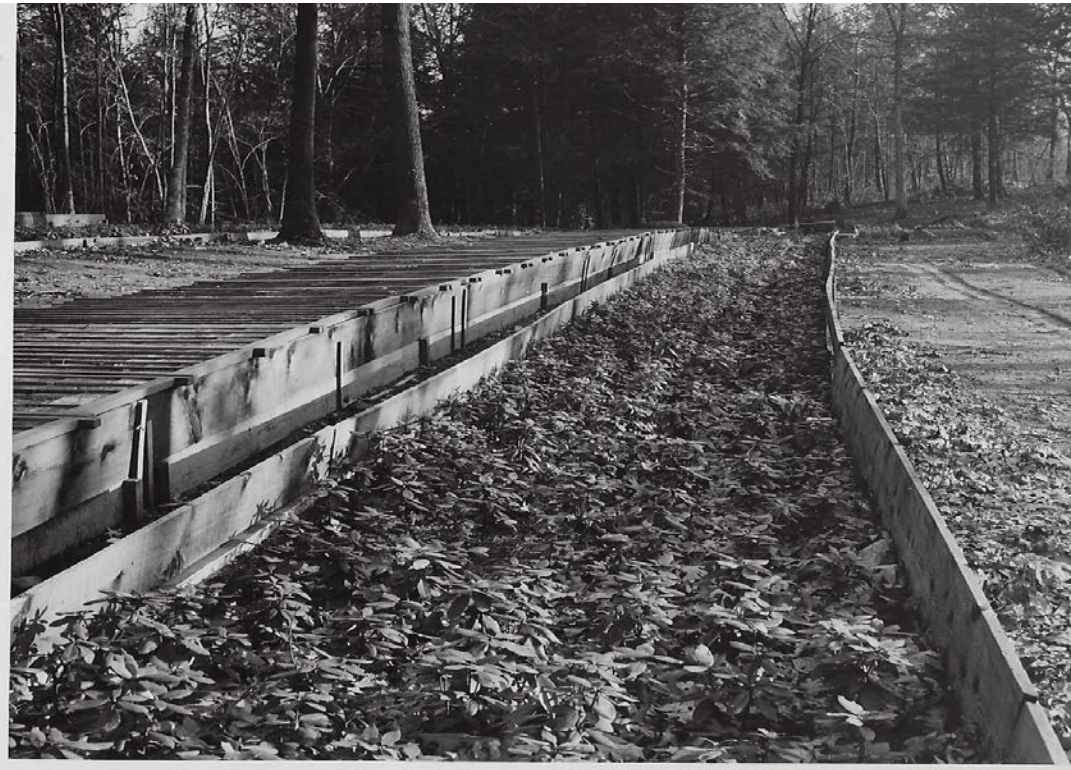


Rooting rhododendron cuttings



Rhododendron Propagation

Rhododendron cold frames



Rhododendron seedlings



Rhododendron Propagation

'Roseum Elegans' cuttings -1956



Seedlings from pollen from Great Britain – Planted February 1956



Propagation Meetings

Pines Lake Garden Club – July 15, 1986

PINES LAKE GARDEN CLUB
PROPAGATION MEETING
July 15, 1986

CUTTINGS AVAILABLE

AZALEAS

Snowclad, white, E. June
Martha Hitchcock, purple edged W. mid May
Gibiana Japonica, sm. leaf lt. purple M. May
Geisha, white flecked, rose R. E. May
J T Lovett, low lg. Pink, mid June
Bond St. Dbl. Red mid June

Arborescens, P & W. mid July

RHODOENDRONS

Dwf. Keiskell, E. May, yellow
Conomough, lav. P. E. May
Mary Fleming, Apricot, E. May
Mochanin, white, late April
Russautinii, Elec. Purple, mid May
Olga, Ert. Pink, late April
Wilsoni, lav. P. mid June

Ass't deciduous

Dwf. Lilac, violet, mid May
Weigelia, Skylands, violet Pink, mid June
Abelia Grandifl. Pink, all summer
Dwf. Forsythia Bronxensis, yel. E. April
Cot. Hor. Purpissilla, red berries, Sept.
Hibiscus, Rose of Sharon, Bluebird mid July
Stephanandra Incissa Crispa, shade
Enkianthus

Evergreen

Dwf. Boxwood, gold
Pieris Pygmaea
Leucothoe Scarlettta
Ilex Aquifolium, Silver edge
" " Blue Princess

Herbaceous, Perennials, etc.

