

## Our Bremen *Rhododendron* – a first evaluation

I will not easily forget our one-day trip to the Botanischer Garten und Rhododendron-Park Bremen in northern Germany in March 2017. Firstly, because we had decided to make this a day trip. 500 kilometres (one way!) in a light commercial van with the necessary traffic jams, roadworks, and diversions is not my idea of a relaxing trip. Secondly, it was with a very specific reason that we had chosen the less comfortable van instead of a car: we were going to collect young, mostly wild collected *Rhododendron* seedlings that were put aside for us!

My companion Christophe Crock and I were welcomed by Dr. Hartwig Schepker who took us around the Park and wonderful *Rhododendron* collection. Needless to say, we were very impressed by the quality of the collections, propagation unit and the general maintenance of the Park.

We returned home (far too late but with a big smile) with 15 boxes of rhododendron seedlings and small plants totalling 109 specimens of 31 species! But before we hit the road back home Hartwig added a little warning: several of these should be considered as ‘test plants’ as they may not or only marginally be hardy ‘even for you guys’. So, they were planted in a nursery under the protection of Corsican pines and protected with a fleece in winter when the weather forecast required us to do so.



Fleece provides cold weather protection to the young rhododendron species in their nursery planting

Now, four years later, including one cold winter (the first half of February of this year with 10 days of frost and temperatures dropping to  $-13^{\circ}\text{C}$  on the coldest night in the coldest spot) the time has come for a first evaluation.

It is important to mention that Wespelaar is a small village in the Belgian countryside and recent studies confirm that climate change in terms of winter colds will not have a big impact in the rural area. Extreme weather conditions will certainly occur more often (storms, droughts, heat waves) but a cold winter remains a possibility. In fact, it is only in cities (‘heat islands’) that an increase in hardiness zone could occur.

A number of subsections are performing quite well in Wespelaar and this was confirmed with the plants from Bremen. All plants of *Heliolepidia* are in perfect condition (3x *R. bracteatum* and 3x *R. heliolepis* var. *heliolepis*). Also, all *Argyrophylla* are doing very well but these were well protected during the cold spell and may suffer

when we experience a real cold winter (5x *R. hunnewellianum* and 6x *R. ririei*). *Rhododendron asterochneum* (*Fortunea*) was introduced in Arboretum Wespelaar in 2008 and has performed remarkably well so far. The three specimens from Bremen are also perfectly hardy and will be a great addition to the collection.

At the other end of the spectrum are those taxa that are not really adapted to our cold (but in summer warm and dry) climate and therefore never really got a fair chance. A good example is subsection *Maddenia*: *R. maddenii* and its ssp. *crassum* are suffering; of the eight *R. horlickianum*, an interesting foliage plant from northern Burma, only a couple survived and we hope for the best; *R. pachypodum*, *R. pseudociliipes* and *R. taggianum* are all dead. Of the three *Rhododendron edgeworthii* (*Edgeworthia*) only one is alive and only because it is still a pot plant kept in a cold greenhouse. All three specimens of *Rhododendron heteroclitum* aff. (*Pogonanthum*) are dead. It is not really the winter temperature that is the cause: these small shrubs from the high mountains hate our unsteady springs and far too hot, dry summers. Our winters, which can often be warm and snowless, are not their cup of tea either. *Rhododendron leptothrium* (*Azaleastrum*) did not survive either.

The two main surprises were *R. kyawii* from West Yunnan and NE Myanmar and *R. oldhamii* from Taiwan both having the reputation of being tender. After 4 years outside, *R. oldhamii* came through untouched, except for one specimen that will surely recover this year. For *R. kyawii*, the situation is slightly more nuanced but at least one of the three specimens seems completely unharmed even after this colder winter of 2020-21. We should not get overconfident but for now this is surprising and good news.

Other plants that are doing well are *Rhododendron brachyanthum* ssp. *hypolepidotum* (*Glauca*), *R. coriaceum* and *R. galactinum* (*Falconera*), *R. souliei* (*Campylocarpa*), *R. selense* ssp. *dasycladum* (*Selensia*), and *R. exasperatum* (*Barbata*). The observations for the following subsections are mixed: *Irrorata*, *Neriiflora* (*R. floccigerum*) and *Thomsonia* (*R. hylaeum*). *Rhododendron arboreum* has always been on our wish list and since 2009 we have planted several specimens of *R. arboreum* ssp. *cinnamomeum* with good results. The plant from Bremen however belongs to the eastern (Chinese) subspecies *R. arboreum* ssp. *delavayi* and is, with only one miserable survivor out of six, clearly less hardy.



*R. kyawii* (West Yunnan, 3000m)

Continued overleaf



*R. oldhamii*

It is probably too early to publish a reliable evaluation after only four years, but initially, our first observations are on paper and you can now follow the progress because in four years' time you can expect an update (and this time with pictures of flowers, hopefully). Or better still, come and see for yourself, because Arboretum Wespelaar has many other beautiful RCMs to admire!

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All photos taken by the author.