

SOUTHEASTERN HYBRIDIZING - A JOINT VENTURE

James R. Todd, Jr.

SE-ARS Member in 1982

Lenoir, North Carolina

The purpose of this article is twofold: first: to give a brief summary of my hybridizing activities covering the past twenty-five years, and my experiences in breeding rhododendrons which have some degree of cold hardiness and heat tolerance suitable for the southeast.

The second, and equally important purpose, is to acknowledge and thank the large number of people who have provided advice, encouragement, seed, and pollen, as well as some close friendships over the years. While hybridizers can justifiably and occasionally take pride in one of "my hybrids", it seems to me that we are often taking credit for someone else's work. When we receive a gift of pollen from an outstanding plant, and seed is produced on one of our own plants, it is quite obvious that approximately 50% of the beauty and quality of the plant came from some other hybridizer. Therefore, we are involved in somewhat of a "joint venture."

Preparing this report has brought back memories of earlier days. The original "carrier" of the disease known as "Rhododendronitis" was Dr. John Scroggin, a family practitioner, who moved to Lenoir around 1960. At that time, I was growing roses and trying a few English holly. Dr. Scroggin had a lifelong interest in botany and horticulture, and he told us of a group called "The Rhododendron Society", which had regular meetings in Asheville. He also told of seeing rhododendrons of bright colors, reds, lavenders, blues, large scented white flowers, and even some which were "yellow." This interested me enough to go with him to the annual flower show of the Southeastern Chapter of the ARS in Asheville. At this show, I saw some trusses labeled "Dexter Hybrids"; and others known as "Gables." Thus began my search to try to find out more about these beautiful rhododendrons, since, for more than thirty years, I had only known of the native "pink," "white," and "purple" rhododendron from our Appalachian mountains.

Influential Hybridizers

My first exploration trip was with Dr. Scroggin to Joe Gable's farm. We spent half a day with Joe, followed him through the Big Woods, and watched him dig a few special plants for us. We also saw 'Mary Garrison' in full bloom, which he grew in a large basket at the time.

Shortly afterwards, my wife and I toured the National Arboretum, and spent several hours in the rhododendron collection, where we saw the first large plants of the named Dexter Hybrids. I was able to order five or six of the best Dexters from Paul Vossberg, at Westbury Nursery, which are now the 25-year-old mainstays of our garden.

Like so many others in the east and southeast, the quality and dependability of the Dexters were largely responsible for my interest in rhododendrons. I

decided to try to improve their color range, fragrance, substance and clarity, by hybridizing Dexters with new hybrids. My goal was to seek peach, cream, yellow and bi-color ranges.

Lenoir is in the foothills, only thirty minutes away from the high country of Boone, Blowing Rock and Grandfather Mountain, which have 3,000 to 5,000 foot elevations. Winter lows average zero to five below, and the past three summers produced many 90+ days. My original goals were to seek plants and seedlings with plant and bud hardiness of at least -5°, which could also survive hot and sometimes dry summers.

Early on, Dr. John Wister had sent information concerning the named and numbered Dexters. About this time, **Russ and Velma Haag** had moved to western North Carolina, and provided the Southeastern Chapter with their list of the "10 Best Dexters", based on their considerable experience in New Jersey and the northeast. Even though this was twenty-five years ago, it is my opinion that they were on target as to the "best" Dexters, and that the other hundred or more Dexters are generally similar, or may be somewhat lesser in quality. The retirement of the Haags to western North Carolina began an exciting time for the Southeastern Chapter, as they were soon followed by

Dr. and Mrs. Augie Kehr, and later by Dr. Skinner, Dr. John Creech, and a number of others who retired in the Asheville-Hendersonville area.

Dr. Ernest Yelton's garden in Rutherfordton, North Carolina, was a real inspiration to me, and I visited his large collection of original hybrids each spring for many years. Ernest was probably the most experienced hybridizer in the southeast, and generously donated collections of his plants to public gardens.

George Miller, of Pennsylvania, and I also crossed paths in the mid-1960's and exchanged seed, visits and information for several years. Dr. Thomas Wheeldon, of Richmond, had one of the largest collections of Dexter hybrids, including the best plants from Winterthur, and **Dr. Scroggin** and I had a tour of his large gardens, which included hundreds of special rhododendrons, and a major collection of azaleas. Dr. Wheeldon was a major influence in the growth of the American Rhododendron Society in the middle Atlantic and southern states.