Lythrum, easy, moisture, Magenta Pink late July
Thermopsis, yellow, early June
Monarda, Adam red, easy mid June
Thalictrum minor
" polygnum, easy, damp, feathery white. July.
Hypericum Calycinum, low shrubby St. Johnswort, Yel. E. July
Heliothis, yellow late June, all summer
Evening Primrose, Oenothera

Pines Lake Garden Club – July 14, 1992

PROPAGATION MEETING
PINES LAKE GARDEN CLUB
JULY 14, 1992

AZALEAS

— Rose Greeley, white mid May
Buccaneer, red late June
Gunsel, pale pink, late June
Daybreak, pink, late June
Ambrosia, salmon pink, early June
Waragishi, dbl. pink early July
Springtime, pink mid April
Kiunianum Album, Dwf. white, late May
Kiunianum Amethystino Purple "
— Viscosum, Deciduous, Fragrant native late June
— Arborescens, " , very fragrant, early July

RHODOENDRONS

Dwf. compact E. J. M.
Windbeam, pink mid May
Star Sapphire, light blue late May
Russautinii, intense purple "

Pieris

— Mountain Fire
Pieris Pygmaea

EVERGREEN ASS'T

Ilex Glabra Compacta, native
— Kingsville Boxwood
— Dwf. Korean Boxwood
Ilex Aquifolium Aureo Marginata
Dwf. Pfister Juniper
— Sarcococca
Kauka

DECIDUOUS ASS'T

— Clostris Alnifolia Rosen
— Dwf. Compact summerweet, white.
— Oakleaf Hydrangea
— Spiraea Shirobi

HERBS

— True Dwf. Tarragon
— Rue

Herbaceous

Monarda, Bee Balm Adam red
Gone Flower, Echianacea purple
Stokesia, Blue
Sheeta Daisy, white etc.
(very popular)

for '93
Joy Conplausata.
Sarcococca
Dwf. Clostris

Thousands of Rhododendron Seedlings

“On a hillside we raised 6,000 Dexter seedlings and are now removing plants as they bloom well and have some unusual trait.”

Statement by Dorothy Knippenberg to members of the New York Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society, February 19, 1964.

“We raised 4,000 seedlings of ‘LaBar’s White.’ Try raising seeds of this, interesting things happen. The seed was open pollinated, and about 10% were pure white. Our select form was the finest of these seedlings, the largest truss, almost a pure white, buds are pure white too. Only the stamens show a little pink.”

Statement by Dorothy Knippenberg to members of the New York Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society, February 19, 1964.

Knippenberg Rhododendrons

Dorothy Knippenberg began hybridizing rhododendrons in 1955, and she continued to strive for plants with new interests and improvements such as hardy large-leaved sorts, more flower substance and later blooming periods. Together with her husband, John, they cultivated more than 50 new named rhododendron hybrids. Hundreds of rhododendrons raised at Laurelwood Gardens were recognized with awards at annual flower shows. In 1976, her 'Carolina Rose' (pictured) was awarded First Place at the National Flower Show of the American Rhododendron Society in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Her hybrid 'Powder Puff' received a Second Place Award at the show.



