



The Dutch Chapter (NRV) and its Belmonte Rhododendron Garden

The Dutch Chapter's Collection garden in 2013.

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Photos by the author

The Dutch Chapter (NRV) of the ARS was founded in 1991 by a number of *Rhododendron* enthusiasts to encourage the exchanging of both plants and experiences between its members. Its first president and co-founder, Mr. Thijs Huisman, was an avid hybridizer who still offers new hybrids to propagation companies for further growing and testing. These objectives indicated that the young chapter meant serious business. The chapter now has 110 members and issues a quarterly newsletter/journal called

Rhodomania, soon to go digital. The board consists of seven members with different areas of interest. Each year several excursions are organized, including one of several days to foreign countries. The chapter also initiates an annual plant fair where rhododendrons, especially the less common species and cultivars, along with exclusive trees and shrubs can be bought. However, its major achievement was the founding of a large rhododendron show and education garden in the Belmonte Arboretum in the town of Wageningen.

The Belmonte Arboretum in Wageningen

Belmonte started out in 1800 as an estate owned by a wealthy aristocratic family. In 1843, a mansion was built and the estate garden was redesigned by the Dutch landscape architect Jan Zocher Jr. A few trees of that period are still present in the arboretum. The estate was named Belmonte (beautiful mountain) because of its high elevation, on a “mountain” (we don't have that many mountains in the Netherlands, so every sizeable mound



1940 Huize Belmonte

is a “mountain”) 60 m (197 ft) above sea level. The “mountain” is the remainder of a glacial moraine and has a very steep slope facing southward. The view is quite impressive, as the low lying area south of Belmonte is wide and the scenery is

dominated by a gently meandering part of the Rhine river.

In 1936, the last members of the family donated the estate to a regional trust. During the Second World War, a German ammunition depot was based on the

estate, which became a target of the allied forces when they invaded the Netherlands and heavy artillery was exchanged between both parties. The unfortunate result was the total ruining of the mansion and many of the huge trees surrounding it.



R. 'Belmonte'.



R. 'Bow Bells'.



The Dutch Chapter's collection garden beginnings in 2007.

The Wageningen University acquired Belmonte in 1951 for the price of one Guilder in order to expand its dendrological research and education collection. The arboretum became part of the Botanical Gardens of the university,

which also encompassed the older Dreijen Arboretum. In 2009 the Botanical Gardens were closed by the University as part of a budget cutting programme, and presently the arboretum is owned by the Belmonte Arboretum Foundation. Its

future now depends on the foundation's success in generating funds for preservation of the arboretum.

The dendrological collection of the Belmonte Arboretum (spread over 17 hectares (42 acres)) is quite impressive. Its



R. 'Cheer'.



R. 'Peter Koster'.



R. 'Professor Hugo de Vries'.



R. 'Velasquez'.



R. adenogynum.



R. campylogynum ssp. *myrtilloides.*



R. dalhousiae var. *rhabdotum.*



R. sutchuenense.



R. ventricosum.



R. williamsianum.

focal collections are *Rhododendron*, *Sorbus* (rowan/mountain ash), *Aria* (whitebeam), botanical roses, *Malus* (crab apple), *Prunus* (especially Japanese ornamental cherries), *Celtis* (nettle tree), *Philadelphus* (mock orange), *Aesculus* (horse chestnut), Caprifoliaceae (honeysuckle family), and *Coriaria*. The rhododendron collection is part of a national collection, including the three partner collections in the Trompenburg Arboretum, the Blijdenstein Pinetum and the Von Gimborn Arboretum. The whole national collection encompasses many hundreds of species and cultivars. The national botanical collections are organized in a foundation, the Dutch National Plant Collections, which is a partner to the Dutch Botanical Gardens Society (www.botanischetuinen.nl; choose the UK version and then the button "SNP coll." in the main menu for all Dutch national botanical collections).

The Rhododendron Garden Beginnings

In 2003, a lucky meeting between the then curator of the Wageningen Botanical Gardens (yours truly) and a friend of his and an early member of the NRV, led to an invitation to the then president of the NRV, Prof. Lou Traas, to discuss the possibility of founding an educational and show garden for rhododendrons in the Belmonte Arboretum. Because the arboretum already contained a sizeable collection of older cultivars (many

originated from Dutch rhododendron breeders, dating back to the first half of the 20th century), it was decided that this garden would be a very welcome addition to both the collection and to the aesthetics of the arboretum. The eastern part of the arboretum lacked an attractive object and it was decided to clear 4000 m² (one acre) for the collection. Members of the chapter committed to donating plants from their private collections, as did several local commercial growers. Additional plants were also bought from some well-known international growers.

It was decided that the plants would be grouped according to the Cullen and Chamberlain (1980) system with hybrid cultivars grouped with their closest genetically/morphologically parental species. At that time, the molecular-based phylogeny of Goetsch *et al.* (2005) was not available.

The garden was designed by Dutch garden architect Elke de Langhe, and the first 100 plants were received in 2004. In 2006, the number of plants prompted the board of the chapter to initiate a Grand Opening of the Rhododendron Garden. This took place on May 12, 2007, in the company of both the mayor of Wageningen, the Rector Magnificus of Wageningen University and some 80 other guests. The opening also witnessed the introduction of the new cultivar 'Belmonte', developed by former chapter president Huisman from crosses involving *R. wardii*.

The Rhododendron Garden Today

Presently the chapter's garden contains about 400 species, about 400 cultivars and a grand total of about 1400 plants. On the side, a few non-hardy species are also part of the collection from sections *Maddenia* and *Schistanthe* (former *Vireya*). New plants are still added where possible and sick or dead specimens are quickly replaced. A permanent committee checks the collection at least twice every year. Maintenance of the collection is largely the responsibility of the new Belmonte Arboretum Foundation, with the chapter's committee sitting in an advisory role. All in all, the garden is flourishing and attracts hundreds of extra visitors to the arboretum each year.

Wilbert Hetterscheid is the Dutch Chapter president and a director of the Von Gimborn Arboretum.

References

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Outstanding Flowers and Amazing Foliage: *R.* 'Cherries and Merlot'

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(From the August 2014 Portland Chapter newsletter)

When you see this hybrid by Frank Fujioka for the first time, the colorful undersides of the leaves attract your attention so much that you forget to ask about the flowers. When you hear that the flowers are a deep, bright red, the combination sounds intriguing. In fact, the flowers are so rich in color that they

meld well with the foliage to form a truly superb new hybrid. Here is more about 'Cherries and Merlot':

- It is an elepidote, with no scales on its leaves.
- The cross is ('Pretty Baby' × *R. pachysanthum*) × 'Whid Bee'.
- The red flowers come from these parents in this cross: 'Cornubia', 'Noyo Chief', 'Kilimanjaro', 'Rubicon' and 'Rosevallon', with the red-purple undersides of the leaves coming from 'Rosevallon'.
- Flowers: The trusses are rounded and are

constructed of deep, bright red corollas that are funnel- campanulate in shape. The bloom time is early April.

- Leaves: Dark green on top, and red-purple on the undersides.
- Height: 3 feet (0.9 m) in 10 years.
- Hardiness: Unknown at this time. Two of the parents, *R. pachysanthum* and *R. degronianum* ssp. *yakushmanum*, may lend some hardiness to the cross.
- Placement in your garden: Protect it from the cold until you know its hardiness. Some shade is desirable.