

the Rhododendron, Camellia & Magnolia group

Patron: HRH The Prince of Wales

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CHAIRMAN'S NOTES

Perhaps unexpectedly, the period just after Christmas is one of my favourite times. The days are getting longer and our plants are beginning to get ready to burst into life with the coming of spring. As I walk around my garden I can almost feel the life there preparing for spring.

This winter has been very mild so far. The first of the rhododendrons to bloom, such as 'Seta', started flowering here in January, which is an early start even in Cornwall. The magnolias seem to be very full of buds so I am looking forward to a good season after two disappointing years.

However, February is usually our coldest month so things may still deteriorate as indeed they did in 2020 and 2021. I am just hoping for the best.

Seed list

Although we still have difficulty in obtaining wild collected seed the 2022 seed list is a very good one due to members who contributed seed from their gardens. If you have not done so already do look at the seeds available on our website.

Events

Last year we ran a number of very successful virtual events and more will follow this year. The pandemic is still with us but seems to be coming more normalised. As a result we and the RHS have plans for more events this year. There are shows and other face-to-face activities planned along, of course, with our AGM. See page 12 for the latest state of play and check our website regularly for updates.

Volunteers - Secretary

As I indicated in the last two Bulletins we need a new Secretary from May 2022.

The role involves a number of administrative and communication activities. These include arranging our AGM and Management Committee meetings, taking minutes thereof and communicating with the RHS over awards, shows and other matters.

This is a very important role that can be considered to help keep the Group together. If you would like to be at the centre of Group activities then please contact me for more information.

Graham Mills



Rhododendron davidii EN 4213 Photo: Maurice Foster (See page 5)

SECRETARY'S NOTE

Annual General Meeting

Miranda Gunn has kindly invited us to join her in celebrating the Centenary of her family's ownership of Ramster Garden. Both the Group AGM and the Centenary Cup Competition will be held there on Sunday 15th May 2022. What a wonderful opportunity to get together, show some of our best plants to each other, enjoy a short talk given by Miranda about Ramster Garden and to round things off, an informal guided tour of the garden. It could be you that takes the Centenary Cup home for a year. The 20-acre Woodland Garden at Ramster is home to a fantastic variety of trees and shrubs including the Group Collection of Hardy Hybrid Rhododendrons. Over the past couple of years Miranda and her gardening team have developed a new Centenary Garden which you can see during the tour. Ramster Garden will still be open to the public on May 15th so our events will be held in separate areas.

*The Centenary Competition
with the Group AGM
is at Ramster - See page 2*

Continued overleaf

Trumpeting spring

Running up to mid-January, it is getting steadily lighter, and now light enough to garden for a bit after 4.30pm on a clear day. It's all downhill to spring. The buds are already beginning to push on four of my first choice rhododendron species, now full of promise and impatient for light and warmth in a few weeks; most widely planted but still special and all flowering in March. In spite of this early showing they seem to get away with it and I do not recall the plants having ever been frosted. They had more or less finished flowering last year when the persistent April frosts caused the 2021 spring damage.

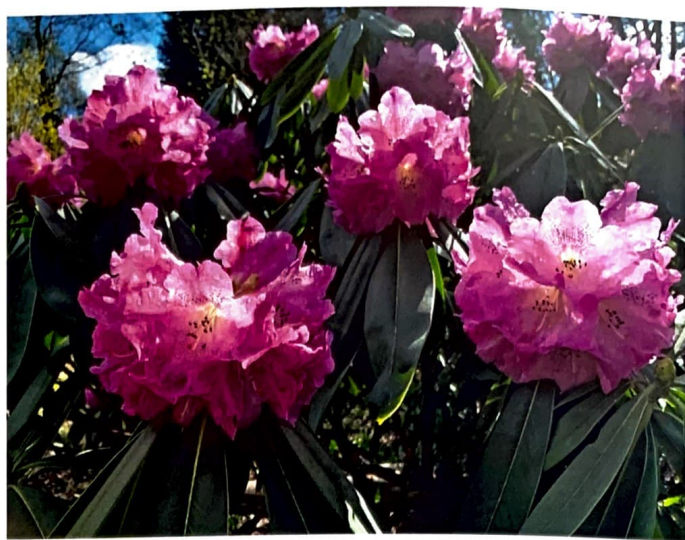
Graham Stuart Thomas, when he managed the Sunningdale nursery way back, described *Rhododendron calophytum* as the 'most noble' of rhododendron species and it seems a most apposite adjective for this magnificent plant. It is bone hardy as well as beautiful and we saw some excellent specimens on the Group Tour in cold north Germany some years ago.



