

Rhododendron & Azalea Pioneer: Edmund V. Mezitt, 1915-1986: Famous for PJM Group, but He Accomplished Much More

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(Photos by author unless noted.)

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PJM Group

Edmund Mezitt had just finished his degree in landscape architecture at Cornell University when he noted the early bloom on these Chinese plants growing in his parent's greenhouse and collected pollen. In 1939, he struck flowers of *R. carolinianum* with this pollen and collected the seed hoping to

John Mezitt was given to a PJM Group clone and this clone is propagated there.

This was a time when most nurseries sold seedlings of rhododendrons because of the difficulty in propagation and the Mezitt's Weston Nursery was no exception. They repeated the PJM Group cross many times and grew on plants by the thousands, selling them as "PJM" and giving us what is called a "grex" or group of genetically related plants. In such a group there are consistent characteristics but also variability in traits such as habit, leaf coloration, flower color, and bloom time.

Connor Ryan of the David G. Leach Research Station said, "While rhododendron connoisseurs may groan at the purple meatballs dotting landscapes far and wide, their prevalence in landscapes is a testament to the breeding, selection, and vetting at Weston Nurseries. PJM Group is the standard for commercial lepidote rhododendrons.



Edmund Mezitt with PJM Group. Photo: Weston Nurseries.

In 1911, Edmund Mezitt's father, Peter Mezitt emigrated to the United States from Latvia. In 1912 he married Anna Olga and in 1923 they established Weston Nurseries. The Mezitts knew Christian missionaries in the Altai Mountain region where Russia, China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan converge and had corresponded with them about the native plants. The Mezitts donated \$50 dollars to the missionaries and were sent a gift of plants that were small evergreen shrubs. Some of the plants were later to be identified as *R. dauricum* var. *sempervirens*.

create a hardy plant like *R. carolinianum*. The hybrid seedlings grown in Weston, Massachusetts, were transplanted into open fields in Hopkinton, Massachusetts in 1944, where the family had recently acquired land for a nursery farm. For the most part Edmund had forgotten about these plants and they had thrived despite benign neglect. In early May 1945, when the family came to view the newly acquired land, they found a hillside of purple-pink blooms. The name 'PJM Group' was given by Edmund in honor of his father, Peter J. Mezitt. In England, the name Peter

PJM Group Hybrids

With such great commercial success on his first try, Edmund Mezitt continued to hybridize, with back crosses such as a PJM Group onto *R. carolinianum* to give 'Laurie', a wonderful compact growing pale pink to white flowered shrub. 'Laurie' and its offspring occasionally throw some double flowers or semi-double flowers. 'Balta' is from the same cross and just a little whiter in flower. 'Molly Fordham*', a hybrid of 'Balta', remains one of the best white PJM Group types with clean, deep dark foliage rather than the yellowish tinge of many white forms.



'Weston's Aglo'.

The extensive written records of crosses from 1951 until as late as 1981 showed that over 4000 viable crosses were done. Edmund's goals were to expand the season of bloom and to increase hardiness, adaptability, and multi-seasonal interest coupled with compact habit, and disease and insect resistance. Edmund knew and shared information and breeding goals with Dr. Robert Tichnor, then at the Waltham Field Station at the University of Massachusetts. When Dr. Tichnor left for Oregon, he gave Edmund the seedlings of his 'Laetiverens'* crosses.

In 1958, Edmund introduced the genes of *R. mucronulatum*. *R. mucronulatum* proved valuable to



'Olga Mezitt'.

produce early bloom in a variety of colors from clear white and pink to deep purple. 'Cornell Pink' is a popular selection in the trade. 'Mahogany Red'* has good color saturation. A 1958 cross of a white form of *R. carolinianum* with *R. mucronulatum* 'Cornell Pink', produced a grex known as the "Shrimp Pink Hybrids". They form upright, semi-deciduous shrubs that cover themselves in late April with a blanket of flowers.

In 1964 crosses, second generation breeding with PJM Group selections resulted in 'Olga Mezitt' (named for Edmund's mother) and 'Weston's Aglo' (Olga spelled backwards) – two outstanding compact growing plants with great habit.

Trying to get a red lepidote was a later breeding goal. This resulted in 'Milestone' which is named for the stone marker in Hopkinton where the Boston Marathon begins. The strong color stands out in the landscape and almost glows but lacks good leaf retention. 'Weston's Pink Diamond'* also lacks good leaf retention but has doubling of the flower in that the stamens become petaloid. Its early and yet long season of bloom and spectacular fall color keeps it a favorite.

