

Rhododendrons for Spring

By Sonja Nelson

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Rhododendron choices for late spring and early summer: tall or small, there are many varieties to choose from

Once the early blooming rhododendrons have quietly introduced the spring season to our gardens from February through early April, along with crocuses and snowdrops, the later blooming rhodies take over without hesitation in late April and May. After May, a few holdouts can surprise us with summer flowers. The rhododendron bloom season is a long one, and with a little forethought in choice of plants, gardeners can enjoy their flowers beyond early spring. This winter has been long and cold, delaying spring past its usual earlier entrance in the year. In this article, however, I will refer to the usual bloom times anticipated.

To see a display of flowers of this year's late April blooming rhododendrons, visit the flower show of the Komo Kulshan Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society at Christianson's Nursery (see sidebar.) Members of the chapter will display flowers of the rhododendrons blooming in their gardens at this time of year.

The end of April marks the beginning of late spring rhododendron bloom season. The season peaks during late spring, and the flowers displayed at the show will include the great variety of flower color and flower type during this time of year.

A rhody called "Yak"

One of my favorites, a species from Japan, is affectionately referred to by gardeners as a "yak," based on its botanic name *Rhododendron degronianum* ssp. *yakushmanum*. This compact, mound-shaped plant grows to about 4 feet in 10 years. The new leaves are covered in white, felt-like growth called "indumentum." The flowers are rose in the bud, with flowers changing to pink and then white. Moreover, it will grow in the sun, and is hardy to -25°F. This species has been crossed with many other rhododendron varieties to create hybrids, but in my mind the species is very special.

At the Discovery Garden, we Master Gardeners searched for several large, robust rhododendrons for the back of the rhododendron display garden. 'Lem's Monarch' is one we chose, which grows to 6 feet in 10 years. Its large leaves and showy pink flowers give it a strong presence even from a distance.



Left - Hachmann's polaris is a yak hybrid rhododendron growing in Sonja Nelson's Bay View garden. Its flowers are flamboyant, opening from dark red buds to pink with fuchsia-colored rims. It has endured summer sun and winter freezes for many years. **Right** - Starbright champagne is a hybrid rhododendron created by Frank Fujioka from Whidbey Island. A purple throat offsets the champagne color of its lily-shaped flowers. Hardy to 0°F, it can be seen in the Discovery Garden. **Photos courtesy of Sonja Nelson.**

Don't forget the azaleas

Azaleas are also rhododendrons, and my favorite deciduous azalea is *Rhododendron occidentale*, a species native to Oregon and California's Pacific Coast. This late spring bloomer bears exquisite flowers in various colors and patterns, depending on which selection of the species you grow. The fragrant flowers can be white or pale pink with yellow throats. Fall foliage is yellow or crimson. The plant is an upright grower to 6 feet or more and hardy to -5°F. This species has survived in my garden for many years.

A group of evergreen azaleas, the Satsukis, are late spring or early summer bloomers. In fact, the name "Satsuki" means "May" in English. The Satsuki azaleas are very old horticultural forms selected in Japan and documented as early as 1692. They are often used for bonsai, but I like to grow them simply as container plants, although many of them are hardy enough to grow out in the garden. Beware, however—rabbits like them! One of my favorites is 'Azuma-kagami'. The leaves are small and shiny, and the flowers are light pink shading to deep pink edges. I keep the Satsukis on my deck because I can better get a close-up view of the variation of flowers born on the same plant.

Late spring and early summer bring the rhododendron bloom season to its climax. Dozens of varieties are available at local nurseries where you can see the glory of their flowers, and find some which might be just right for your own garden.

Komo Kulshan Chapter Meetings

The Komo Kulshan Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society meets the third Thursday of each month, September through May (except December.) 7:30 PM at the Burlington Community Center, 1011 Greenleaf Avenue.

Komo Kulshan Flower Show April 30th

The Komo Kulshan Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society will hold a rhododendron flower show from 10 AM to 4 PM Saturday, April 30th, at Christianson's Nursery & Greenhouse, 15806 Best Road, Mount Vernon. Members of the chapter will be on hand to answer questions about rhododendron culture and share branches of blooming rhododendrons from their gardens.

At the show, visitors who sign up to join the society, and who also attend the Komo Kulshan Chapter meeting in September, will be given a free membership for one year (dues are \$40 a year for an individual).



Lori Bayes, Dolores Isakson, Dave Hammond and Elaine Isakson are members of the Komo Kulshan Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. Years ago, chapter members planted this Lem's monarch in the rhododendron garden within the Discovery Garden at WSU Mount Vernon NWREC. The large leaves, showy pink flowers and large stature of Lem's monarch give it a strong presence. **Photo courtesy of Sonja Nelson.**

References:

- American Rhododendron Society website: <http://www.rhododendron.org> . This website gives cultural information on growing rhododendrons, a database of plants and nursery sources for plants.
- Greer, Harold E. *Greer's Guidebook To Available Rhododendrons, Species & Hybrids, Third Edition*, 1996, Offshoot Publications, Eugene, Oregon.