

Rhododendron Collection at Wespelaar Arboretum and Herkenrode Gardens

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Rhododendron is a genus of widely cultivated ericaceous shrubs and trees, with the larger concentration native to Asia, especially Himalaya, SE Asia and the Malaysian mountains. They were introduced into western gardens mostly between the eighteenth and nineteenth century and their popularity has increased progressively since, ultimately determining their status of sovereign woodland plants.

At Arboretum Wespelaar and the linked gardens of Herkenrode, they are among the favourites together with *Acer*, *Magnolia* and many genera in Betulaceae and Fagaceae. However, the genus *Rhododendron* has the largest representation with over 800 taxa. The specimens have been accommodated here according to their systematic position and climatic and soil requirements, with greatest concentration in the Verlat Wood, Vijverbos and Marnef Wood.

As an Italian horticulturalist currently working in the United Kingdom, I stayed at Wespelaar for a fortnightly work experience in early April 2015, thus in perfect time for observing and enjoying the *Rhododendron* collection. On Sunday 19 April, I attended the study day on lepidote rhododendrons organised by Arboretum Wespelaar in conjunction with the Belgian Dendrology Society. This article will talk about the afternoon visit of the *Rhododendron* collections, which officially closed the study day and my stay in Belgium.

Our conductor and cicerone was Koen Camelbeke, Curator at Arboretum Wespelaar and experienced rhododendrons grower and enthusiast. Our contingent was also reinforced by Head Gardener Christophe Crock, real plantsman and friend, and Kenneth Cox, world-recognised expert on *Rhododendron* and lecturer during the seminar. We looked specifically at the lepidotes, which are characterized by the presence of small scales on various vegetative and even generative parts, most notably on the underside of the leaves. This definition is not arbitrary but essential for classifying the large and taxonomically complex genus *Rhododendron*. In point of fact, lepidotes almost never hybridize with the non-scaled elepidotes, so permitting to split the genus into two distinct subgenera of great taxonomic and horticultural utility.

A quantity of dwarf and alpine species from Eastern Asia are included in the lepidotes, with many of the most popular cultivars bred from them. In this wide group are included many of the sections and subsections we were about to admire in our walk-around, such as *Cinnabarina*, *Heliolepidia*, *Lapponica*, *Ledum*, *Maddenia*, *Pogonanthum*, *Rhodorastra*, *Scabrifolia*, *Triflora* and *Uniflora*.

Our visit took its first steps in the Werner Wood, a woodland area which stretches along the northern edge of the Arboretum. This is the domain of *Betula* and *Fagus* collections,

with a wonderful understory of colourful hybrid rhododendrons and azaleas. *Rhododendron* 'Taurus' is a cracking hybrid obtained by crossing *R. strigillosum* with *R.* 'The Honourable Jean Marie de Montague'. It's a tall but well-behaved rhododendron and displays large, vibrant red flowers in tall trusses. I stood for some time in front of its magnificent red blossoms; that true, red, with no hint of pink, purple or violet contained, was radiating an aura of classical nobility that I've seen rarely matched elsewhere in the plant kingdom.

'Taurus' is with no doubt one of the best red hybrids ever raised, but unfortunately for us, not a lepidote. After prolonged jubilations, came the inevitable "rappel à l'ordre" from Koen, who invited us to stick with the lepidotes and proceed to the Vijverbos, the woods on the northern boundary of the Arboretum. This is a section yet to fully establish but it already presents beautiful open vistas and gentle undulations of lawns and riverbanks where charming spring ephemerals grow, such as lesser celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria*), wood anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*) and slender speedwell (*Veronica filiformis*). Rhododendrons are grown here, but from *Taliensia* and *Argyrophylla* subsections, which are in the lepidotes. Once again Koen remembered our obligation to the lepidote species and guided us to the Verlat Wood, where the majority of the *Rhododendron* collection of Wespelaar is displayed.