The real legacy that Edmund and Wayne Mezitt give us in lepidotes for the connoisseur is the doubles. An interesting little quirk of *R. mucronulatum* is that there are some genes for "doubling" prevalent in some selections. Most doubling is really stamens that convert to petal-like structures. Beginning with 'Weston's Pink Diamond'* and the occasional doubling on 'Laurie', selections were made to enhance and improve that look.

Weston Nursery

Edmund's efforts occurred during a period when New England experienced severe winters as compared to more recent winters. Many seedlings were lined out in open fields with no shade and growing in typically poor New England soil. Those plants that survived and passed aesthetic tests had to be really tough and able to prosper with little care. This has made many of them favorites of landscapers and homeowners due to their ability to do well with little aftercare.

One must keep in mind that Weston Nursery during this time was more a landscaper's nursery with field grown plants. It was only more recently that they shifted to container grown material. For landscapers, a plant had to have vigorous growth and good leaf retention along with all the other qualities that make it worthwhile to grow in the landscape.

Wayne Mezitt, one of Edmund's three sons, was very much involved in the later breeding and selection process. He is responsible for registering most if not all of Edmund's registered plants. He would say a good commercial plant must be able to be planted with a backhoe into a landscape that would not get any special attention. The high standards that Wayne gave to the selection process helped to reinforce the need for tough plants in New England.

The impact of Weston plants is widespread. The Minneapolis, MN, Peace Garden boasts a hillside which was planted over 40 years ago. The road to the Seattle Airport is lined with Edmund Mezitt's hybrid lepidote rhododendrons.

Elipidotes

While the ancestry of the lepidote hybrids was generally well documented, that of the elipidotes was less so, at least in the early years. In addition to raising named varieties of the familiar old *R. catawbiense* ironclads, the nursery practice was to raise seedlings of the



'Henry's Red'.* Photo: Weston Nurseries



'Pauline Bralit'.



'Big Deal'. Photo: Weston Nurseries.

same, often open-pollinated, selecting every year the best plants from which to harvest seed. There was an occasional infusion of other types, for example, some *R. wardii* hybrids received from Dr. Ticknor. Occasionally a seedling would exhibit such desirable qualities that a decision was made to name it and propagate it clonally. The first of these to be so honored was a 1950 selection, 'Noreaster', a low-growing, dense, compact plant with white flowers. 'Years of Peace' was a 1954 hybrid of 'Mrs Charles S. Sargent', selfed. It forms an upright, sturdy plant of 5-6

feet (1.5-1.8 m) in ten years, with deep pink flowers.

Another, 'Pauline Bralit', a 1958 cross, introduced *R. fortunei* genes into the blood lines; and as might be expected, it is also a sturdy, upright plant with large, slightly fragrant, creamy-white flowers in early midseason. 'Big Deal' has elegant ball-shaped trusses of pale yellow and 'White Dimples' has proven to be a promising parent in hybridizing.

Perhaps the best known of all the Weston elepidotes is 'Henry's Red',* selected from a field of *R. catawbiense* seedlings. Somewhat open and rangy in habit, 'Henry's Red'* offers one of the deepest colors to be found in hardy rhododendrons —so deep, in fact, that it tends to recede into the background unless backlit by the sun. Other reds followed: 'Red Frilled'* and 'Trojan Warrior', both selected *R. catawbiense* seedlings and both fairly low-growing and compact. But the goal of a truly dwarf, hardy, red-flowered hybrid remained elusive.

Summer Flowering Hardy Deciduous Azaleas



'Lollipop'.* Photo: Weston Nurseries.

Not as well-known are the many hardy azaleas that Edmund hybridized at Weston Nurseries. In 1950, when he started keeping records, he recorded eight deciduous azalea crosses which were hoped to extend the azalea blooming season later into the spring. They begin flowering after mid-June and added color to the garden after most



'Pink and Sweet'.* Photo: Weston Nurseries.



'Popsicle'. Photo: Weston Nurseries.

woody shrubs had finished flowering.

The summer flowering deciduous azaleas include 'Lollipop',* 'Pink and Sweet',* 'Popsicle', and 'Weston's Innocence'.* The four listed here are hardy to at least -20° F (-29° C) which includes zone 5 and many areas in zone 4 as well.

Edmund's hybridizing program at Weston Nurseries was one of the more successful programs in developing late blooming deciduous azaleas. *R. prunifolium* had a significant part in the development of these plants. Some of these with *R. prunifolium* heritage are 'Cherry Bomb',* a July bloomer with large cherry red flowers; 'Tangerine Glow',* a dark orange July bloomer; 'Everglow',* which has orange-red flowers that appear in July and August; and 'Pennsylvania',* a July bloomer with light pink flowers.

