

# Rediscovering Rhododendron Dell, Part 1

*Kyle Port*

---

**A pile of plant record labels, mysteriously stripped from accessioned plants in the Arboretum's Rhododendron Dell, sent Manager of Plant Records Kyle Port on a mission to assess, verify, and relabel the collection**

**In this issue, Kyle reports on the early history of Rhododendron Dell, and in the next issue he will write about the multi-layered curatorial process involved in the Rhododendron Dell project.**

---

One hundred forty years ago, a triumphant rhododendron show bloomed on the Boston Common. For a nominal fee, attendees were ushered under tents where plants from private collections, including those of Arnold Arboretum director Charles S. Sargent and the event's sponsor, H. H. Hunnewell, were arranged. Rhododendron hybrids imported from Anthony Waterer (Knap Hill Nursery, Woking, England) garnered considerable attention. The revelation that *R. 'Album Elegans'* and a few other cultivars were hardy outdoors in the Boston area soon fostered planting trials beyond conservatory walls, specifically in the bur-



## EDITORIAL NOTES Rhododendron Show at Boston

The Rhododendron show on the Boston Common was a sight never to be forgotten—the finest in colors and display of choice varieties this country has ever beheld. It was with considerable difficulty the bare privilege was secured from the common council, to exhibit upon the Common; and next, it was believed to be almost impossible to transport and successfully flower so many plants as would be needed to produce the desired effect. Thanks, however, to the untiring energy of Mr. H. H. Hunnewell, Charles S. Sargent and E. S. Rand, jr., every difficulty was surmounted, and for the entire month of June the denizens of that city saw a collection of Azaleas and Rhododendrons of rare value and great beauty ...

Two large tents were erected, one about 60 by 100 feet, the other 100 by 300 feet, and the plants transplanted from their native home and conservatories of Mr. Hunnewell and Mr. Sargent, and placed in the natural soil of the Common. Within the tents were laid out, first, an avenue of 100 feet in length, bordered with Palms and rare Ferns; this led to the Rhododendron beds and walks. In the center of the large tent were three raised beds; the first, 15 by 30 feet; the second, 50 by 80 feet; the third, 15 feet in diameter. Walks also surrounded all the beds, which were lined with specimen plants. Imagine all this space and beds filled solidly with masses of Rhododendrons in full bloom, bearing flowers of most royal size, and delicate as well as glowing and brilliant colors, and it would seem to be but a vision of the garden of Paradise.

... most of them [rhododendrons] are fit for in-door greenhouse culture only, many being but just imported from the Knapp [Knap] Hill nursery of Anthony Waterer, Woking England.

Luther Tucker

*The Horticulturist, and Journal of Rural Art and Rural Taste,*  
Volume 28, August 1873



The alluring white-flowered R. 'Album Elegans' (hybridized by Waterer, pre-1847) was one of the first large-leaved, evergreen rhododendrons proved hardy in Massachusetts. This Arboretum accession of the cultivar was photographed by Ralph W. Curtis in June 1932.



The burgeoning Rhododendron Dell is seen in this Autochrome glass slide from 1934.

geoning landscapes of the Arnold Arboretum, which had been established just the year before. More importantly, the friendships forged at the Boston show guaranteed that the most sought after rhododendron hybrids of the day would become accessible for viewing and study, free of

the existing soils—Hinckley sandy loam and Scio very fine sandy loam—proved adequate. Stands of eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), intentionally left by the previous land owner Benjamin Bussey (1757–1842), provided an ideal amount of shade. And above all, the site



Staff members of the Arnold Arboretum have collected, researched, and written extensively about *Rhododendron*, covering a myriad of species and hybrids. So prolific were early Arboretum contributors that the Royal Horticultural Society bestowed the Loder Rhododendron Cup on C. S. Sargent in 1924, E. H. Wilson in 1927, and Alfred Rehder in 1936.

charge, to anyone who journeyed to the Arboretum.

A suitable location for cultivating these large-leaved rhododendrons was found in a wind sheltered two-acre area between the northern contours of Hemlock Hill and Valley Road, through which Bussey Brook flows. Eventually named Rhododendron Dell,



allowed for cold air to sink away toward low-lying Bussey Brook Meadow.

The new hybrids were not immediately planted in Rhododendron Dell; instead, the first plantings on the site were of the hybrids' North American parent species, which included *R. catawbiense*, *R. maximum*, and *R. minus*. It is likely that the only remaining plants from these early plantings exist in a mass planting of *R. maximum* accessions 23020 and 23021. These accessions actually comprise a number of accessions that were interplanted over the years and became indistinguishable from each other. The oldest of these *R. maximum* accessions was obtained as seeds in 1880 from Benjamin Marston Watson's Old Colony Nurseries and Seed Warehouse in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

In 1886, the first *R. catawbiense* hybrids from Anthony Waterer were planted in Rhododendron Dell. Some of these hybrid cultivars had been featured in the tents of the 1873 rhododendron show on Boston Common, but now they were being planted outdoors to see how they would fare. Among these inaugural cultivars, *R. 'Purpureum Grandiflorum'* (accession 2804) and *R. 'Album Grandiflorum'* (accession 2805-A) survive to this day. Subsequent introductions such as *R. 'Mrs. Harry Ingersoll'* (accession 6202-C, acquired in 1891) epitomize the allure these hybrid rhododendrons had upon so many. Their survival at the Arboretum solidified a resolve to develop, evaluate, and maintain a collection for the ages. As Sargent wrote to Anthony Waterer in February 1911, "I think that we should have here a correctly named standard set of the hardy hybrid Rhododendrons as so many people depend on the Arboretum for information on such a subject."

While the majority of the early acquisitions of hybrids in Rhododendron Dell were those of Anthony Waterer and his cousin, John Waterer, a number of other international hybridizers are also represented. Fel-



*Rhododendron catawbiense* 'Grandiflorum'



*Rhododendron* 'Mrs. Harry Ingersoll'



*Rhododendron* 'Echse I'





*Rhododendron* 'Duke of York'

low Englishman G. Paul provided *R.* 'Duke of York' (accession 22616-A, 1921 lineage from a 1915 introduction), and in 1908 German T. J. Rudolf Seidel sent, among others, *R.* 'Echse I' (accession 6175-B), which has bright reddish purple flowers with wavy-edged petals.

In 1919, the federal government's passage of Quarantine No. 37 governing the importation of nursery stock halted shipments of plants by steamer directly to Boston. The Arboretum had

a nearly exclusive reliance on overseas suppliers at the time, but this quarantine forced relationship-building closer to home. North American nurseries, hybridizers, and hobbyists stepped up to meet the challenge and became reliable allies in the development of the *Rhododendron* Dell collections.

---

Kyle Port is Manager of Plant Records at the Arnold Arboretum.

*For a great opportunity to explore the Rhododendron Dell in bloom, join us there for*

**COLLECTIONS UP CLOSE: RHODODENDRON RAMBLE**

*on Sunday, June 2, 1:00 to 3:00 p.m.*

*This free event includes walking tours with knowledgeable Arboretum staff and fun science activities for kids.*