Knippenberg Rhododendrons

‘Laurel Pink’



‘Hardy Giant’



Knippenberg Rhododendrons

‘Big Mac’



‘Wayne Pink’



Knippenberg Rhododendrons

‘Topaz’



‘Big Willy’



Knippenberg Rhododendrons

‘Powder Puff’



‘Blush Button’



1973 Bronze Medal Award New York Chapter

Dorothy Knippenberg was awarded the 1973 Bronze Medal by the New York Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. The Citation read in part:

She is a knowledgeable horticulturalist who has encouraged others to see truly the beauty of rhododendrons and to enjoy growing them. Visitors to Laurelwood are inspired by the magnificence of the woodland landscaping, designed, planted and lovingly nurtured by Dorothy. The challenge of hybridizing encouraged numerous crosses and thousands of seedlings resulting in the selection of several new hybrids: 'Carolina Rose,' 'Wayne Pink' and 'Blush Button.'



Observations of An International Visitor to Laurelwood Gardens

In 1961, Dietrich Hobbie, one of the most famous German hybridizers, visited the United States to attend the International Rhododendron Conference in Portland, Oregon. After a long train trip from the West Coast, he arrived in New York and set out to visit many East Coast gardens. His observations were published in an article entitled *"Rhododendrons in the USA and Canada."* The article was translated from the German by Alfred Huber and it was republished in the Journal of the American Rhododendron Society in October 1962. This is his comment about Laurelwood Gardens.

The Knippenbergs grew Hobbie hybrids in their test garden.

"In Wayne, New Jersey, are the Laurelwood Gardens. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Knippenberg, have built up a wonderful rhododendron park in hilly woods between dogwood trees, maples, pines and oaks. Countless rocks and smaller granite stones were excavated. The ice age glaciers had broken them from the Canadian shield and moved them far to the South. Colonies of very pretty lady slippers (Cypripedium acaulis) in rose and yellow hues were blooming under the trees. It took several hours to walk through all the gardens led by the enthusiastic Knippenbergs."

Rhododendron Study Team

The Rhododendron Study Team at Laurelwood Arboretum has set a goal of identifying and tagging the rhododendron collection. Using an inventory prepared by Dorothy Knippenberg decades ago, we have counted 411 rhododendron hybrids and species in the arboretum at that time. The inventory did not include the rhododendrons along the perimeter of the arboretum nor did it list many of the Dexter and Gable rhododendrons specifically. Hence, we estimate there may be 500-600 rhododendrons in the arboretum.

To date, the study team volunteers have identified and tagged 214 rhododendrons. Detailed information on each rhododendron has been entered into a plant collection management computerized database.

The rhododendron hybrids and species shown here have been identified and tagged by the study committee.

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|------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 'America' | 'Gertrude Saxe' | 'Rosey Future' |
| 'Atroflo' | 'Henry's Red' | 'Scintillation' |
| 'Babylon' | 'Janet Blair' | 'Solidarity' |
| 'Boule de Neige' | 'La Bar's White' | 'Tow Head' |
| 'Brandywine' | 'Lavender Princess' | 'Van Nes Sensation' |
| 'Calsap' | 'Lee's Best Purple' | 'Vulcan's Flame' |
| 'Carolina Rose' | 'Mary Belle' | 'Westbury' |
| 'Caroline' | 'Mary Fleming' | 'Weston's Aglo' |
| 'Catawbiense Album' | 'Molly Fordham' | 'Wheatley' |
| 'Chesapeake' | 'Olga Mezitt' | 'Windbeam' |
| 'Christmas Cheer' | 'Parker's Pink' | <u>Species</u> |
| 'County of York' | 'Paul Vossberg' | <i>carolinianum</i> |
| 'David Gable' | 'Pearce's American Beauty' | <i>hyperythrum</i> |
| 'Dexter's Pink Satin' | 'Pioneer Silvery Pink' | <i>keiskei</i> |
| Dexter's Appleblossom' | 'PJM' | <i>merchernichii</i> |
| 'Dorothy Russell' | 'Purpureum Elegans' | <i>williamsianum</i> |
| 'English Roseum' | 'Rochelle' | <i>yakushmanum</i> |

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Letters between the Registrar of the American Rhododendron Society and Dorothy Knippenberg from 1979 to 1992.