

Rhododendrons * 4 May

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As members converged on the Exbury Club for the morning of lectures they were met with an array of rhododendron species and hybrids arranged in a display worthy of any show bench. I was immediately taken with the huge flowers of *Rhododendron nuttallii*, a large drowsily perfumed Maddenia, presumably from the glasshouses. Contrast this with a spray of *R. spinuliferum* with its small and unusual tubular flowers bearing distinctive protruding anthers, well chosen to demonstrate the wide range of flower forms within the genus. Two fine hybrids of *R. cinnabarinum*, *R.* 'Biskra' (an Exbury hybrid of Lionel de Rothschild's breeding) and *R.* 'Alison Johnstone' stood out: as Head Gardener Tom Clarke was to reinforce in his lecture, plants of this subsection have been neglected in recent times, having long been associated with a susceptibility to powdery mildew. This problem, however, appears much improved in recent years and it is high time we all planted more cinnabarinum again, especially in areas with good air flow.

We were then welcomed officially by Lionel de Rothschild and Tom, with Tom stressing the impossibility of condensing a genus of potentially over a thousand species by some estimates and 28,000 hybrids into a day. Exbury itself boasts a collection of around 13,000 individual plants (not taxa) of *Rhododendron*. A light touch would inevitably be necessary.

Lionel gave us the background to the garden in his own anecdotal and inimitable style. The sense he gave of his namesake and creator of the gardens, Lionel Nathan de Rothschild (1882–1942) was of a man of extraordinary energy, famously describing himself as 'a banker by hobby but a gardener by profession'. Remembered primarily for his achievements at Exbury, he took the same vigorous approach to all his endeavours and distractions, breaking the world water-speed record, and in 1907 winning the prestigious 'Perla del Mediterraneo'.

Exbury was surely his greatest passion; the entire site where planting was to commence would be double dug and hops added. A rock garden was a later addition: the quarry in Wales which supplied his stone had to check whether he had not better stop at 1,000 tons when he continued to order stone at an unprecedented rate – in the end he ordered double that. During the Second World War, to raise money for the Red Cross, Lionel auctioned 28,000 orchids. When he decided to plant an arboretum, it was inevitably going to be the most complete collection of trees in the country and he was ably advised by W.J. Bean, who lent his more cautious approach to identifying species. We were shown some fascinating aerial photos of the arboretum as it took shape, taken by the Luftwaffe in 1943. Sadly, this wonderful collection was later grubbed up, a great loss as it would have surely been one of the foremost collections of its kind today.



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Head Gardener Tom Clarke introducing *Rhododendron* 'Jessica de Rothschild'.

Lionel sponsored many of the great early 20th century explorers and when George Forrest suffered a fatal heart attack while hunting in the hills near Tengchong, it was Lionel who paid to have his effects returned to England and a memorial erected where he died, remembering the man where he had been at his most prolific in the introduction of so many new species. The collector who appeared to have been closest to Lionel was Frank Kingdon-Ward; the two men shared a particular love of yellow-flowered *Rhododendron* species.

The penchant for good yellows was to inform some of Lionel's experiments in breeding. It was *R. wardii* which Lionel bred with *R. 'Lady Bessborough'* a hybrid of the closely related *R. campylocarpum*, uniting these two yellow species to produce two excellent hybrids. He made two crosses a year apart; the one which flowered during his lifetime, *R. 'Hawk'*, was in fact the second cross made. Unfortunately, it was not until after his death that *R. 'Crest'*, which our present Lionel described as the 'purest' yellow, began to flower and this was undoubtedly made with the superior, award-winning KW-collected *R. wardii* which Lionel noted in his studbook. He continued to make crosses, many of which have stood the test of time in an era when competition was fierce and others like Lord Aberconway at Bodnant were also making many crosses. After initially seeking purer and brighter reds, Lionel turned towards calmer pastels, the creamy rose and pink of the *R. 'Naomi'* hybrids which he in turn would use as parents of the soft pink and yellow *R. 'Lionel's Triumph'*.

