

Some gardening adventures including rhododendrons in rural Aberdeenshire

This article is from a fairly recent member of the SRS, who has an ongoing project to convert a hillside into a garden in rural Aberdeenshire. It may be of interest to other SRS members.

Background

I retired last year after 3 years as a military aircraft designer/stress engineer followed by 40 years as a subsea engineer in the offshore oil and gas industry, hence our current location near Aberdeen. My previous experience of gardening was limited to basic weeding, cutting grass and planting a few tulips.

I bought our place in 1999 because it was cheaper than properties in Aberdeen, it was in a lovely part of the country and it had some ground, which I thought I might do something with. We own about two and a half acres, covering most of a hillside. We also control another half an acre below us which has been abandoned for many years. This area we have planted with daffodils and I cut back a couple of times a year as it is a source of "fireweed" (Rosebay Willowherb) which spreads up hill to us, and is a pain to get rid of. The property runs primarily North to South, on various levels, all sloping to some degree, with our house at the Southern end facing West across a glen. Our house is just below the top of the hill at an elevation of about 500 feet, and reached via a long track from the North. We have a field about 25 acres in size along the East side of the property, and a large stand of trees to the South. We are on the edge of the Howe of Alford, in the heart of beautiful Donside, with farms all around us.

The climate here inland is a little different to the Aberdeenshire coast. Aberdeen is twenty five miles to the West of us. We are hotter in the summer and colder in the winter. They fairly regularly get the "haar" sea fog in the summer, which is miserable but fortunately doesn't reach us. In the summer the southern edge of the house acts as a suntrap, and in July and August it is not unusual to reach 30 degrees on a sunny day. On the negative side, it is colder here in the winter, partly due to our elevation. We can also get a lot more snow.

Current Situation

The previous owners had done some planting, including a few Ponticums near the house and along the track. However, the rest of the property was mostly abandoned to gorse and the dreaded fireweed, with some mature rowans and lots of young scots pine, field maples, silver birch and downey birch.

My original plan was simply to plant some specimen trees and more flowering shrubs alongside the track which winds its way along to the house. Then later we needed a path to shorten the route to the bottom of our track. This then provided an opportunity for more planting, at which point I discovered hybrid rhododendrons. The track and the path then both became obvious planting sites for these. We later cleared about half an acre of gorse in the centre of the property. This has windbreaks on the North and West sides, and twenty large woodland hybrids (Sappho, Percy Wiseman, Red Jack, Rabatz, Graffito, Nova Zembla and Mrs T.H Lewinsky) are planted around the edges, with some smaller Cunningham's White as an inner ring. Most of these later hybrids have been in the ground for four years now and are developing nicely. Those along the garden path have been in the ground about ten years and are threatening to overrun the path. The previous owners

Ponticums and the few I planted along the track twelve years ago are now at least three metres high and some are over four metres wide.

As time went by the rowans stayed about the same size, but the young scots pines and field maples and the birches seemed to suddenly become a lot of very tall mature trees. I had also planted a lot of ornamental cherry trees and laburnums, and smaller conifers for windbreaks, so eventually it became clear we were living in a small forest with lots of rhododendrons (getting on for a hundred at the last count) planted amongst the trees, not the other way around. I love my trees but I realised we had too many and they were getting out of control. Because of this, over the last two years we have removed a dozen trees and topped another dozen. Now we have a good level of light throughout the garden and much less of a risk of trees coming down in a gale. The trees are possibly located sufficiently at random and in sufficient quantity for our garden to be described as a woodland garden, but in the late spring when everything is growing like crazy it can seem like a jungle, but I love it.

I have an admission to make. For the first few years I bought rhododendrons just based on colour, and I didn't bother to keep a note of their names. It's only over the last five years, since joining the SRS, that I've kept careful notes. So, if I'm asked what some varieties are, I can only say that's a pink one or a red one etc.

Problems

Disease – I've read in the SRS magazines and in info from Glendoick Gardens and elsewhere concerns regarding the risk of transmission of disease, and possibly by buying new plants. Our garden has escaped disease so far, and I'm not planning in expanding my collection of rhododendrons at the moment. We also do not have any neighbours with rhododendrons. So, I'm hoping disease will not be an issue in the future.

