Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden

by Mary Yee

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. sinigrande, 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. riviei 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.
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 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!”

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