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**SMALL GARDENS UPDATE
and MORE**

ON SOUR GROUND:

The *Rhododendron* and *Kalmia* Collections
at Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens

STEVEN A. WRIGHT

The groundwork for Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens was laid in 1968 when H. Lawrence Jenkins preserved his twenty-acre property as a living memorial to his wife Elisabeth, an avid gardener and wildlife enthusiast. In his will, Mr. Jenkins directed that the property become a “public park, arboretum, and wildlife sanctuary for the study of arboriculture, horticulture, and wildlife for educational and scientific purposes.” Since officially opening in 1976, the Arboretum has remained true to Mr. Jenkins’ original vision.

Today, Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens continues to provide a tranquil escape from the bustling Philadelphia suburbs—it is open every day of the year and free of charge. Perhaps more important, Jenkins has become one of the region’s great horticultural and environmental assets. Since receiving a donation of twenty-six adjoining acres in 1972, the Arboretum now preserves a total of forty-six acres. As much as possible, the landscape incorporates native plants that attract birds and wildlife and nature enthusiasts of all kinds, but it is the extensive rhododendron and azalea collections that get visitors really stirring.



History

It could be said that the Arboretum did not choose the collection, nature did. Early surveys found the sour, acidic soil to be perfectly suited for growing the acid-loving plants of the Ericaceae family, and rhododendrons, kalmias, and vacciniums were among the plants found growing wild on the site. With this in mind, the garden was planned to display a diverse collection of ericaceous plants, with a focus on rhododendron and azalea species and hybrids from around the world.

Since 1976, the *Rhododendron* collection has expanded, and the Arboretum’s original plantings have matured to become a spectacle that draws thousands of visitors each year.

The *Rhododendron* Collection

With over twenty-three hundred accessions and eighteen hundred taxa, the *Rhododendron* collection at Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens is incredibly diverse. All five major divisions within the genus are represented—lepidote rhododendrons (those with scaly leaves), elepidote rhododendrons (those with non-scaly leaves), evergreen azaleas (all from Asia), deciduous azaleas (mainly eastern US natives), and even vireya rhododendrons (mostly tropical epiphytes).

The success of the *Rhododendron* collection is a result of moist, well-drained, acidic soils and ample rainfall during the growing season. Perhaps the main factor, however, is simply the location of the Arboretum. Being situated on the edge of zones 6b and 7 and having both north- and south-facing slopes, the

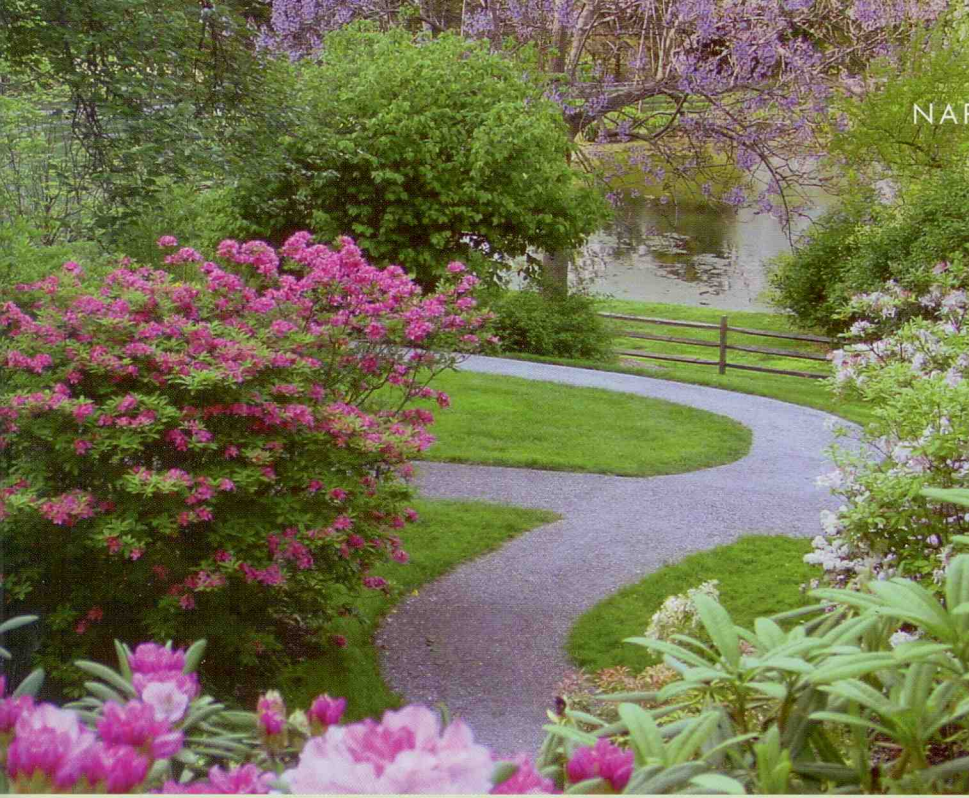


Arboretum is able to display evergreen azaleas, which typically grow farther south, as well as large leaf rhododendrons, which typically grow farther north.

