

Rhododendrons

We all know what a *Rhododendron* looks like, more or less but there are over 900 species, let alone hybrids and cultivars, and they occur in every continent bar South America; however there is no doubt as to where the majority of species comes from, and it's that corner of the eastern Himalayas which contains S.W China, northern Burma, Tibet, and northern India. It has been a spectacular entrance into the world's horticulture, taking only about a hundred and fifty years to win the hearts and minds of gardeners. Their late arrival is accounted for by the very inaccessibility of their homeland, and the secretive nature of the all countries involved. It seems that the first person to return with *Rhododendron* seed from the Himalaya was Major General Thomas Hardwicke of the Bengal Artillery during the 1830's. He was followed by Robert Fortune in the 1840's and 1850's, when he travelled (partly disguised as a Chinaman) managing to collect the seed of four *Rhododendrons* although he did not approach the main centre of distribution. Most of the ones he managed to introduce were already being cultivated in Chinese gardens, although one discovered in the mountains of Ningbo, in east China, was named *Rhododendron fortunei*. He sent seeds to the nursery firm of Glendinning of Chiswick for them to propagate. You can still buy the plant today.

Sir Joseph Hooker, when he went to the Himalayas, particularly Sikkim, he made a remarkably clean sweep of the southern fringes of the area. He managed to discover twenty three species, many of which are still extant and growing like the old war horses that they are. The seed that he collected was redistributed literally around the world, many going to botanic gardens, including Dijon Botanic gardens and Arboretum, to Canterbury in New Zealand, Sydney Australia, Baltimore and the grand- daddy of them all, founded in 1545 the Botanic Garden of Florence in Italy. Prince Albert received seed for the planting of *Rhododendrons* at Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight, Charles Darwin received 12 assorted seed. Many of the great Cornish valley gardens owe their Himalayan look to Hooker's generosity.

Of the flood of Chinese species, large and small, one of the most important to come in from the wild, was *Rhododendron griersonianum* which was discovered by George Forrest in 1917 and named by him for his friend and host R. C. Grierson, who was stationed at Tengchong County in the Chinese Maritime Customs. This *Rhododendron* excited such enthusiasm because of its startling flower colour, geranium - red, unlike any other species that by 1952 it had become a parent of about a hundred and twenty-two other hybrids. In other words as Ernest Wilson wrote ' it was crossed with everything in sight'. Today it's been calculated that *griersonianum* appears in at least 10% of all the registered hybrids - that is at least 2,500 of the 25,000 hybrids there are. As can be imagined there are also a huge collection of Societies - all around

the world specialising in *Rhododendrons*, New Zealand, America, Canada, Vancouver, France as well as the Société Bretonne du Rhododendron, in 1851 there is even a literary Duke of Rhododendron created by George Borrow his novel 'Lavengro'.

Rhododendron -ites are like their shrubs, sociable and clubbable, you cannot grow just one rhododendron you must grow as many as you can cram into your garden, a rhododendron after all is an investment in the future and not just for Christmas!