In this wood, the natural conditions are perfect for the cultivation of rhododendrons and many other ericaceous woodlanders. The dense canopy of mature Corsican pines (*Pinus nigra* subsp. *laricio*) not only creates ideal dapple shade, but also provides protection, with average temperatures generally five degrees warmer in winter and cooler in summer. In addition to that, the needles of the conifers have over time built up a thick top layer of

light acid soil. The *Rhododendron* collection has been set out according to the different sections and subsections, so permitting comparison of closely related taxa. The emphasis is on wild species, although some first generation crosses have been allowed. The maintenance is intense and involves constant planting-out, mulching, pruning and recording of the individual specimens. Some more tender species, notably from the Himalaya and Southwest China, may need replacement after particularly severe winters; also overgrown or unattractive plants are cut back and substituted.

The first specimens we admired in the Verlat Wood were representatives from the *Rhodorastra* subsection. These are odd azalea-looking members in the lepidotes, which feature a deciduous or semi-deciduous habit and wide funnel-shaped flowers. They are early flowering and prove to do well in the Belgian climate, providing some partial shade and protection against late frosts is given. *R. dauricum* comes in two forms, one persistent (*R. dauricum* var. *sempervirens*) and one semi-persistent; the flowers are bright purplish-red. *Rhododendron dauricum* 'Midwinter' is a popular selection, very early flowering; *R. d.* 'Hokkaido' [Ill. 1] is also a reliable white form, flowering immediately after in February / March. The second species in the group is *Rhododendron mucronulatum*, an old favourite deciduous rhododendron, which was the first introduction from Japan. The flowers are single or up to three in a truss, mostly rosy to pink-mauve [Ill. 2].

Immediately nearby the *Rhodorastra* bed is a section planted with young, mixed specimens. Christophe informed us that establishing plants are covered during harsh winters with horticultural fleece laid over a temporary structure of bamboo canes. This overwintering system, together with a combination of skilful horticultural practices, is among the

keys of the success of Arboretum Wespelaar in growing *Rhododendron*. Other techniques are home-made propagation and raising, minimal pot culture, seasonal mulching with oak leaves and pine needles; among the pruning methods, the terminal-bud-pinching technique is



1 – *Rhododendron dauricum* 'Hokkaido'.
Arboretum Wespelaar [K. Camelbeke, 30-03-2015]



2 – *Rhododendron mucronulatum* var. *ciliatum*
(Mt.Sobaek, S.Korea). Arboretum Wespelaar
[K. Camelbeke, 18-03-2009]

worth mentioning, giving well-branched plants with the minimum effort and equipment.

The *Pogonanthum* section was the next series to be botanised. They typically feature daphne-like flowers that are clustered together, with long corolla tubes so that styles and stamens are not always visible; the leaves present the most irregular scale pattern. The entire group stopped in admiration of a magnificent specimen of *Rhododendron kongboense*, flowering in a deep shade of pink. This species is perfectly hardy, but not common in cultivation. Moreover, the leaves (as always for the species in this section) are strongly aromatic and were apparently burnt and used as incense in its native regions of eastern Himalaya. Many of us stuck up their noses at the idea of such horticultural crime.

The *Uniflora* subsection is a series of dwarf characters fairly close to the *Lepidota* and, as the name suggested, includes plants with either solitary or at the most flowers in pairs. At Wespelaar are grown three of the five species. The pale pink blossom of *Rhododendron pemakoense* [Ill. 3] first attracted our attention; the small, compact structure and floriferous habit of this species make it a good choice for rock gardens. The type species *R. uniflorum* var. *imperator* was also displayed [Ill. 4]. This is a true alpine rhododendron, which naturally grows on cliff ledges in Northeast Burma. In the western gardens it flowers in May and always forms dense mats.

We then entered in the realm of the larger growing rhododendrons, grouped in the *Triflora*, *Cinnabarina* and *Heliolipida* subsections.

Triflora subsection is one of the most useful in the domestic garden, as the members of this group have a light, airy appearance and lack the bulkiness of other larger rhododendrons.



