

Azaleas and Rhododendrons at Winterthur

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“I do not know when I have enjoyed anything more and have come back fired with a desire to plant azaleas in all directions...” H. F. du Pont letter to Charles Dexter, June 7, 1930.

It was 1930 and Henry Francis (H. F.) du Pont had just returned from a visit to Charles Dexter, a prominent early 20th century rhododendron breeder. Mr. du Pont had actually been planting azaleas and rhododendrons at Winterthur as early as 1905. Winterthur, a few miles outside of Wilmington, Delaware, was home to Henry Francis 1880 – 1969. In his words “I was born at Winterthur and I have always loved everything connected with it...” (Henry Francis du Pont’s letter to Harlan Phillips, 25 March 1962).

Du Pont’s first plantings would have been in the family’s formal gardens in the early 1900s (Tyrrell 1962) and in the creation of a narcissi grove on the slope to the north of the house. He was planting thousands of bulbs in the



Winterthur Garden path.

style of the “wild garden” promoted by William Robinson (1883), a British



Winter hazels (*Corylopsis*) and Korean rhododendrons under-planted with hellebores.

horticulturist and author. Robinson's own words summarize the concept best. "It is applied essentially to the placing of perfectly hardy exotic plants in places and under conditions where they will become established and take care of themselves." Du Pont used this concept to create what many believe to be one of the premiere naturalistic gardens.

Du Pont used broad sweeps of both exotic and native plants under a canopy of majestic oaks, tulip-poplars, and beeches. He extended his garden to the fields and farmlands beyond. As with many 18th century English estates, the garden and the countryside merge in a seamless whole with no clear boundaries. For the formal areas, he turned to his friend and one of the first female landscape architects, Marian Coffin. She designed the layout for the Reflecting Pool, Peony Garden and Sundial Garden, and du Pont selected the plants and color combinations.

Throughout the naturalistic and formal areas, du Pont used azaleas and rhododendrons. He especially valued them because they could provide color in the garden from early April through August. Though he was a collector at heart, once commenting that he must have been borne with the desire to collect, it was important to him that his plants create a beautiful whole. In a 1954 letter to Silvia Saunders, he stated "No matter how fascinating any plant may be, unless it looks well with its group, I do not want it."

Our Rhododendron season begins in early April with the pink shades of *R. oreodoxa* var. *fargesii*, *R. sutchuenense* and *R. sutchuenense* var. *giraldii*. Du Pont purchased these in 1944 from Charles Dexter's widow and he added them at the edge of his Azalea Woods, where you would be able to see the distant pink and white flowers of both the Saucer magnolias, *M. x soulangeana*, and the soft pink fading to white flowers of the Sargent cherry, *Prunus sargentii*. The daisy like blossoms of Italian windflowers, *Anemone apeninna*, in light blues, pinks and white carpet the ground beneath these rhododendrons.

Rhododendron mucronulatum 'Cornell Pink' echoes this color near the Sargent cherry and by the wonderful pink *Prunus* 'Accolade'. Early *Viburnum farreri* and *V. bodnantense* repeat the color, while adding their delightful perfume to the air. Adjacent to this area are lavender forms of *R. mucronulatum* mixed with the soft yellow of winter hazels, *Corylopsis*. Du Pont mentions this color combination as early as 1923 and under-planted the shrubs though the



Pink and white cherries with 'Cornell Pink', *R. mucronulatum* and winter hazels (*Corylopsis*).

years with perennials that would harmonize with their color combination, such as *Corydalis densiflora*, Helleborus hybrids, and *Primula abschasicca*.

The lavender flowers of 'Conewago' and *R. yedoense* var. *poukhanense* soon join



R. mucronulatum 'Cornel Pink'.

the seasonal display and continue the color in nearby garden areas. Du Pont had acquired these plants from Joseph Gable in 1939 and 1941 respectively, after these men had begun correspondence in the 1930s. In 1939, du Pont wrote that he thought Gable's new azaleas were a "most interesting lot" and that Gable's mauves were "lovely and a better mauve than any Kurume I have." The pink flowers of *R. mucronulatum* 'Cornell Pink' give way in mid-April to the delicate, pure pink flowers of the Royal azalea, *R. schlippenbachii*. Professor Charles Sargent of the Arnold Arboretum recommended these plants to H.F. in 1919 noting that "Certainly it is one of the most beautiful of perfectly hardy azaleas and I am sure it will do well in Delaware." Du Pont ordered six plants from Cottage Gardens in 1922 and planted them along the main allee of the Pinetum, another planting project encouraged and helped along by Sargent.

