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Jerry Harris' rhody 'lab'

By NONA PIERCE

There are over 1,000 species of rhododendrons, 43 different classes, including azaleas, and over 10,000 named varieties, but Jerry Harris grows only several dozen kinds on his property on Lupine Valley Road in the Aptos Hills.

He came to rhododendron culture through a friend he met when he came to California. He had always been in construction work after growing up on a farm in Missouri, and hoped going into the nursery business would allow him to make a permanent change. Instead, he stayed in construction and now cultivates rhododendrons as an avocation.

He says he can't really estimate how much time he spends in their care. "I come home from work and just come out here and walk around, look at the plants, maybe remove dead blossoms, pull a clump of grass out of the mulch, check to see how the plants look. I don't keep track of the time."

A group of sun-tolerant "Exbury" type rhododendrons dominates a bed as one approaches the house he built about three years ago. The flowers are shades of red-orange, yellow, gold and creamy white. This variety is deciduous, the flowers blooming in clusters before the leaves unfold on the plant. Harris has hybridized deciduous varieties himself, preferring to use this kind because "you can see the result sooner than with other kinds. The deciduous ones come into bloom within four or five years, where some others may take 10 or even 20

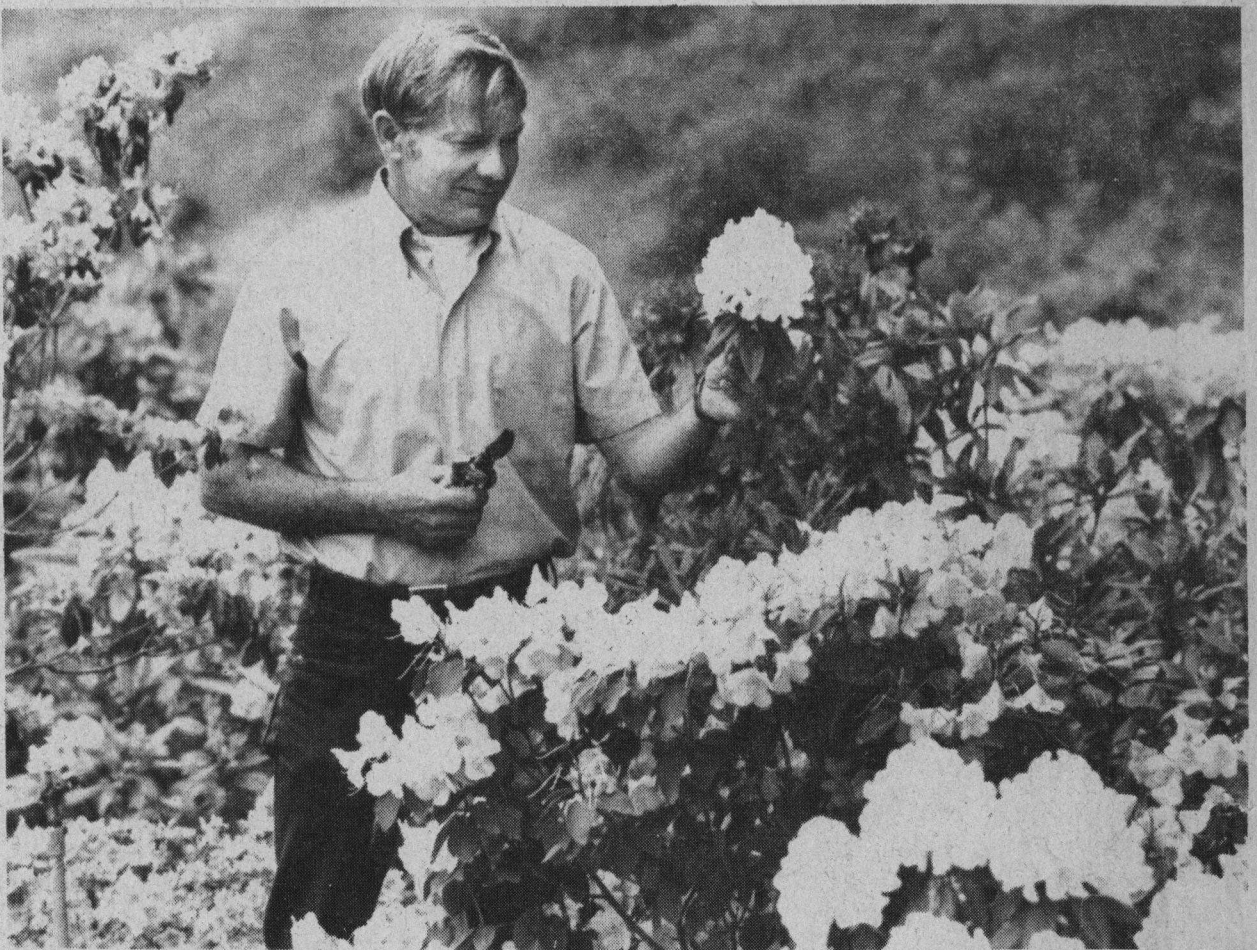


Photo by Kurt Ellison

Harris showing a truss from his white 'Helene Schiffner' variety.

years to bloom (from seed)."

East of the house, spread before the eye as one walks down a slight slope, is the largest planting. Here are many dozens of plants, Harris' main "laboratory," which is a fairyland of bloom and fragrance. Meandering paths among the plants afford close-up viewing. A large grove of second-growth redwoods in the usual ring provides some shelter and sun control. All the plants get sun some time of the day, however. Harris warns that rhododendrons grown in a too-shady location will become "leggy and

will have sparse bloom, or none at all."

The soil here has been rototilled, then redwood sawdust and mulch mixed in. When holes are dug for placement of new plants, he mixes more organic material in the holes, and makes sure the plants sit up high enough above the soil surface so that drainage is good. "Rhododendrons are surface feeders, and the decay of the sawdust and mulch provides food as they grow, and also builds up the soil." Watering during the dry months, and if needed in the winter (but not *this* year!), is done with a completely automatic Rainbird sprinkler system. "They are watered while I sleep," he says. Besides the constant nutritional elements generated in the soil from the redwood sawdust, Harris also feeds the plants with cottonseed meal during the winter season.