3 – *Rhododendron pemakoense*. Arboretum Wespelaar
[D. De Meyere, 19-04-2015]

Flowers are zygomorphic, with three petals pointing up and two petals pointing down. *Rhododendron augustinii* was the first species we bumped into; it's a strong, reliable plant, featuring very distinguishable leaves having a rather soft texture, smooth upperside and hairy underside, especially on the midrib. This is the only blue-flowering species within the subsection. *R. davidsonianum* is not the easiest to grow in the subsection, but the specimen that we saw at Wespelaar was truly fantastic. In a section where real pinks are rarities, some forms of *davidsonianum* pass the test with flying colours [Ill. 5]. Many interesting hybrids were also in flower, such as *Rhododendron* 'Shamrock', a cross between *R. keiskei* and *R. hanceanum* with lovely pale yellow flowers. On the other hand, it was a bit early for flowers on *R. concinnum*. Koen told us about his predilection for dark flowers in rhododendron



4 – *Rhododendron uniflorum* var. *imperator*.
Arboretum Wespelaar [D. De Meyere, 19-04-2015]



5 – *Rhododendron davidsonianum*.
Arboretum Wespelaar [D. De Meyere, 19-04-2015]

and *Rhododendron concinnum* is among the best ones, with blue-violet to reddish-purple forms. Not without a certain sense of unfulfilled expectation, I casted my eye on a mature specimen which was just about budding out, and proceed over.

The *Heliolepidia* subsection is very close to *Triflora*, presenting similar characters such as large-habit, easily-grown species which take hard pruning well and perform diligently in gardens. A distinguish feature in *Heliolepidia* is that all its members have aromatic foliage. *Rhododendron rubiginosum* is the most frequently seen species, featuring small trusses of widely funnel-shaped, rosy-mauve flowers beautifully spotted with brown. This is a tall, vigorous rhododendron, ideal for interior windbreaks and informal hedging.

The *Cinnabarina* subsection finds representation in the beds nearby, especially with the type species *Rhododendron cinnabarinum* and its numerous hybrids, some of them having been in cultivation for more than hundred years. *Rhododendron* 'What a Dane' is a more modern hybrid and flowers in yellow and red [Ill. 6]. Another striking selection is *R.* 'Arthur Grumiaux', named after the famous Belgian violinist [Ill. 7]. All these hybrids of *cinnabarinum* have distinctive flowers, which are waxy and tubular, with long tubes and short lobes. They are among the most attractive rhododendrons with the only downside being a certain tendency to suffer from mildew.

Plants in the *Scabrifolia* subsection are smaller to the previous three "series", being closer to the *Virgata* subsection. They all are small shrubs up to four feet tall and are characterized by clusters of pink-reddish flowers and hairy, tough leaves and twigs. Only six species (all from Southwest China) and their hybrids exist. *Rhododendron spinuliferum* was represented in the plots by two healthy plants, wild collected in Sichuan. The pollination



6 – *Rhododendron* 'What a Dane'
 ((*R. ambiguum* × *R. cinnabarinum* Concatenans Gp)
 × *R. cinnabarinum* subsp. *cinnabarinum* 'Nepal').
 Arboretum Wespelaar [D. De Meyere, 19-04-2015]



7 – *Rhododendron* 'Arthur Grumiaux'
 (*R. oreotrephes* × *R.* 'Youthful Sin').
 Arboretum Wespelaar [D. De Meyere, 19-04-2015]

mechanism is still a bit of a mystery because of the very narrow tubular corolla. The spectacular *Rhododendron* 'Spinulosum', a hybrid between *spinuliferum* and *racemosum*, also finds representation at Wespelaar.