In this same corridor are 'Miss Susie' azaleas and their pink flower buds echo the pink of the Royal azaleas. This cultivar from Dr. Thomas Wheeldon creates a tall, bright pink hallway in late April, just after the Royal azaleas are finished. Dr. Wheeldon was in communication with du Pont from the mid-1950s to early 60s and supplied him with many of the then new hybrids. Du Pont noted "I am grateful to him for letting me try all these new plants, which, if I waited for them to be offered by the nurseries, I would have long since left this planet". Before the



From left to right, Kurume azaleas #2, #46, and #48.

Italian windflowers, *A. apennina*, fade in late April, they overlap for a few days with the salmons, reds and oranges of the Torch azaleas, *R. kaempferi*. Professor Sargent recommended and supplied these plants in 1919. They were used to create a tall corridor entrance to the Azalea Woods, concealing the expansive panorama of flowering Kurume azaleas one is about to enter.

Azalea Woods began as a nursery after the Chestnut blight killed the American chestnuts growing there, opening the forest floor to more light. Du Pont acquired his first Kurume azaleas in 1917 from Cottage Gardens Nursery on Long Island, just two years after they were first displayed at the Panama Pacific International Exposition. In 1920, Professor Sargent invited du Pont to Boston for a show of E. H. Wilson's "new race of azaleas" (Kurumes), stating that "If these azaleas prove hardy in the middle states, they will be the most important introduction the gardens of that part of the country which has been made for a great many years." Sargent sent him twenty-one different Kurumes in 1922, adding to his collection, but unfortunately, many of the original names did not stay with the plants, so du Pont and his staff simply referred to these Kurumes by assigned numbers.

Du Pont propagated these initial plants and began arranging them in large drifts of color. There are notes and letters through the years of their transplanting azaleas to create just the right combinations of color. He designed the center of Azalea



Kurume azaleas 'Arnoldianum', 'Snow', #4, and #5



From left to right, Kurume azaleas #48 and #46.



Kurume azaleas beneath dogwood trees.



Rhododendron 'Pink Pearl'.

recognize the names 'Pink Pearl' and 'Cherryblossom'. The color intensifies to a bright pink with 'Hinomayo' and two similar colored kurumes that vary slightly in color and flower shape. Du Pont often used this technique of using similar colored azaleas together, most likely to maintain the design while adding to his collection, but it also adds another level of detail and interest to the garden.

Beside the sweep of 'Hinomayo' azaleas, the color transitions to lavender with just a touch of cherry red. The lavender is from what we believe are 'Lavender Queen' and 'Mauve Beauty' azaleas and is blended with a few points of cherry red from

Woods as a vision of white with three different white flowering azaleas, 'Snow', Kurume #16, and 'Rose Greeley,' under a canopy of white flowering dogwoods, *Cornus florida*, with a carpet of white *Trillium grandiflorum*. We have recently been experimenting with white flowering redbuds, *Cercis canadensis f. alba* and the two-winged silverbell, *Halesia diptera* var. *magniflora*, due to problems with dogwood anthracnose.

A few of the flower corridors spreading out from the center repeat the white color, while others bring in shades of soft pink, rose and salmon. Most of these are our numbered Kurumes but some may



Rhododendron 'Tan'

Rhododendron 'Tan'

'Arnoldianum'*. Du Pont commented that it was to “chic it up,” and Marian Coffin admired his talent with color when she wrote to him in 1948 after an early May visit to Winterthur. She stated “I can shut my eyes and see it all and am still undecided which azalea effect was the loveliest. You certainly handled the discords or near discords, which in your knowing hands became harmonies with consummate skill, and with those vibrant pinks and magentas that is no mean feat.” Overlapping with the Kurumes and carrying the color later into May is one of du Pont’s favorites, *R. mucronatum* and its cultivars. *R. mucronatum* was grown at Winterthur possibly as early as 1910, most likely received from Cottage Gardens. They were also the source for ‘Magnifica’*, a white flowering form with a strawberry blotch, giving an overall light pink effect in the landscape. This form, along with a soft purple form called ‘Winterthur’*, repeats throughout the 60 acre (24.3 ha) garden.