Use of some of these natives also introduced incredible fragrance into resulting hybrids. Mildew on foliage is a problem for many older deciduous azalea hybrids. Mildew resistance was another criteria used by Mr. Mezitt in his selection process. The results are plants that continue to look good

long after the blooms are spent. One standout is 'Millennium' with its blue-green leaves and silvery undersides.

Evergreen Azaleas

Although less extensive than the Edmund's work in other categories, his introduction of evergreen azaleas made it possible to extend the range of the bright blooms of evergreen azaleas further north. With the evergreen azaleas, the goals have included not only increased hardiness but also



'Bixby'. Photo: Weston Nurseries.

compact and floriferous plants. 'Bixby', with dark red flowers; 'Pink Clusters', bright pink; and 'Royal Pillow', purple, satisfy these criteria and offer real Zone 5 hardiness. Edmund broadened the scope and diversity of evergreen azaleas for cold places.

Mass Chapter ARS

When the Massachusetts Chapter of the ARS was founded in 1971 Edmund became its first president. Edmund received the Gold Medal from the ARS in 1980, the same year the Mass. Chapter hosted the ARS convention. Sadly, Edmund passed away in 1986 after a long illness. In the 36 years since his passing, Edmund Mezitt's legacy is bringing the diversity and usefulness of the genus *Rhododendron* to the attention of the gardening public.

The Legacy

The Edmund's hybrids have been rigorously tested under conditions

that promptly eliminate any weaklings. Fields of rhododendrons are grown in full sun on exposed hillsides and in rocky, clay soil. Any varieties that flourish despite these adversities are bound to be star performers under less strenuous conditions elsewhere.

In the course of 40 years, the breeding program of the late Edmund Mezitt and his son Wayne have made the New England landscape more beautiful. During the four decades before Edmund's death

in 1986, PJM group could be found in many places where rhododendrons were never expected to grow. However, during those decades, Edmund continued to hybridize to offer variety in color, time of bloom, pH tolerance, disease resistance, and plant habit. The International Rhododendron Registers lists 105 of Edmund's rhododendrons,



'Landmark'.

including 44 lepidotes, 27 deciduous azaleas, 23 elepidotes, and seven evergreen azaleas. Today many of Edmund Mezitt's hybrids are listed on Weston's catalog in Massachusetts, Whitney's catalog in Washington state, and Monrovia's offerings sold throughout the US and Canada.

Looking at all of the data from the ARS



Edmund V. Mezitt was honored with the ARS Pioneer Achievement Award at the 2022 ARS Fall meeting in Gettysburg, PA. His son Wayne Mezitt received the award from past ARS president Ken Webb (left) and awards chair Bill Mangels (right).

Good Performers and Rhododendron of the Year awards, the PJM Group/Weston lepidotes are in a class by themselves. The PJM Group (in which I include 'Olga Mezitt') has received 61 nominations, and cultivars from another group of hybrids ('Landmark', 'Pink Diamond*', and 'Weston's Aglo') have been nominated 32 times. The next most popular small-leaved rhododendrons among enthusiasts are 'Ginny Gee' (35 nominations) and 'Dora Amateis' (25 nominations). Furthermore, these awards are coming from very diverse climates within North America, providing consistent testimony about the broad adaptability of the Mezitt rhododendrons. Edmund Mezitt has produced rhododendrons and azaleas that have served both the ARS and the American gardening public exceptionally well.

Karel Bernady reports that the Greater Philadelphia Chapter has propagated at least 15 of Edmund's creations. They are readily purchased and grace our home gardens. In addition, more than a dozen of his various hybrids have been sold to the public at chapter plant sales a local arboreta. His plants are well appreciated.

* = unregistered.

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- Steve Henning is a member of the Valley Forge chapter and is District 8 Director.*

Plant Seed Collection Options

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Firstly, please appreciate that when collecting seed, it is always imperative to get permission from the owner of the plant first if from a private or public garden. It is not needed if collecting seed from the wild, unless from a country where no wild seed collection is permitted without first obtaining a government collection permit.

To hold the collected seed, I use whatever paper is available at the time,

and for many of us, this may be paper money, as many of us have paper money when visiting other gardens. I take a dollar bill and fold it lengthwise twice to make three sections, and then fold it crosswise twice. Tuck one end into the other, making a crude envelope, but closed enough to save any seed.

Preferably, use any other paper that is handy, and I would make five or so of these “envelopes” prior to any garden visit, just in case I needed any. A description label can be written on a paper envelope or a small identification object (e.g., plant leaf?) can be inserted as a label if using a currency bill envelope.



If no other paper is available, grab a bill from your wallet.

If the latter, perhaps a description of the identification object can also be written as a note in your cellphone, to remind you later as to the names of the plant seeds collected.

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