The *ARS Quarterly Bulletin* has published a number of well-written articles by Dr. Carl Phetteplace of Eugene, Oregon, who contributed so much to the Society over many years. I wrote to Dr. Carl, inquiring about one of his plants, and I was very surprised to receive a four or five-page handwritten note from him, not only answering my questions, but giving me other helpful suggestions. This began a number of years of correspondence, during which time he was most generous to send expert advice, and also pollen from some of his best selections. In fact, his pollen of *R. wardii* x 'Fawn', on 'Tom Everett', produced what some say is my best seedling, and which has been registered and named 'Mary Todd', for my wife.

During the late 1960's, I became a regular visitor to the large gardens of Ralph Van Landingham, in Charlotte. Ralph was a true collector and usually purchased a truck load of large plants every year from Bob Comerford's Nursery, often ordering five plants of each variety. From 1965 until 1970, I viewed many

new named varieties for the first time in his garden. Unfortunately, some of these did not survive the hot summers in Charlotte. Through his generosity, his will established a trust to move and maintain his large collection in the gardens of the University of North Carolina division in Charlotte. Others who were helpful during those years were Cecil Smith, Jim Elliott, Harold Greer, and Bob Comerford on the West Coast, and Dr. Fred Serbin of Connecticut.

In 1961, K. Wada, of Japan, had an article published in *the ARS Quarterly Bulletin* featuring his discovery of *R. metternichii*, variety aff. He wrote that this one plant bloomed three weeks earlier than other *R. metternichii*, was very heat tolerant, and in some respects he thought it to be superior to *R. yakushmanum*. I wrote Mr. Wada, and was very pleased to receive a packet of seed from his *R. metternichii* var. aff. Apparently he was never able to find any more plants, and my seed came from his one and only original plant. I grew on several dozen, gave away about half, and still have half a dozen selected plants, which bloom very early, just about the time of the first azaleas.

Dr. Fred Serbin, of Connecticut, and I exchanged correspondence and seed for several years, and I grew several of his "Yak" crosses.

The Southeastern Chapter owes a special debt to John and Marion Johnson, of Asheville, who were so generous in their support of our Chapter activities. On several occasions, they invited Frank Knight, Director of Wisley Gardens, to come and visit in North Carolina, and to meet with our Chapter.

Having met Mr. Knight, I wrote that we were planning a trip to the British Isles in the spring of 1973, in hopes that we could visit Wisley and see him while in England. Not only did he respond, but he arranged to meet us at the Royal Horticultural Society's Rhododendron Show in London. We had lunch with him, and he introduced us to a number of exhibitors and English gardeners. The next morning, Mr. Knight showed us through the Royal Horticultural Society's Gardens at Wisley; then, in the afternoon took us through the Savill Gardens, accompanied by the Director, Mr. Hope Findlay.

Thanks to suggestions from Dr. Augie Kehr, we had selected some of the best rhododendron gardens in the British Isles to see in some sixteen days. We were especially fortunate to be shown through Caerhays gardens and woods by Julian Williams, and by Christopher Fairweather at Exbury. These were memorable days, to see the mature and often original hybrids in these lovely gardens, from Cornwall to London, then to Wales and Scotland. The overnight snowfall on Goat Fell Mountain on the Isle of Arran was special, as was the next day, walking through the Brodick Castle Gardens with John Basford.

At Bodnant, our wives spent the first day with us as we walked down through the magnificent terraces and glens, then Ed Hartshorn and I returned the next day to discover new paths and planted areas. Of all of the gardens and estates, I thought Bodnant to have the greatest variety and the most carefully designed vistas and plantings, which were possible because of the natural valley and streams, similar to some of the mountain areas, which we have in western North Carolina.

During these years, **Dr. Don Kellam** and I had become friends and shared our interest in rhododendrons, and Don began his extensive hybridizing program

in his Charlotte woodland, and his leadership in the society. I had also met Dick Murcott on Long Island, and we exchanged phone calls and correspondence. Later, I visited Dick and his garden. He had seedlings planted which appeared to cover almost every square yard of his large woodland. I was impressed by his many "Yak" seedlings, which included crosses with the finest reds, and his major collection of Hardgrove plants.

I had known Dr. Reid Bahnson for many years, as we shared a common interest in trout fishing. During this time, I knew that he collected and hybridized orchids and was a Director of the North Carolina Botanical Gardens. As fishermen are prone to do, we sometimes discussed other matters, and I told Reid that rhododendrons were fairly easy to grow and that crosses were fairly simple, and I recall giving him seed of Dexter's 'Champagne' x 'Odee Wright' and a few others. Reid grew these on and came up with several outstanding yellow seedlings with nice blotches, but they were short lived, as were my seedlings of the cross. Reid then began hybridizing rhododendrons on his own, along with his orchids. Reid has become a major influence in the Piedmont Chapter and a pioneer with his efforts to grow and improve 'Clark's White' and other special *R. catawbiense* selections.