Most people think of rhododendrons as large shrubs with leathery leaves, with prominent clusters of pink, red or purple flowers. But the plants can vary in size from less than a foot high to almost tree-size. Harris has a very low plant, *R. impeditum*, with grayish-green tiny leaves, compact growth and small, lavender shading into blue flowers. It is about 12 inches high in its planter, and is from a high-altitude alpine environment in which the

plant has had to evolve into this low form in order to survive. He also has several varieties with very large, tough leaves, native to rain forests in China or Tibet, which he says will grow tall as a tree in its normal habitat.

Many rhododendrons are fragrant, and a sweet-smelling, outstanding one in Harris' collection is "Fragrantissimum," a large shrub of rather loose, open growth. The fragrance is powerful enough to waft on the breeze, honeysuckle-like, beckoning one to seek out the source. The "trusses" (as the clusters of flowers on rhododendrons are called) are made up of funnel-shaped white flowers, nodding at the ends of branches.

"Pink Brightness" has bell-like flowers of a clear, distinct pink. "White Pearl" has dark pink "candles" (the buds before they open), which change to white, shaded with pale pink, as they open. "Bow Bells" is another beauty in Jerry Harris' garden. It is compact, with flowers of bell shape, bright pink in loose clusters.

A deep red, with huge trusses of red flowers, is "Lem's Storm Cloud." One year it won Best of Show in its color in San Mateo County one week, Best of Show in its color in San Jose the next week, and then Best of

Show overall in Santa Cruz County the following week. Harris says, "It would have won best in its color in Santa Cruz too, but by this time the flowers were beginning to fade a bit."

Harris, and many other members, will have trusses of flowers and many plants for judging at the annual show of the Monterey Bay Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society this Saturday and Sunday at Antonelli Brothers Begonia Gardens, 2545 Capitola Road, Capitola. The show is open to the public Saturday from 1 to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Non-members are eligible for ribbons but not trophies. Those who want information on how to enter, and about the show, can call Mr. and Mrs. John Hixon of Watsonville (722-8502). Or come to the show, see how it's done, and plan to enter next year.

Also this weekend, the Monterey Bay Iris Society, in cooperation with the American Iris Society, presents "Spring Rainbows 1982." Visitors can view the show at the Capitola Mall on 41st Avenue, Capitola, on Saturday from noon to 5 p.m. and on Sunday from noon to 4 p.m.

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