Lionel refused to have anything named after him during his lifetime and this was named by his son Edmund, though his grandson felt it had not withstood

the test of time. Hybridising at Exbury did not cease after Lionel's death in 1942. Edmund registered *R. 'Fred Wynniatt'*, named for a former head gardener and recently *R. 'Thomas Clarke'* is to be named for Tom. Indeed, it was not until 1996 that Exbury registered *R. 'Jessica de Rothschild'* a plant bred some thirty years earlier by Edmund and shortlisted for plant of the year at Chelsea in 2019. When attempting to commit to a favourite *Rhododendron* Lionel allowed himself some leniency and picked two subsections, *Cinnabarina* and *Maddenia*.

Tom then took a trot through the genus, its history and cultivation. It is the largest genus in the Ericaceae, believed to be around 200 million years old with a present-day circumpolar distribution largely in the northern hemisphere, with species of *Vireya* reaching into Malaysia and with two species reaching as far south as Queensland. The greatest density of species is found in the Sino-Himalayan region. The Himalaya are a geologically recent mountain range, formed some 40 and 50 million years ago, and it is understood that these mountains rose up between existing populations, generating localised speciation that has led to the rich biodiversity and unique species of the region.

On to the phases of introduction to Britain and Europe after that, beginning with *R. ponticum*, which curiously has two areas of distribution, the Pontic around the Black Sea, and the Iberian, sometimes referred to as subspecies *baeticum*, a curious remnant stand that is suggestive of a once far wider distribution. This and another European, *R. caucasicum*, would soon be joined in the early 19th century by the American *R. maximum* and *R. catawbiense*, leading to the famed hardy hybrids of the era; these were given a significant boost by the introduction of the Himalayan blood red *R. arboreum*. The Himalayan species were to make their true entrance through Joseph Hooker, whose name today is inextricably linked with rhododendrons. His exploration of Sikkim, in a relatively small area, resulted in the discovery of 25 previously undescribed species, and seed was returned of many more. This diversity led to an explosion in breeding as the new species began to flower. The greatest expansion, however, was during the first two decades of the twentieth century, when more new species were introduced – chiefly from Sino-Tibetan expeditions – than in the entire period up to that date.

Tom then described how rhododendrons can be used in cultivation: at Exbury, quite a flat garden, the rhododendrons form useful backdrops in the garden giving shape to the landscape. They have many hidden attributes beyond flowers; many deciduous species, for example, produce fine autumn colour like that of *R. quinquefolium*; other species possess attractive peeling bark, such as those of the *Barbata* subsection and *R. falconeri*. Tom described how this adaptation possibly developed in the native humid atmosphere, which often produces a superabundance of lichen so prolific it can threaten to pull them down, whereas the peeling bark can shed a heavy clothing of lichen.

A great Cornish gardener once said, 'If you need to prune a rhododendron, it is in the wrong place.' However, on account of their shallow roots it is

surprisingly easy – with due care – to move even established plants. The most important lesson Tom wanted us to take away was drainage. This is the cause of most *Rhododendron* problems. They must not be planted too deep and many of Exbury's new plantings are in raised beds. Because of the shallow water table of the New Forest, it can become too wet in winter with, inevitably, more watering needed in summer. Exbury sits in the rain shadow of the Isle of Wight; Lionel originally had a water tower built, boreholes sunk and an extensive underground water pipe system installed but recent summers have been extremely challenging. When drought sets in the plants will stop photosynthesising to conserve water. The ideal soil conditions for growing rhododendrons is that hallowed horticultural oxymoron moisture-retentive free-draining soil. It is important to remember that the species predominantly come from monsoon areas where nutrients are being washed from the soil; they are not hungry plants and manure should be avoided, although mulching with leaf mould will be much appreciated.

A description of the various propagation techniques followed. Once obtained seed should be sown in a sterile medium such as sphagnum moss with a little bottom heat; this should be done as early as possible – indeed Tom advocated sowing by Christmas if additional light can be given. As soon as seedlings are large enough to handle, they should be moved on and fed a little weak solution of Phostrogen or similar fertilizer. It is important to keep them shaded as hot summer sun can check their growth, after which it can be difficult to get them going again. Semi-ripe cuttings are also successful for most species if one can get the timing right, which varies quite a bit between species. Interestingly *Maddenias* will root at most times of the year. Unfortunately, it was observed that most peat-free composts have so far produced disappointing results with rhododendrons; research continues however, and a peat reduced mix down to about forty per cent can be used. Another solution once plants are large enough is to grow on in nursery beds; Tom has taken to growing young plants on in nursery beds before siting them in their permanent positions. They are happy to languish as a seedling might in the wild, awaiting a fallen tree to allow light and space for it to grow away.