While rhododendrons and azaleas are planted throughout the garden, the majority of the collection can be found in two general locations. The showiest of the collection, the Asian evergreen azaleas reside in a part of the Arboretum known as Azalea Hill, a south-facing slope with high open shade. Native azaleas are also represented as there are fourteen species native to the eastern US displayed on the Woodland Walk, a north-facing slope devoted to native trees, shrubs, ferns, and wildflowers.

Microclimates and species diversity allow for a long blooming season which lasts about four months. The season begins in late March with the purple *Rhododendron dauricum* and lavender/pink Korean azalea (*R. mucronulatum*) and ends in late July to early August with the red-orange plumleaf azalea (*R. prunifolium*), though some hybrid evergreen azaleas even bloom in the fall. Peak bloom time occurs just in time for Mother’s Day when the majority of the collection is in full bloom and visitor attendance is at its highest.

There is, however, more to the genus *Rhododendron* than the obvious flush of spring color. From the diminutive form of the dwarf azalea to the sweet fragrance of the swamp azalea, and to the distinctive



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“strap petals” of ‘Koromo Shikibu,’ the variety in the collection is seemingly endless. But if color really is what you’re looking for, the Jenkins’ collection goes way beyond the traditional pinks and whites. Examples include ‘Cockatoo,’ a hybrid azalea with bright red-orange flowers, ‘Rheins Luna,’ a hybrid azalea with beautiful lavender blue flowers, or the *keiskei* hybrids—small-leaved rhododendrons with clear yellow flowers.

Research and Expansion

The relatively young collection has continued to evolve and expand since the 1970s. Some of the more interesting additions came in the 1990s, when Arboretum Director Dr. Harold Sweetman explored the high Himalayas and collected rhododendrons, particularly *R. decorum*, *R. racemosum*, and *R. rubiginosum*, in the remote regions of western China’s Yunnan Province and Arunachal Pradesh, a state in northwest India. Later, *Rhododendron nakaharai* witches’-brooms from the Arboretum’s own collection were discovered, propagated, and planted as a mass. In 2007, the Arboretum acquired a collection of twenty vireya rhododendrons that, because of Philadelphia’s cold winters, must reside in the greenhouse. Currently, Jenkins is working on preservation and collections expansion to include some of the best new cultivars of hybrid rhododendrons from east coast hybridizers.

Kalmias and Other Native Plants

The Arboretum has also amassed a noteworthy collection of laurels (*Kalmia* spp.) that, along with the *Rhododendron* collection, became part of the NAPCC in 2010. There are seven *Kalmia* species native to North America, but climate has limited the Jenkins collection to only two—*K. latifolia*, the common mountain laurel, and its thin-leaved cousin, *K. angustifolia*, the sheep laurel. It is interesting to note that these are the only two species native to this region of Pennsylvania.

While the Arboretum’s *Kalmia* collection is significantly smaller than its *Rhododendron* collection, it is still quite diverse with 235 plants representing forty-eight taxa. The mountain laurels are most prominent with forty cultivars on display and dozens of specimens growing wild on the rocky hillside. While the Arboretum is always looking to add new varieties and hybrids, specific plans to expand this collection focus on adding the five North American species that are not currently grown on the site (*K. carolina*, *K. cuneata*, *K. ericoides*, *K. hirsuta*, and *K. polifolia*). As mentioned, climate will be the major determining factor in their success, and careful plant and site selection will be essential.

Finally, no discussion of Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens would be complete without further mention of native plants. There are approximately five hundred species of native trees, shrubs, ferns, and

wildflowers planted in the Arboretum. From the spring-blooming woodland ephemerals and colorful summer wildflowers to the vibrant fall foliage and persistent winter fruits, these plants provide wildlife habitat and horticultural interest year-round. Current efforts aim to expand the native plant collections’ focus on conserving Pennsylvania’s rare and endangered species. As of fall 2010, the Arboretum fostered nearly fifty species that are considered rare, endangered, threatened, or extirpated in the state of Pennsylvania, and more will be added in years to come. Additionally, efforts are being made to acquire and display native bog and woodland orchids whose rarity, delicate nature, and exacting site requirements should make this a daunting task. With *Rhododendrons*, *Kalmias*, and a diverse collection of native plants, Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens will continue to provide both horticultural interest and botanical diversity and be forever preserved as a recreational, educational, and environmental model for the appreciation and stewardship of nature.

Steve Wright is the newly appointed curator of plant collections at Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens. He received a BS in education from Delaware Valley College and an MAgri. in forestry and entomology from Louisiana State University. Steve can be reached at steve@jenkinsarboretum.org.

