

New Breed Of Farmer

... Mountain Home Man Specializes In Rhododen

By CLYDE OSBORNE
Citizen Staff Writer

Ted Richardson belongs to the new generation of Western North Carolina farmers, a group pushing a burgeoning production of horticultural crops.

The Mountain Home man is growing a crop which feeds the soul rather than the physical body of man.

His specialty is Rhododendron hybrids which adorn landscaped plots from Birmingham to Washington. He turns out 25,000 of them each year, a mixture of 50 varieties which he has found are hardiest and most satisfactory for the area he serves.

Like a lot of other modern, new-generation farmers, Richardson, who appears to be in his late thirties, talks more like a scientist than a farmer. He has a master's degree in horticulture from N.C. State University.

And while most of his business is wholesale — about 90 percent — he does sell some plants at retail from his place on highway 25 a few miles the other side of Fletcher in Henderson County.

Also like a lot of other new-generation farmers, Richardson is highly mobile. He uses the warm Florida winters

to get another year's growth on his Rhododendrons, actually getting them ready for market a year earlier.

The young father of two daughters — third grade and kindergarten — takes cuttings (flushes) from the mother plants in his nursery in late June.

The cuttings are new growth which have hardened but are still flexible and not at the brittle point.

These are inserted in a mixture of 50 percent Perlite and 50 percent peat moss in seven-foot by three-foot trays which have wire bottoms.

"This is the only peat moss these plants will ever see while they're on my place," Richardson says. "The wire bottoms in the trays allow complete drainage for the holding mixture."

It makes an ideal rooting situation, he says. Automatic misters keep adding small amounts of water so that there's no chance the rooting cuttings will dry out.

Along about Nov. 1, Richardson will load the trays of cuttings on a truck and haul them to South Florida, to a point south of Palm Beach.

Immediately upon arrival there, he'll transfer the rooted

cuttings into three-gallon cans where they'll thrive until sold.

Each of the cans contains pine bark chips "and nothing else," says Richardson.

This growing medium is porous, drains well, and allows needed air to get to the roots of the young plants.

The Rhododendrons thrive all winter in Florida and are returned to Mountain Home in early May, "hopefully after the danger of frost is past," Richardson says. The same growing techniques are continued in the Henderson community with fertilizer being applied almost daily through the nursery's irrigation system.

Fertilization is done scientifically as are all other phases of this modern farm operation. Richardson sends samples of plant tissue to the N.C. Department of Agriculture for regular checks. Analysis of the plant tissues gives a clear picture of nutrients needed by the plants.

Richardson adjusts his fertilizer formula to meet these needs.

Most of his plants are sold at two years old. But others are ready to go at one year of age.

His varieties range from the tiny dwarf Yakusamanum Rhododendron to the giant hybrids of the United States.

Colors run the gamut from yellows through reds to purples and all in between.

He is constantly searching for new varieties which will prove hardy in his sales region. "I travel all over the nation doing this," he says. "A few years ago I bought 100 new varieties from a Cape Cod nurseryman. After a trial period I narrowed the ones worth breeding down to five."