To finish, Tom took us through common pests and diseases, which fortunately are reasonably few. Most problems like honey fungus, which in fact is in most gardens, are exacerbated by plants becoming stressed, which all relates back to issues of drainage. The extreme temperatures of last year had caused plants to become sunburnt and summer is the time they put on the growth for next year's flowers and really need water. Perhaps, I felt, it is largely a case of finding the serenity to accept the things one cannot change. Tom closed his lecture with a picture of *R. lacteum* growing epiphytically on a rock surrounded by water spray in China, demonstrating the environmental conditions and humid atmosphere enjoyed by rhododendrons in the wild; reminding ourselves of this is probably the best way to inform our cultivation techniques.

Members then enjoyed a practical session looking at the fundamentals of identification through plant morphology. This involved the samples prepared for us on arrival, and the correct use of a hand lens, holding the lens to one's eye while moving the subject of examination up into focus. The simplest distinction in the genus is between lepidote

(those with scales) and elepidotes (those without). Many species within the elepidotes also have hairs which form indumentum on the leaves, the different types of which can be very important in identification of the species: some are flat and appear smooth, as in the example of *R. grande* that we observed; this is correctly termed 'plastered'. Tom warned us of the hazards of flower colour as a variable character in many species, like *R. arboreum* where red forms predominate at lower altitudes, but pink and white can also be found at higher elevations. Other useful characteristics to look for include the number of flowers to a truss, the length of the pedicel and the number of stamens; the stigma, style and nectar pouches are also all useful in determining the identity of the species.

After the members had exercised their eyes and dissected their flowers it was with keen anticipation that we were transported via tractor to Exbury Gardens. Our group was guided with infectious enthusiasm by Marie-Louise Agius and Lionel. Lionel gave a brief history of the house: having been bought by the Mitfords in 1718 it was they who first landscaped there, planting some of the huge cedars of Lebanon and the *Platanus orientalis* which has layered itself to form one of the favourite sights in the garden. In the 1880s it was sold to John Forster before Lionel de Rothschild purchased the house in 1919. A gargantuan group of *R. 'Southamptonia'* (a form of *R. 'Russellianum'*) in front of the house frames the view of the Solent across to the Isle of Wight.

Exbury suffered a heavy toll during the great storm of 1987 which took out up to a third of the tree cover. It is hard to believe this today as one is met with great examples of mature trees on entering the woodland walk: if one can tear one's eyes up from the profusion of blooms below fine mature specimens of *Cedrus atlantica* and *Cedrus libani* as well as some superb *Magnolia campbellii* come into view. It was very pleasing to see that the *Cedrus* this far south have not been affected by *Sirococcus tsugae*, a shoot blight that has devastated this



R. degronianum
subsp. *yakushimamum*
'Shiro Wada'



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Left: *Rhododendron* 'Bow Bells'; right: *R.* 'Queen of Hearts'

Left: *Rhododendron* 'Fortune'; right: *R.* 'Golden Oriel' (deciduous)

species further north. These trees are particularly well cared for and given a wide mulched area at the base of the tree which helps to discourage footfall and attendant compaction.

When he first started at Exbury, Lionel often planted multiple examples of the same species, demonstrating his natural propensity for design by making a statement with a group. Marie-Louise explained how woodland gardening works on the vertical scale with the mature trees forming the canopy, working down through shrubs, *Rhododendron*, *Cornus* etc through to the ground level where bulbs and perennials can be used to create a layered effect. It was an approach that to some extent followed Gertrude Jekyll's approach to the herbaceous border and applied it to the woodland garden. The great gardener and friend of Exbury Sir Peter Smithers said that gardening was an art in four dimensions, the fourth dimension being time. Lionel manged the time factor spectacularly well, planting a vertical tapestry at Exbury much of which he himself did not live to see.