We were by then in the middle of the Verlat Wood and the profusion and variety of species and hybrids began to be simply overwhelming. We gradually abandoned the initial systematic criteria and started lingering on the individual specimens, comparing distinguishing features and exceptions. Some of us audaciously left the charted tracks and deviated in direction of the fantastic magnolias. Impossible to resist: their flowers, glorified in the dappled shade of the woods, acted like sirens' songs. A group of deserters lost in contemplation of *Magnolia* (Shirazz) 'Vulden' (*M.* 'Vulcan' × *M. denudata*). Others were bewitched by the flowers of *Magnolia* 'Athene', trying to recognise their peculiar scent. Kenneth Cox stated toothpaste: we all agreed.

We then moved progressively southwards, on a woodland path running along a shelterbelt. The rank of Leyland cypresses (*Cupressus × leylandii*), together with the pine canopy, offers considerable protection for less-hardy species, such as *Taiwania cryptomerioides* and *Betula insignis*, a lovely Chinese birch with showy clusters of long, big male catkins, up to 16 cm long.

At that point Koen had to call the group back to order again, inviting us to focus on the *Lapponica* section, which finds vast representation in the Verlat Wood. Taxonomically this is an extremely difficult group, with taxa interbreeding in the wild and leading to challenging classification. Species are dwarf and therefore good for the small or rock garden. *Rhododendron cuneatum* is one of the most recognisable within the section because of its unusually large size, up to 4 or 5 feet. This is a

genuine lepidote indeed, with densely scaly branchlets and also leaves densely scaled on both surfaces. The flowers are deep rose to a rich pink and contrast magnificently with the purple-blue of *R. polycladum* Scintillans Group.

The next group we explored was the *Maddenia* section, a large series of mostly tender and often epiphytic shrubs. *Rhododendron ciliatum* is moderately hardy, but in colder regions should be grown in full sun and away from frost pockets. It grows up to 4 or 5 feet, spreads widely and should be used more in modern gardens [Ill. 8]. We also noticed *Rhododendron* 'Snow Lady', a cross between *R. ciliatum* and *R. leucaspis*. This is a highly elegant rhododendron, with pure white flowers and brown anthers borne on lax trusses.

Our visit concluded with a walk through Herkenrode, the private gardens of Philippe de Spoelberch that are linked with the arboretum. Here the rhododendrons are displayed differently, as groups and subsections are accommodated more liberally, often mixed together according to a more personal taste. However, some systematic criteria are used, especially due to the scientific approach of the owner.



8 – *Rhododendron ciliatum*. Arboretum Wespelaar
[K. Camelbeke, 25-03-2014]

The connoisseur touch became instantly obvious when we saw *Rhododendron groenlandicum* 'Compactum', a real specimen lepidote commonly known as Labrador tea. It used to be in the genus *Ledum* before 2010 when the whole genus *Ledum* was transferred to *Rhododendron* as a subsection on its own. We noticed some of the previous year's seed caps, revealing the habit of the fruits to open at the base, and the remarkable indumentum on the underside of the leaves.

Rhododendron pentaphyllum was cultivated in a bed nearby. This is another oddity, known as the five-leafed azalea, even technically being a rhododendron. In point of fact, rhododendrons distinguish from azaleas by having 10 stamens instead of 5 (plus from a number of secondary features such as evergreen and broader foliage). This is almost always true, apart when – of course – there are exceptions, consisting in a small group of 10-stamened azaleas, which seem to refuse to read botanical

literature. Unfortunately for us *R. pentaphyllum* wasn't in flower at that time of the year, but is said to be a very showy flowerer at any rate.

At that point the group slowly started to walk back to the Arboretum. The last rhododendron we bumped in was *Rhododendron lapponicum*, with its unmissable sheer blue colour. Koen presented to us the fascinating hypothesis of crossing *R. lapponicum* with *R. augustinii*, so combining deep blue colour with good size and obtaining effective plants for the garden use.

Koen then gave command to break ranks and we all started walking back to Wespelaar in loose formation for the final disbandment. Brushed by a gentle breeze, *Magnolia* 'Petit Chicon' was dropping its yellow tepals on the floor, premonition of the botanical glories still to come over the seasons at Wespelaar and Herkenrode.