

PRESERVING THE LEGACY

John and Dorothy Knippenberg purchased parcels of land across the street from their Pines Lake home in Wayne, New Jersey from the Pines Lake Company in the 1940s and 1950s. They operated their 30-acre woodland, known as Laurelwood Gardens, as a commercial nursery that specialized in rhododendrons and azaleas. They soon became widely known among growers on the East and West coasts for specializing in hybridizing.

Dorothy Knippenberg began hybridizing rhododendrons in 1955. She strove for interesting and improved plants, such as hardy large-leaved varieties and those with greater flower substance and later bloom. She was a knowledgeable horticulturalist who encouraged others to appreciate rhododendrons and enjoy growing them. Dorothy and John hybridized and named eight cultivars of rhododendrons that were registered by the American Rhododendron Society and Royal Horticultural Society: “Blush Button,” “Caroline Gem,” “Hardy Giant,” “Big Willy,” “Burgundy Cherry,” “Laurel Pink,” “Laurelwood Snow Bunting” and “Wayne Pink.”

The Knippenbergs maintained a test garden in which they planted rhododendron cultivars sent to them from all over the country to be subjected to the New Jersey climate and cultivated for East Coast growers. At one time, they raised 6,000 seedlings on the hillside at Laurelwood. They imported plants from England and donated cuttings, seeds and pollen to growers all over the world. Over the years, they raised and/or hybridized approximately 50 new rhododendrons.

Dorothy’s commitment to rhododendrons was formally acknowledged in 1973, when she was awarded a Bronze Medal by the New York Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society in appreciation for her devotion to the genus *Rhododendron*. In 1992, hybridizer Nathaniel Hess of Sands Point, New York, named and registered the “Dorothy Knippenberg” rhododendron in her honor. Blooming in mid-May, the fragrant shrub displays heavy, openly funnel-shaped flowers that are white with reddish orange dorsal spotting.

John and Dorothy helped continue the legacy of such renowned hybridizers as Charles O. Dexter, one of the first to undertake a massive hybridizing program in Sandwich, Massachusetts; Joseph B. Gable, who made rhododendron hybridizing look deceptively simple at his nursery in Stewartstown, Pennsylvania; and G. Guy Nearing, who developed many hardy hybrids at his nursery in Ramsey, New Jersey. Laurelwood Gardens displayed many rhododendrons hybridized by these pioneers, and Wayne became known countrywide as an important location for hybridizing rhododendrons.

Friends of Laurelwood Arboretum is dedicated to preserving the Knippenberg legacy. The Knippenberg Center for Education is home to many of Dorothy’s books and records and offers educational tours and programs as Dorothy did years ago. Volunteers are working on a project to identify and document the locations of the many rhododendrons in today’s arboretum. They are digitizing hundreds of Dorothy’s photographs of rhododendrons and azaleas. Their goal is to locate and identify her hybrids, including those she registered (although it is unlikely that all have survived over the years). They also hope to replace some of the

important hybrids that are no longer in the arboretum by reaching out to hybridizers and arboreta across the country that might be able to provide cuttings.

Members of the American Rhododendron Society met at Schrafft's Restaurant in New York City in 1964 to visit Laurelwood Gardens by way of a slide presentation by Dorothy Knippenberg. Using many slides of the rhododendrons and azaleas scattered throughout Laurelwood, she talked about each cultivar. Her narrative has been preserved in the *Journal of the American Rhododendron Society*, and is archived at the Virginia Tech Digital Library and Archives. Friends of Laurelwood Arboretum's volunteer study team plans to create a walking tour using photographs and Dorothy's own words from this meeting.

What better way to preserve the legacy of John and Dorothy Knippenberg than to restore the rhododendron gardens in Laurelwood Arboretum?

A GENEROUS GIFT TO THE TOWNSHIP OF WAYNE

In 1960, the Knippenbergs entered into an Agreement of Understanding with the Township of Wayne to donate the entire 30 acres of Laurelwood to the Township in order to create a public park after their deaths. One condition of the agreement was that they be allowed to cultivate and maintain the property without restrictions as long as one of them lived. The agreement provided for the property to be conveyed in parcels over time, which they did between 1961 and 1975. Dorothy expressed her vision for the property she and John had so lovingly developed when she told the American Rhododendron Society gathering that Laurelwood Gardens would, in her words, "become a public rhododendron park following our lifetime."

After John's death in 1994, Dorothy continued to supervise and work in the gardens. During this time, a small grassroots community group formed to support Dorothy in maintaining the property and ensuring its future as a public park. In 2003, this group was formalized as Friends of Laurelwood Arboretum, a 501 (c) (3) non-profit corporation.

After Dorothy's death in 2006, a formal partnership was formed between Friends of Laurelwood Arboretum and the Township of Wayne. Laurelwood Arboretum became part of the park system, and Friends of Laurelwood Arboretum assumed responsibility for maintaining and improving the property's horticultural inheritance.



Burgundy Cherry" hybridized by Charles O. Dexter, named and introduced at Laurelwood Gardens by Dorothy Knippenberg in 1974 and registered by her in 1980.