Rhododendron calophytum SICH 1656

It will make a tree of some 7-8 metres in good conditions and I recall sitting alone on a damp moss-covered rock in a towering cool grove of these trees on Emeishan in Sichuan eating a cold Chinese sausage while contemplating the eternal verities, as one does; the trees shut out the light so that all below is boulders and moss and nothing but moss; and the light is a filtered semi-green seen through a glass darkly, the place hushed and slightly sinister, so I half expect a little green man to appear. Back in the outside world a few yards away and all was light and colour and the sheer magnificence of *Rhododendron calophytum*. Not surprisingly the species epithet means 'beautiful plant'. The plant figured is SICH 1656 at White House Farm, my home in West Kent.

The RCM Group visited WHF some 15 years ago and we organised a plant sale for the visit to raise funds. Tom Wood brought along a very nice plant of *Rhododendron sutchuenense* but for whatever reason no one bid for it and it remained unsold. It was from garden seed and perhaps in those days when there were plenty of collections from the wild, OP garden origin seedlings were thought to be not quite the thing. Tom left it with me and I planted it.



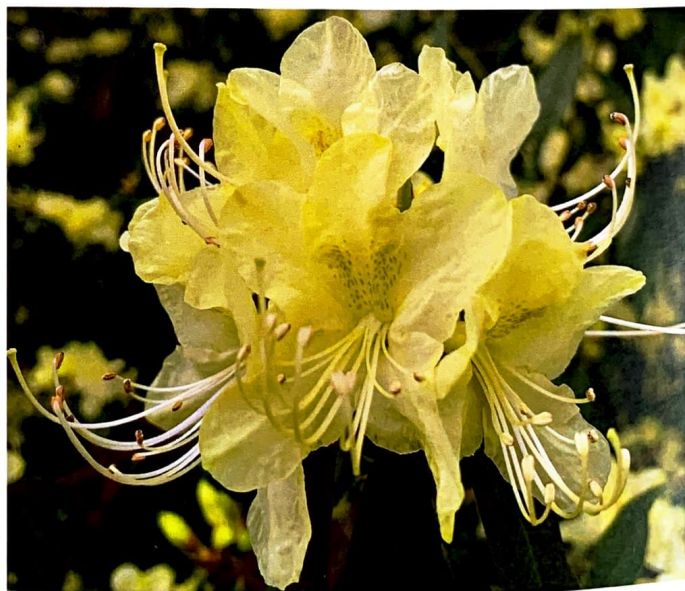
Rhododendron sutchuenense

It may well be a hybrid, but the image shows a bright fresh pink flower with nice spotting and a pale centre, atop a hanging ruff of dark green foliage, in flower on March 19 and an extremely effective flowering shrub, especially at this time of year. The plant is now about 2mx2m, clothed to the ground, very handsome and maybe a useful gentle reminder not to be too sniffy about OP seed of garden origin, especially since the seed list has now been 'Nagoya-d' of wild collected seed.

I find *Rhododendron lutescens* a superlative plant in foliage, flower and form, one of the classic plants of mid-March. I have what I bought as the FCC Exbury form many years ago and it never fails to shine every year with larger flowers than the type.

This form has great poise and colour as well as an open graceful habit and attractive bronze young growth; I have never grown 'Bagshot Sands', the Stevenson Tower Court form and wonder if any member grows both and has a view about which might be the more superior garden plant? I have raised seedlings, but all have been smaller flowered and inferior in quality.

There is a form now available with strikingly dark bronze growth which it keeps all through summer. A superb example of this luxuriates on the edge of the great grass bowl at Holker Hall, the wonderful Cavendish garden at Grange-over-Sands in Cumbria.



Rhododendron lutescens FCC Exbury Form

Finally, a species still rarely seen in gardens is *Rhododendron davidii*, but now generally available and so should become more widely planted. Discovered in 1886, and as it was named and described by Franchet, it seems likely that it was a David discovery. It was either never introduced as seed and only described as herbarium specimens or it was brought in and subsequently lost to cultivation, or it was some other plant masquerading under the *R. davidii* name. Whatever the reason, the real thing was not to be found in gardens until fortunately rediscovered and introduced by Edward Needham in the 1990s under EN 4213 – a bit over 100 years later. (See front cover).

Its campanulate purple/lavender flowers are freely borne and a pleasing colour which lasts well in the cool of March. It makes a bigger and more spreading bush than I had anticipated and now is growing embarrassingly freely, promising to outgrow its place. It is a nice complement to *R. grande* in flower and would look well with *R. ririei*.

Maurice Foster VMH

This article first appeared in bulletin 138 (March 2022) of the RHS *Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group* (<https://www.rhodogroup-rhs.org/>).

All photos by the author