

Russ and Velma Haag



Home in Cedar Mountain

Russ was a past President of the Southeastern Chapter

Our gardening experience began in the late 30's when we owned our first home. Russ bought me a rose plant for Mother's Day. He carefully planted it for me and guess what, it didn't grow. So it was appropriately replaced by the store (Sears). That one didn't grow either. So, said I: We shall go to the library and get some reading material – and so we did. Russ, being the avid reader, digested several books on roses and the bug really bit. We ordered rose catalogs and bought roses - maybe 15 or 20, and Russ maintained the rose garden, hilling them up in the fall and down in the spring, spraying and dusting according to directions.

Then, as our family had grown by four, we moved. This new home had plenty of room on the inside as well as the outside. But it also had more than ample shade, which was not to the liking of the roses. So we changed our gardening to azaleas. And then, slowly but surely, to rhododendron. About that time, a co-worker of Russ's who owned property in the Pennsylvania Mountains said we could have all the rhododendrons we wanted. Of course, we took him up on this offer and added untold Maximums (Maximi ???) to our property.

About that time, Russ read about the American Rhododendron Society and, of course, we joined. That led to new sources and acquaintances with other folks who shared our blossoming interest in rhododendron. We were among the dozen or so people who founded the New Jersey Chapter. It was a real privilege to have Guy Nearing among our membership. The Knippenbergs were also members.

About this time the Saturday Evening Post ran an article entitled "The Flowering Forest of Joseph B. Gable". So we visited the Gables that Spring and every Spring for many more years, always buying anything and everything available! During these early years Warren Baldsiefen was rooting rhododendrons from Gable & Nearing. And on one occasion, Gable took a load of plants to Warren's and stopped by our place on his way home. Our Blue Ridge was in full bloom at the time and Gable was really impressed. Fortunately, we had an extra and it was our pleasure to give it to him!

Sooner than later, we started hybridizing. We really had no particular goal, although eventually yellow became the goal. Most of the yellows on the market were hopelessly tender. Russ built a concrete block enclosure to give a few plants winter protection. But it was many a year before we saw a yellow seedling bloom.

As retirement came, we relocated to the temperate mountains of Western North Carolina and a 176 acre property in Cedar Mountain. We were fortunate in being able to ship many, many seedlings and small plants by way of a truck that had been bringing plants north and returning empty. The plants liked the NC climate with plentiful rainfall and milder winters. One winter, however, was unforgettable: after a warm February and March, the temperature dropped to 12 degrees on March 29th. That created lots of extra space in the beds, and some of them were combined.

We continued our hybridizing until 1985. Russ kept all the records of crosses and what was in which planting bed. He also took care of the pollen. The plants were listed by name and the number of the bed in which they were planted. We never put a name on a plant until it had proven itself thru a number of years (Editor's Note: There are 7 registered Haag Hybrids: Blue Ridge, Carolina Moon, Great Smoky, Cloud Nine, Golden Delicious, Good Fortune and White Water North Carolina).

In the first years over 100 beds were planted with approximately 100 plants in each bed. We later emptied 25 of these beds and replanted. Some of these plants are worth propagating including one which is going to be a tree. It has 4" florets, 11 to the truss. I call it Lily Tree because the floret looks like a lily and one parent is a tree.

There are also a number of yellows and, perhaps, some are worth propagating. Many of the last to actually bloom have never been tagged as to identity. Someone might possibly like this job. All in all, we must have planted out almost 16,000 of the seedlings. What a pleasure it was. I'm sure we might have been more selective in our crosses, but we enjoyed what we were doing.

Source: Haag's Web Page <http://www.rhodogardens.com/index.html>

Velma Haag's own story as told to Ed Collins,

Southeast Chapter President,

Ed: Jackpot Winner was grown and named by Weldon Delp from seed obtained from the Haags. There are many plants worthy of naming and Velma has selected some for further study that might be named after her and Russ. Although Velma and Russ are well known for the many rhododendron hybrids they produced, they should also be known for their collection of azaleas and native plants. Seeds of various Trilliums and Lady Slippers, as well as many other plants, are gathered annually and sown throughout the property. Many knowledgeable people have commented that the Shortia at the Haag property is the most extensive they have ever seen outside of a nursery or arboretum. In addition to all of the rhododendrons, Rhodo Gardens is truly a wildflower paradise.

Russ and Velma Haag's initial interest in rhododendrons dates back to 1952 and blossomed into a love affair that has spanned more than half a century. Although Russ passed away in 1995 at age 85, Velma actively continues their legacy, working in the garden every day – weather permitting. While they were living in New Jersey, Russ, a chemical engineer for Exxon (then Standard Oil of New Jersey) and Velma, a mother of four and homemaker, were enticed by the opportunity to get some free rhododendrons from Pennsylvania to landscape the yard of their recently-purchased home. Little did they imagine at the time where that initial spark of interest might lead them.

In 1981 the American Rhododendron Society awarded Russ and Velma Haag the Silver Medal in recognition of their contributions. That award, in part, mentions their active involvement at all levels of the Society, their key roles in establishing a 5,000-plant public display garden and their extensive work as hybridizers which resulted in a number of their crosses becoming registered and unselfishly made available to the membership

In 1995 they were presented with the Bronze Medal by the Southeastern Chapter in Hendersonville, NC. They were part of the Gable Study Group. Russ was a past president of our chapter.

Potomac Valley Chapter

American Rhododendron Society

www.arspvc.org

Winter Newsletter: January 2011

Some Sad News:

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of some wonderful friends. In October, a long time member, **Margaret Church** passed away. Pictured to the right is Margaret Church walking with Margaret White (far right) in the White Garden. About the same time, **Velma Haag** passed away. She was the last of the Gable Study Group and had lovely garden in North Carolina that many of us visited in May of 2009. Also, we just learned that **Mary Beasley** of 'My Mary' fame and Transplant Nursery in Georgia passed away in August. They will all be missed but have left us lasting memories that we will cherish.