

## Hybridist at Verde Vista

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"I've never been satisfied; I've always wanted to make them better," the hybridizer admits of his intense, never-ending search for improved seedlings.

Among his goals is the breeding of a yellow evergreen azalea, and the developing of selected azaleas as houseplants. Smith would also like to continue increasing the hues in the color range, and add fragrance to this largely non-fragrant species.

"I've created some 'monsters' already," he chuckles. "Then I have to go back to a certain point in the crosses and start over."

But you can't hurry the maturing time of plants, although one season can be gained by using the greenhouse.

"Time is so precious," Smith sighs. "And there is still so much to be done."

His years of careful observation and volumes of written records have led him to develop some theories on genetics. Smith believes that the female parent of hybrid crosses has greater influence on the overall plant habit, while the male genetic material lends more to the bloom character.

Heavy emphasis is placed on winter hardiness. Smith has observed that his early blooming

varieties aren't disturbed by unseasonably cold weather in early fall, because new growth has had time to mature and harden. But late winter warm spells will break their bud dormancy, and the bud may blast. Later bloomers, on the other hand, aren't as readily affected by February warm spells, but are more susceptible to mid-fall heavy freezes.

Smith's love for these plants, each one a "child" of his creation, is the moving force of the widower's active life. He does some writing and lecturing, and still attends various rhododendron-related functions.

Although a rhododendron breeder for 25 years before he belonged to any organized group, he's now a member of four Rhododendron Societies, and recently started a chapter in the York area. Smith is a fellow in the celebrated Royal Horticultural Society based in England and a member of the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens where his expertise is sometimes sought.

In all of his years of growing rhododendrons, Smith says he has never seen a winter as harsh as was this past one. One day especially is imprinted in his memory, when the temperature

was extremely cold, and the wind chill was a reported minus-50 degrees. He shudders when remembering that the snow blew parallel, first from one direction, then rapidly shifting and coming the opposite way.

Although Smith's Eden and Susquehanna Valley hybrids are selected to withstand severe temperatures, he admits that day was a low point of his career.

"It was most discouraging. I thought I'd lost everything. The leaves were all curled and some looked black," he says of the near disaster. Many of his specimens are still one-of-a-kind, and almost a half-century of work hung in the balance.

Although a few plants suffered severe damage, and others had some leaf burn and blasted buds, the bulk of the specimens withstood the Arctic blasts well. It was a sort of ultimate test that Smith philosophically figures "separated the sheep from the goats."

Plants at Verde Vista get no coddling, and Smith avoids spraying or feeding. More important, he believes, is to prepare the soil well at the original planting time, working in quantities of peat moss, perhaps some perlite, and cottonseed meal for nitrogen. He recommends that beds be prepared in the fall, and left for

## Enter your vegetable specialty

LANCASTER — It's not too soon to plan your specialty for the third annual Pennsylvania Vegetable Recipe Contest. Final judging will be held August 25 during Penn State's Ag Progress Days at Rock Springs, just west of State College. The deadline for your entry is July 16.

You can submit any original vegetable recipe that uses fresh Pennsylvania grown vegetables as the main ingredient. It will be judged for taste, ease of preparation and practicality, originality, and appearance. All recipe instructions must be clear

and be specific about ingredients. The number of servings the recipe produces and how long the dish takes to prepare should be clearly stated.

All Pennsylvanians 18 years or older and without professional food status are invited to enter. After entries are received, judges will select the top twelve and notify final contenders by mid-August. Finalists will then take their completed dish to Ag Progress where facilities for reheating entries will be available. All expenses are born by contestants.

spring planting giving organic materials time to decompose.

Good drainage is essential, since the rhododendron species are fairly shallow-rooted and can drown with overwatering in heavy, clay soils. But several of Smith's giant old plants, plus many in raised seedling beds, thrive in a several-inch deep layer of the soil mix spread over an old clay tennis court on the property.

If gardeners have rhododendron or azalea plants that show signs of yellowing, Smith recommends watering them with a solution of weak tea, weak epsom salts water, or pouring on used coffee and tea grounds to help correct soil deficiency.

Walking on the paths through his four shaded garden areas, Smith points out bloom and foliage characteristics of various specimens. Gazing toward the acres of beautiful blooms and greenery, he quietly wishes that there was someone, some young person, whom he could teach, who would understand the immeasurable value of these plants and who would continue this labor of love.

"Don't say what I've accomplished," he chides, modestly, turning away accolades for the beauty he's added to earth.

"What's more important is what still has to be done."

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