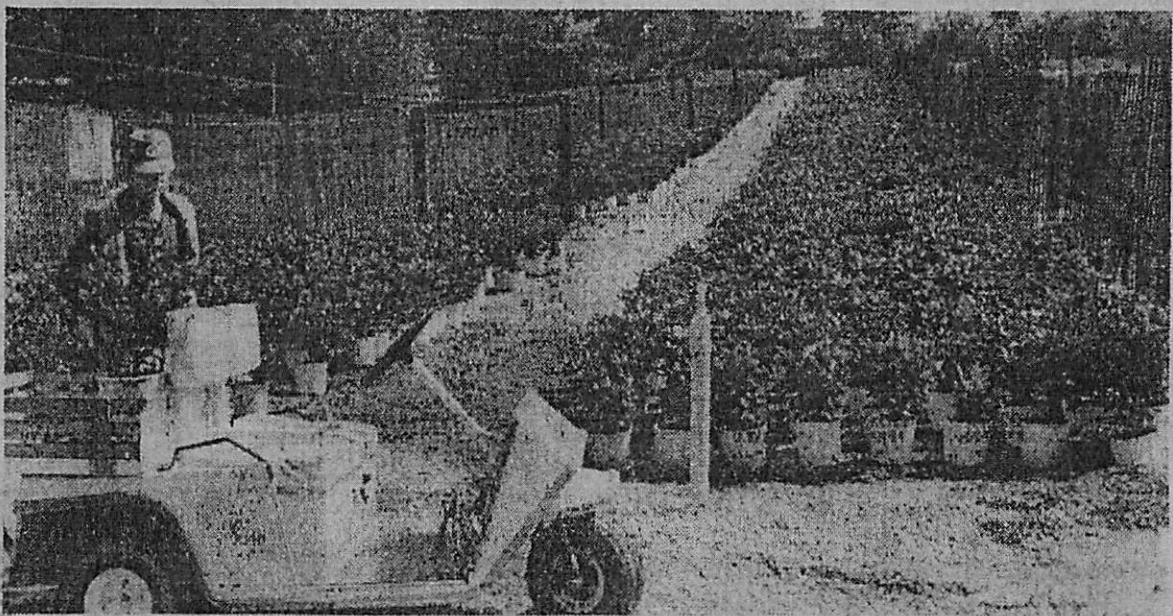
Fifteen years ago when he went into the business after teaching school at Hayesville for a couple of years and returning to N.C. State to get his Master's, there was no place to go for stock within the region.

He went into the northeast to purchase his nursery stock, and ended up by throwing away more than 200 varieties which weren't hardy here or didn't meet his standards for other reasons.

Richardson is a native of Randleman in Randolph County. He once drove the school bus on which race driver Richard Petty rode to school.

"Rhododendron is a very exacting crop," says Richardson, "awfully hard to grow."

So he has some advice for homeowners and others who



—Photo By Clyde Osborne

GOLF CART SERVES AS TRUCK FOR TRANSPORTING RHODODENDRONS

Iron Hybrids

wish to be successful with the plants:

Picture a bucket of golf balls, and a bucket of postage stamps. Fill each of the buckets with water. When the bucket of golf balls drains the air holes are left. When the bucket of stamps is drained, it leaves a soggy mess.

The bucket of postage stamps is like clay soil, Richardson continues. It is tight and cuts off air, and keeps a soggy mess around the roots.

Air and drainage are the two most important elements for a Rhododendron's roots. "For this reason, I don't even recommend putting Rhododendrons into holes. Don't ever dig a hole. Set the Rhododendrons down on top of the ground and mound up with a good organic soil mixture around the root systems. This allows the water to drain away from the mound's edges.

"Root rot disease is the worst enemy of Rhododendrons. And I doubt that there's a spoonful of soil in North Carolina which doesn't contain the fungus of this disease. But well-aerated, and well-drained root systems do not allow the root rot to take hold: it is defeated."

Naturally, he continues, plants set on top of the ground need to be watered during droughts.

"It's very simple, you water nice healthy plants, as you don't water and have dead plants."

One thing the blossoming horticultural industry in W.N.C. needs, Richardson says, is an Extension Service specialist located in the region who is readily available to assist farmers with any troubles which might arise.

At the rate horticultural crops are growing in the region, such a person is needed badly, he said.

Farmers who specialize in the wide variety of floral, vegetable, and other horticultural crops need such a person handy, he says. This person needs to be one with a lot of practical experience, not one with just a lot of book learning.

"I feel very strongly about this," Richardson said. "I hope the extension service will come through."



Dwarf Plant

Ted Richardson held tiny Japanese Yakusamanum Rhododendron to compare with one of the new hybrids at his nursery. Both plants are the same age.

The dwarf plant, he said, would be excellent for apartment dwellers. (Photo by Clyde Osborne)

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