Marshall Stillwell, of the Piedmont Chapter, became a fellow hybridizer and acquired a major collection of the Dexter hybrids. In the mid-1970s, I read of new rhododendron hybrids from Howard Phipps on Long Island. He did not begin hybridizing rhododendron until he was almost 60 years old, but in some twenty years he had produced a number of award plants which were shown at New York Chapter shows. Later, I was fortunate to spend a day and a half in the Phipps' gardens about the time Mr. Phipps reached his 90th birthday! The quality and variety of his seedlings was impressive, especially the bi-colors, cream and peach shades and some lovely yellows. I especially admired *Rhododendron* 'Martha Phipps', which I thought to be the finest cream yellow rhododendron I had seen at the time. Dick Murcott and others in the Long Island area have identified, propagated, and preserved some of the best of the Phipps collection, which is a major contribution.

From the published reports of the 1979 Hybridizers Roundtable, I first learned of Robert Furman, also from Long Island. When I read of his careful planning and selection of parents, and record keeping, etc., I knew that some day I would like to see his plants. Bob and I exchanged correspondence and information for some months before I had the opportunity to visit his garden on Cape Cod. His crosses are carefully planned and very extensive. I saw right away that he was achieving clarity of colors, substance, and a quality of flowers and trusses beyond most others in the field of hybridizing at the time. Seedlings which most of us would keep were destroyed, in large numbers, in order to monitor and select from only the best. Of all the gardens and hybrids, Bob Furman certainly had the finest yellow rhododendrons I had yet seen in this country, and these were all seedlings.

I remembered the work of Arthur Childers, in Oregon, from his excellent article in the summer, 1977, *ARS Quarterly Bulletin*. Art kindly sent pollen from several of his 'Warm Spring' type hybrids, and I now have several promising

seedlings. While attending the 1986 convention in Eugene, Dr. Reid Bahnson and I visited Art and Maxine Childers and saw his numerous seedlings in their woodland garden.

Many of David Leach's newer hybrids and color breaks have just become available in recent years and will likely become basic plants for colder climates in future years. In our area, we do not have to be concerned with plants hardy to -15 degrees. I have not used this type, generally, for hybridizing, but have used somewhat more tender pollen and seed parents in hopes of producing richer colors and more substance in the flowers.

Among hybridizers on the west coast, I admired the work of Jack Lofthouse, in Vancouver, British Columbia, and Dr. Ned Brockenbrough in Bellevue, Washington. Following the 1989 ARS Convention, I had the pleasure of brief visits with both Jack and Ned, and saw some of the next generation of seedlings from such fine parents as 'Butter Brickie' and 'Nancy Evans'. All of these represent a new era in hybridizing: clearer colors and blends of red, yellow, orange, and peach, on well-shaped compact plants.

From those hybridizers mentioned in this article, and others, I have confidence that we will have rhododendrons in the east and south, with equally clear colors, substance, fragrance and form, with the hardiness to survive both hot summers and cold winters. Such goals are now well along the way.

During the preparation of this article, I had the opportunity to meet with Weldon Delp, while he was visiting old friends in North Carolina. Weldon started hybridizing over 30 years ago, and his colleagues were David Leach, Joe Gable, and Guy Nearing. The enormous quantity and variety of seedlings he has raised over the years has provided much basic information on hardiness. The contributions of Phipps, Furman, Delp, and others will, I believe, become the basis for the quality hardy rhododendron of the 21st century.

Some of the basic plants which may play a major part in our future eastern hybrids are, of course, *R. catawbiense*, and such others as 'Clark's White', *R. yakushimanum*, the hardier Dexters, Gable's *R. vernicosum* #18139, and 'Mary Belle'. Others such as *R. metternichii* var. aff., 'Goldfort', 'Golden Star', 'Exbury Naomi', and 'Peach Lady', may be useful.

