



Landscape design by Allan Dalsimer; Gottscho-Schleisner and C. H. Lewis photos
IN SUBURBIA—Choice planting of evergreens adds character to the landscape.

THE DEXTER RHODODENDRON STORY

By **PAUL D. VOSSBERG**

THE Dexter hybrids are considered to be among the finest rhododendrons for home landscapes. These notable flowering evergreens evolved in a rather unusual manner.

From the turn of the century to the post-war period new introductions in hybrid rhododendrons—and all other plants—were hard to find. There were strict embargoes on plant importations. At this time, C. O. Dexter, a retired manufacturer in Sandwich, Mass., assigned his landscape architect, Paul Frost, to visit nurseries and gather a collection of good rhododendron hybrids and species for his Cape Cod estate.

The location seemed so ideal for this class of material that C. S. Sargent and E. H. Wilson of the Arnold Arboretum encouraged Mr. Dexter in the breeding of rhododendrons for new and improved varieties.

The earlier crosses were made with *Fortunae* hybrids, plants of unknown background from the old Farquhar Nurseries on Cape Cod, and a few varieties of the so-called "iron-clads" introduced by Anthony Waterer of England. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Dexter obtained rhododendron pollen of *griffithianum*, *haematodes*, *discolor*, *smirnovi*, *griersonianum*, *orbiculare* and *decorum*. He also obtained pollen

from some spectacular named varieties, one of which was *Pygmalion*, a rich dark red hybrid of doubtful hardiness.

Between 1925 and 1940, Mr. Dexter produced more than 5,000 crosses a year and was generous in distributing the finest. Numbered seedlings were given to friends and to arboreta. Also, selected varieties were propagated and distributed.

At first the experts doubted that Mr. Dexter's work would produce plants hardy enough for the northern states. All doubts disappeared during the brutal winter of 1933-34. In Westbury, N. Y., for example, the thermometer dropped to 15 degrees below zero, yet no serious damage was noticed in a collection of Dexter hybrids.

Committee Formed

After the death of Mr. Dexter in 1943, officials of the American Rhododendron Society sought to prevent a dissipation or loss of the wonderful varieties developed by this man. An informal committee was formed and assigned to visit gardens in which Dexter hybrids were growing.

The committee checked and evaluated the outstanding varieties. Permission was obtained from the owners to procure and propagate cuttings. These plants—known only by test

numbers—were distributed in several places for final growth-evaluation over a period of three years.

The test program was designed to expose the Dexter hybrids to a wide range of climate and soil conditions. If a plant produced outstanding foliage and flowers, it was given a name. Included on the list of outstanding named varieties are:

Angora, deep crimson red; Amethyst, lavender with large frilled flowers; Ben Moseley, rose pink with crimson blotch; Brookville, a late-blooming clear pink; Champagne, apricot buds that open to cream buff; Helen Everitt, pure white with heavy substance; Mrs. Wm. R. Coe, very large rose pink with dark throat; Parker Pink, very deep pink; Scintillation, clear pink with old gold pattern and exceptional foliage; Tom Everet, large pink truss and very large pink plant; Westbury, luminous pink with golden throat; Wheatley, lively clear pink, and Wissahickon, clear light red.

Except for Angora, Ben Moseley, Helen Everitt, Parker Pink and Tom Everet, all of the listed Dexter varieties are available only in limited quantities. The gardener will have to search for them in rhododendron nurseries. Dexter hybrids are in bloom from May 10 to 30 in the New York area.