



RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

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Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden

by Mary Yee



Rhododendrons and azaleas from all over the world grow in the woodlands of the Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden, providing brilliant color in spring.

MARCH THROUGH May is a spectacular time at the Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden (RSBG), when most of its collection is in bloom. Located about half an hour from Seattle in Federal Way, Washington, this trail-filled, 22-acre woodland is home to about 900 of the approximately 1,200 identified species of the world's rhododendrons and azaleas.

"The Rhododendron Species Foundation began in the early 1960s as a way for avid rhododendron collectors to find true-to-name species rhododendrons, which were very difficult to source in North America at the time," says Steve Hootman, the garden's executive director and curator. The foundation's rhododendron collection grew into the

botanical garden when it found a home in 1974 on land originally leased from the Weyerhaeuser company.

WHY RHODODENDRONS MATTER

So what's so special about the genus *Rhododendron*? Beyond their ornamental value for gardeners, rhododendrons and azaleas can offer "insights into the health of the planet," says Britt Board, RSBG's program and outreach manager. "They can often be the first plants to grow back after clearcutting or a fire. In some areas, certain rhododendrons are also considered keystone species, which means that they are crucial to the success of an entire ecosystem."

Hence the RSBG is both a recreational space for visitors as well as a living museum for researchers. With only about two

percent of species native to North America, the majority of the garden's collection is from other parts of the world.

Hootman, who has been on rhododendron-hunting trips all over the world and brought back specimens to add to the RSBG's collection, is partial to many Asian species, including *Rhododendron edgeworthii*, which, he describes as having "stunning white flushed pink fragrant flowers and beautiful glossy and bullate foliage with a thick indumentum [hairy covering] beneath." Another favorite, *R. singrande*, has "huge, glossy leaves that are up to two-and-a-half feet in length."

At RSBG, visitors will be sure to see a species of rhododendron or azalea blooming almost any time of the year. "Early-blooming species include *R. dauricum* from Siberia with red-purple flowers in January, and *R. ririei* from Sichuan with lavender-purple bells in early February," says Hootman. "The last species to flower is *R. faithiae* from Guangxi, China, which produces large, pure white, fragrant flowers in September. This species was our own first introduction into cultivation from the wild." For year-round eye appeal, Hootman lauds flame azalea (*R. calendulaceum*), "which is native to mountains in eastern North America and features large and showy flowers in late spring that range from orange to yellow and red. It has great fall foliage color as well."

Tropical rhododendrons, most notably the vireyas, that can't be grown outdoors in the Pacific Northwest, can be found in the Rutherford Conservatory together with species orchids, tree ferns, and other plants. "Vireyas are some of the flashiest rhodies," says Board, "with exceptionally bright colors, unusual flower shapes, and fragrance." She notes the Conservatory also houses a "world-class collection of *Agapetes*," a blueberry relative from the Himalayas with pendent, tubular flowers.



Serving as habitat for a variety of ferns and other shade-loving plants, the Stumpery pays homage to the sculptural and life-giving qualities of decaying tree stumps and logs.

BEYOND RHODODENDRONS

Set in woodlands, the RSBG is all about trees, and one of its most popular gardens celebrates them in an unusual way. Debuting in 2009 as a collaborative project between the RSBG and the Hardy Fern Foundation, the Stumpery “looks like an otherworldly fairy land,” says Board. More than 140 decaying stumps and logs are arranged to create niche environments under the woodland’s Douglas firs that are perfect for ferns, big leaf rhododendrons, and woodland wildflowers.

Another visitor favorite is the Blue Poppy Meadow, which features a cultivar of the Himalayan blue poppy, *Meconopsis* ‘Lingholm’, a showy Asian plant that is difficult to cultivate in most parts of North America. The RSBG has had so much success that it dedicates a Blue



A meadow of ‘Lingholm’ blue poppy in bloom makes for a breathtaking display.

Poppy Day each spring in celebration.

“The genus *Meconopsis* occurs in the same regions and habitats as rhododendrons in the mountains of the Himalayas and adjacent southwestern China,” says Hootman. “Members of these two genera can often be seen growing side by side in their native habitats, so it made sense to introduce the beautiful and rarely seen blue poppies and other *Meconopsis* to the garden where they complement the *Rhododendron* species.”

RSBG also has a magnolia grove and an alpine rock garden.

EDUCATION AND CONSERVATION

Although the RSBG began as a collector’s museum for the RSF, Hootman says, “the organization has increasingly been focused on education and conservation.” As part of an effort to better interpret its collection, the RSBG is producing signage to help visitors understand the importance of rhododendrons and azaleas. Hootman adds, “We continue to explore the most remote regions of the world in a quest for more knowledge about the genus *Rhododendron* and to search for new plants worthy of introduction into horticulture. There is always something new and exciting at the RSBG!”

Mary Yee is managing editor and art director of *The American Gardener*.

Additional Information

Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden

2525 S. 336th Street
Federal Way, WA 98003
(253) 838-4646
<https://rhodygarden.org>

- Tuesday–Sunday 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Closed on major holidays.
- Admission: \$8 general; \$5 for 65+ and students; free for children under 12 and active military.
- RAP benefits: Free admission; discounts on select special events, educational programs, and gift shop purchases

HOW THE RECIPROCAL ADMISSIONS PROGRAM (RAP) WORKS

This American Horticultural Society program is designed to encourage people to visit gardens, arboreta, and conservatories while traveling. As a current member, you receive free admission and/or other special discounts at more than 330 sites throughout North America! Here’s how to make the most of this member benefit:

- View the current list of participating locations and the RAP benefits they offer at www.ahsgardening.org/rapgardens.
- Contact the garden to confirm the RAP benefits it offers. (Some sites may choose to enforce a 90-mile exclusion policy; if your zip code falls within that distance from the location, you would not receive the offered RAP benefits there.) Admission to special events may also be excluded.
- Present your current membership card at the admissions counter or gift shop to receive the RAP benefit(s) offered by that garden. Each card will only admit the individual(s) listed on the card. In the case of a family, couple, or household membership card that does not list individual names, the garden must extend the benefit(s) to at least two members; it is at the garden’s discretion to extend benefits to more than two individuals. Some gardens may require a photo ID.