The storm may well have benefited the rhododendrons by allowing in more light, and highlights in the woodland walk on the day we visited included *R.* 'Bow Bells', a Rothschild hybrid of *R. williamsianum*. A younger plant of the familiar *R. degronianum* subsp. *yakushmanum* 'Koichiro Wada' was singled out and Lionel commented that he felt it was still better than all the *yakushmanum* crosses now available, adding wryly that while in this case the parent was better than its offspring, he was careful not to say so in front of his own children. He explained how his grandfather had acquired many new plants from his contact with Koichiro Wada of Hakoneya Nurseries in Japan. One of the two plants of this new species of rhododendron had been taken by Exbury's then head gardener, Francis Hanger, to Wisley when he became curator there in 1946, and from where he later showed the plant leading to its widespread fame and use as a parent. The indumentum of *yakushmanum* is not bettered by too many other species, although *R. bureavii* is surely its equal. Members were able to see the characteristic hairs on it without recourse to their lenses, so dense are they. If one hybrid stood out as being most 'on

song' on the day no-one could argue with *R.* 'Queen of Hearts', a 1930s hybrid of Lionel's using the lesser-known *R. thomsonii* relative *R. meddianum*, which although imparting its rather open straggly habit more than makes up for it in the intensity of the red.

To pick out *Rhododendron* highlights from a visit to Exbury is an impossible task and, inevitably, glaring omissions will be made but I shall attempt to single out a few. The colourful pops of Kurume azaleas in the Azalea bowl were beginning to hit their stride; this is a legacy of Lionel's father Edmund (Eddy) who was responsible for opening the garden to the public and allowed his head gardeners considerably greater latitude in the placing of individual plants. A simply vast *R. sinogrande* flowering some twenty feet in the air grew near *R.* 'Fortune', a hybrid of the former species with *R. falconeri*. *R.* 'Fortune' was Eddy's favourite and Lionel pointed out the bench near it upon which he had composed the dedication for his father's 90th birthday: 'It was his good fortune to inherit these gardens. It was their good fortune to inherit him.' The top pond which is embraced by deciduous azaleas is commanded by an old *Taxodium distichum* of considerable girth. The pond was originally concrete lined and used to contain carp and water lilies, which do not make good bedfellows as the carp consumed the lilies, but the arrival of a local otter – much to Lionel's delight – has resulted in the disappearance of the carp and so the lilies are being reinstated.

Although this was a *Rhododendron* study day it is not possible to be in a place like Exbury without being pulled in several directions at the same time, and many other plants vied for our attention. *Quercus phillyreoides* here had made a single-stemmed tree with a clean trunk of respectable size; so often this species shows as much horizontal ambition as vertical. A mature *Quercus acuta* had formed a typically broad-canopied tree of great size and the usually sprawling *Juniperus rigida* had here made a respectable tree of not insignificant height, and the space given around it showed a tree that can be unremarkable to its best effect. So often the planting and design at Exbury are a perfect marriage rarely met even in the best collections.



Juniperus rigida
forming an upright
tree.

Several *Meliosma veitchiorum* had been planted rising above the shrub layer in the woodland walk, their attractive radially arranged large pinnate leaves contrasting with the red rachis. These were complemented by the frequent planting of *Heptapleurum* (formerly *Schefflera*) species, some of which reached over 3m. There were two rarities of the *Styracaceae* that I had not encountered before, the Japanese *Styrax shiraianus* with its distinctive foliage somewhat recalling *Corylus avellana* in shape, and the wonderful *Perkinsiodendron macgregorii* (formerly *Halesia*) with unusual green immature flowers.

Nyssa forms one of Exbury's National Collections and it was pleasing to see *Nyssa sinensis* 'Jim Russell' in bud with umbellate clusters held out on long peduncles: while they may be less showy than some of the rhododendrons, I had not seen this species flowering before. Nor had I come across the male flowers of *Nothofagus cliffortioides*, turning the tree copper with tufts of bright red stamens. As I marvelled at yet another novelty, Marie-Louise described how despite years of walking the garden she still emerges every time having discovered something she has never seen before. Despite all the superlatives that have been used to describe Exbury I can think of no greater praise of a garden than this. I'd like to add special thanks to Lionel de Rothschild for his help, knowledge and careful reading in the composition of this report.