Todd Seedlings

We were told years ago that it is relatively simple to make crosses producing seed, and to raise seedlings. The difficult and time-consuming task is to grow them on to bud and blooming size. Then comes the years of evaluating and comparing them with others. It can be very tempting to admire one's own plants, while resisting the fact that there are a dozen similar and possibly better ones already available. Thus, over the years, by selection, I have realized that only a few, possibly a half dozen or so, of my own seedlings may be truly worthy. The rare plants become so because they have special characteristics, such as heat tolerance, plant form and foliage, special fragrance, superior flower quality and substance, or that rare color combination and attraction which Bob Furman calls "luminosity". Only those which combine a large measure of all of these qualities can ever become a 'Lem's Cameo', or a 'Scintillation', and thus a world

class plant. In listing a few of the seedlings from our garden, I will include only those which have several of these special qualities and are worthy of further observation and testing. Listed first is the origination of either the seed parent or pollen parent. Underneath, I list the cross, with comments following. Generally, the list begins with earlier crosses, from Gable plants and on through more recent crosses with pollen from Phipps, Childers, and Furman, etc.

Seedlings with Gable Background

'Cadis' x 'Exbury Naomi' Flowers and truss like a somewhat enlarged 'Cadis', with more substance.

'Cadis' x 'Ruby Bowman' Lovely lavender shading with dark red throat, large frilled flowers on impressive truss.

'Cadis' x *R. diaprepes* Three selected plants, very pale pink fringe, then opening white with green throat, 4½ inch flowers with fragrance. Very late bloom. Strong branching plants and large leaves.

'Lodauric' x 'Cadis' Latest to bloom of all. Broad umbrella plant, good leaves and fairly deep pink large, scented flowers fading to medium pink.

Dexter Background

'Avalanche' x 'Scintillation' Early cross, seed sent to George Miller (see photograph #95, *Hybrids & Hybridizers*, (West 1978)) 3 plants. Good leaves, large creamy pink-white flowers with green throat. Number 3 has very large 'Scintillation' type leaves on very spreading compact plant.

R. yakushmanum x 'Scintillation' Early cross - lost all of my plants by neglect. Raymond Goodrich grew a number of these from my seed (see photograph #104, *Hybrids & Hybridizers*).

'Tom Everett' x 'Joe Brooks' This was grown from seed from Dr. Ernest Yelton - the result was one very hardy dependable plant which produces quantities of creamy porcelain pink flowers which are eye catching; registered and named 'Dr. Elton Trueblood', winner of 2 Blue Ribbons at Southeastern Chapter shows - very hardy.

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very hardy.



'Dr. Elton Trueblood'
Photo by James R. Todd, Jr.

'Dexter's Spice' x 'Dexter's Peppermint' Cross from early seed exchange list grown by Dr. John Scroggin, who gave me a small plant. - now 6' high x 10' wide - large white trusses with spicy fragrance - early dependable bloomer - excellent form.

'Tom Everett' x 'Mary Garrison' Joe Gable gave me pollen of his 'Mary Garrison' about 1966 - crossed with 'Tom Everett' - several seedlings retained; best is low spreading plant. Blooms early and dependably with bi-color pink and peach shades with green yellow throat. Has been used extensively for hybridizing.

'Tom Everett' x 'Odee Wright' Best foliage of the 'Tom Everett' series - larger than 'Scintillation' leaves on a spreading plant. Very large buds open with 18-20 flowers similar to 'Tom Everett' but with brighter and clearer colors. Does not produce as many buds as most, but they are impressive.



'Tom Everett' x 'Odee Wright'
Photo by James R. Todd, Jr.

'Tom Everett' x 'Exbury Naomi' Plant #4, and the last of the seedlings to bloom, proved to be worth waiting for. An attention getting bi-color of peach cream in a large well-filled truss. This reached the goal of improving the quality and color of Dexter flowers. A truss of this won the red ribbon in the unnamed seedling class at the 1988 National Convention show in Williamsburg. Unfortunately, in its present location, the original plant tends to be somewhat open and sparse.

'Tom Everett' x (*R. wardii* x 'Fawn') Pollen from Dr. Phetteplace. At first bloom, I knew that I had a rare seedling. Not a trace of Tom Everett seemed to appear in the huge 5-inch flowers of cream with peach pink margin and cool green center. The flowers and truss are about the size of a Loderi bloom. Probably more admired than any in the garden when in bloom; has won Blue Ribbon twice in Southeastern Chapter shows. Because of the beauty and attraction of the flowers, I named and registered it as 'Mary Todd' for my wife. Unfortunately, propagation has not yet been successful.



'Mary Todd'
Photo by James R. Todd, Jr.

Dr. Ernest Yelton Background

('Madonna' x *R. fortunei*) x 'Loderi King George' In the sixties, Dr. Yelton gave me six or seven seedlings of this cross, using his hardy Gable 'Madfort' (Yelton's choice). Of the six, one has produced a large spreading plant with the largest flowers, pure white, with fragrance - which may be an acceptable and hardy substitute for the Loderi group in our climate.