Flowering with these azaleas are the majestic broadleaf rhododendrons. The majority of ours are from the propagation efforts of Charles O. Dexter. Du Pont had visited Dexter in 1930 looking for soft yellow forms of *R. mollis* azaleas, and became entranced with Dexter’s work with *R. fortunei*. He was especially interested



Rhododendron schlippenbachii, and ‘Miss Susie’.

in Dexter's apricot colored forms, and Dexter sent du Pont young layered plants and flats of unnamed seedlings, which du Pont would number as they came into flower. Therefore, we have unofficial names of #1, the first to flower at the very end of April, up to #53, the last to flower in late May.

Du Pont's connection with nurserymen brought him several rhododendrons before the breeders officially named them. Joseph Gable would send him young plants still in the number stage. For example, 'Robert Allison' was received simply as 'Gable's Pink No.2' and 'David Gable' as 'Gable's Pink No.1'. These and 'Mary Belle' are still represented in the garden, as well as Gable hybrid CxC4 and 5x64.

Du Pont was committed to adding new plants to the garden. He acquired the Glenn Dale hybrids as early as 1949 from Henry Hohman of Kingsville Nursery, and later from Dr. Wheeldon. He used these and the Chisolm-Merritt hybrids in other areas outside of Azalea Woods to entice visitor to stroll through the garden. The salmon forms of 'Mayflower', 'Lullaby', and 'Coral Cluster' brighten a portion of the Pinetum.

Du Pont was also always searching for ways to extend the season of color. In 1954, he stated "I was always worried about the late bloom, but now I'm moving the Kaempferi hybrid azaleas above the garden, and it will increase the showing." By late May and into early June, the display is primarily Kaempferi hybrid azaleas, which Du Pont received from Professor Sargent and from Mr. Hunnewell of Wellesley, Massachusetts. There are two distinct color waves, which du Pont kept separate. Some flower slightly earlier and are described by him as red pink, while the other form is a blue pink. There are variations in each color form that we have documented so that we can



Reflecting Pool.

propagate and preserve these plants and the design.

Deciduous azaleas overlap the flowering time of the rhododendrons mentioned earlier and extend the color into summer. We have documented orders as early as 1907 for *R. arborescens*, as Du Pont used both native and oriental deciduous azaleas in the garden. In the Pinetum, he combined soft yellow, pink and orange flowered azaleas with the blue of Spanish bluebells, *Hyacinthoides hispanica*. In the 1950s he helped sponsor the doctoral work of Dr. Henry Skinner's exploration of the native azaleas and in return, received several plants. Our garden's rhododendron flowering season ends with the plum-leaf azalea, *R. prunifolium*, of which. S. D. Coleman and the National Arboretum sent several shades of orange-red in the early to mid-1960s.

Perhaps it is best to summarize du Pont's (1962) love of azaleas in his own words: "The longer I grow azaleas, the more I realize how beautiful they are when grouped in harmonious colors and pleasing contrast. They naturalize in every imaginable terrain and contour (no other species are in bloom in Delaware for almost four months) and due to their various height and habit of growth are never monotonous, and are perfect with countless varieties of bulbs and wild bloom."



Rhododendron 'Winterthur-Dexter #7'.*



Rhododendron 'Winterthur-Dexter #7'.*

Note: Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library will be on the tours of “The Philadelphia Story: Rhododendrons in America’s Garden Capital,” at the May 2019 International ARS Convention.

* = Unregistered.

References:

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A garden is a complex of aesthetic and plastic intentions; and the plant is, to a landscape artist, not only a plant - rare, unusual, ordinary or doomed to disappearance - but it is also a color, a shape, a volume or an arabesque in itself.

Roberto Burle Marx