Dr. Phetteplace Background

'Exbury Naomi' x 'Crest' I bloomed 'Exbury Naomi' for several years, and used pollen from Dr. Phetteplace. One has proved to be hardy and blooms 3 out of 4 years with large peach cream flowers with an open, but most attractive truss, on a better plant than 'Crest'. Won blue ribbon at Piedmont Chapter show some years ago.

'Exbury Naomi' x ('Idealist' x 'Crest') Again, pollen from Dr. Phetteplace (may now be named 'Queen of McKenzie') produced a very strong full plant with foliage better than either parent. While a sparse bloomer in its location, the very large flowers and truss of substance are shades of pale cream and pink. This one was judged second only to 'Mary Todd' in the Southeastern Chapter show several years ago.

R. yakushimanum x *R. fortunei* Seed from Dr. Phetteplace - white flowers are trumpet shaped and, I think, equal to 'Nestucca'; however, plant is somewhat more open.

Bob Comerford Background

R. yakushimanum x 'Idealist' Seed from Bob Comerford - one plant has been retained and seems to be dependable (many other "Yak" crosses have not done well for me). Bright red-pink flowers fade to attractive deep pink bi-color, foliage deep green on a plant 30" tall after 15 years. A spray won blue ribbon in Asheville Show.

K. Wada Background

R. metternichii var. aff. x 'Odee Wright' A very sturdy compact plant with foliage like 'Odee Wright,' produces faultless trusses of pink-white, which change to a pale cream. This was one of about 8 rhododendrons in our entire garden which bloomed well after the 1988 winter which reached -11° below. Has been used in later crosses for hardiness, and the possibility of color from 'Odee Wright' genes.

Russ & Velma Haag Background

'Mary Belle' x 'Jingle Bells' From cross and seed from the Haags. One of these is under observation, since it buds up well and produces orange-yellow bi-color trumpet-shaped flowers.

From Howard Phipps' Garden

R. yakushimanum x 'Martha Phipps' One plant selected of good form with good foliage and creamy white flowers.

R. metternichii var. aff. x 'Martha Phipps' Excellent re-curved bright green foliage and very early blooming pink flowers on a well-shaped plant - retained for early blooming characteristics.

'Parker's Pink' x 'Martha Phipps' As this seedling grew, I almost discarded it, since it sprawled, and never seemed to produce a center; because of its very attractive truss, it was retained and moved to more sun. It is still an oddball in appearance, but produces superior pink trusses, somewhat between 'Parker's Pink' and 'Wheatley', but clearer color and more substance than either.

('Tom Everett' x 'Exbury Naomi') x 'Martha Phipps' Three plants retained, all of excellent low spreading habit with superior large foliage. Best truss thus far has very large and open cream flowers of substance which last 10 days even in hot weather.

R. diapryes x 'Martha Phipps' Possibly the largest leaves of any of our seedlings, and a nicely spreading plant. I have moved the best one to a permanent location. Budded for this spring.

From Robert Furman's Garden

Pollen from half dozen Furman selections has been used, unfortunately the largest groups were transplanted too late in the season and were lost to heat problems. A number of remaining seedlings, such as crosses with Furman's 'Jalisco' x *R. yakushimanum* x 'Golden Star' are being evaluated.

From Arthur Childer's Garden

('Tom Everett' x 'Mary Garrison') x ('Fawn' x 'Dido' x 'Yellow Creek') These produced cream, yellow or greenish yellow hybrids. One with outstanding flowers I call 'Green Ice'. Has 5-inch lily-like ivory cream flowers, very open with a cool green-yellow throat,

This is a late bloomer, but it lasts in good condition for many days due to its heavy lily-like substance.



'Elizabeth Todd Cobey'
Photo by James R. Todd, Jr.

Pollen from Richard Murcott

('Tom Everett' x 'Mary Garrison') x ('Dido' x *R. charitopes* x *R. lacteum*) This seedling was grown in full sun for 5 years and made a low spreading plant with deep blue-green leaves. It has remained compact and spreading and has pale yellow flowers with green throat. In full bloom, it is an arresting plant. Blue Ribbon 1988, Asheville Show, it is to be named 'Elizabeth Todd Cobey'.

James Todd, an attorney, began hybridizing 25 years ago. He has been a member of the ARS about the same amount of time and has served the Southeastern Chapter as vice-president and as a member of the board of directors.

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