Wind – Our location is very exposed to gales from the West. We are maybe not as exposed as the folks who live in the Western Isles, but when it blows here it is very impressive and a bit scary at times. We have several trees with trunks at 45 degrees due to the prevailing winds. As mentioned already I've had some spruce and scots pine trees more than 30 feet high topped to reduce the risk of them blowing down. More will require topping in the future. This is by far the biggest potential problem we have in our garden. After every big storm we see trees down in the local woods, and the shallow roots on many are plain to see. We had a mature 60 foot scots pine blown down several years ago in a very mild blow, so now I'm on the lookout for trees that are at risk, and will control their height, and also thin out their branches where prudent. As far as the rhododendrons and azaleas are concerned, they are mostly placed behind windbreaks, which have been growing along with them, and our gales haven't troubled them so far. Hopefully that will continue to be the case.



A much loved laburnum we are trying to keep upright despite the gales.

Cold and Snow – We’ve had temperatures as low as minus 18 quite a few times since we’ve been here. So when the rhododendron bug really bit I started selecting the ones I wanted particularly by hardiness. I’ve been guided mainly by information gleaned from publications by the Cox family and Glendoick Garden. I initially bought a couple of plants rated at 4, but apart from that I’ve gone for only hardiness 5 or more. Our windbreaks run north to south along our hillside, so there is a risk of cold air being trapped on the up side of the wind breaks. To prevent this I’ve got gaps in the windbreaks. We’ve not lost any plants due to the cold, so far. I’m hoping that will continue.

Like the wind, when it snows here, we can get a lot and it drifts, especially if it comes from the East. In 2000, 2001, 2005, 2009 and this year we got big dumps of snow from the East. Big for us means more than a foot deep. Unfortunately, if the snow comes from the East with a following wind, we get the snow off the adjacent field, as well as our own snow. This year we had drifts nearly 5 feet deep. In 2010 we had them over 6 feet deep more than once. We got the first delivery in December, a second a month later and yet another a month after that! Life in the country can be an adventure. We also get power cuts! But I have a generator for that eventuality. Getting back to the rhododendrons, I have very few planted in locations at risk of deep snow drifts – through luck rather than judgement. Buried or not, none of our rhododendrons and azaleas seem bothered by the cold, but the weight of the snow on their branches is the main risk. If we have a lot of snow I will try and

remove some safely, but that in itself can cause the damage you are trying to prevent. Complete burial is another problem. When we get a lot of snow some deep drifts may not melt or be completely cleared for days, or even weeks. The snow quickly hardens like concrete, the weight can then flatten the plants, and is very difficult to dig them out without causing damage. I want to keep my large (and getting larger) hybrids, so I have to accept the risk of some snow damage. Snow has always been a problem for the branches of our small conifers, but I've been securing these with string since the first winter after we arrived.



Snow blocking our track this year

Climate change – This is what concerns me the most. We've always been exposed to the wind here. I may be wrong, but the storms seem to be getting stronger as the years go by. I'm taking precautions, but I'm afraid of a repeat of a storm such as the big one in 1987, and also afraid of these becoming a regular occurrence.

2017 was a washout here, with rain and drizzle throughout the spring and summer. (We only had one barbecue!) and daytime maximum temperatures regularly only 12 degrees. However, my rhododendrons and azaleas put on a marvellous display.

This year the weather has been very different. From June right through August daytime temperatures have been in the high twenties, occasionally over 30 with little or no rain, effectively a drought. (But more barbecues, and some serious suntan!). Our rhododendrons did not flower so well this year, I believe as a result. Likewise our ornamental cherry trees and laburnums. I'm not sure if there was any water rationing in Scotland this year, but fortunately we get our water from a series of wells, so watering was not an issue – except I had to do it a lot. Some newly planted hybrids were clearly suffering, so I was out every couple of days with the hose pipe. All the plants seem to have recovered after we started to get rain again late in August. I've very rarely had to water anything other than hanging baskets, but maybe I will have to do more in the future.

Lessons

I'm not sure any general lessons can be learnt from my amateurish experiences in the wilds of Aberdeenshire over the last 15 odd years. However, I've noted below what seems to have worked in our "woodland" garden / jungle:-

- Over the last two years I had to take control of the number and height of our many trees to reduce the risk of them coming down in our regular gales. But I should have done it some years earlier.
- I selected rhododendron varieties that would flower about the same time - May though early June. Some large gardens we've visited in Scotland have varieties that flower outside this range planted together. That doesn't work for me. I think it spoils the overall effect. It can look untidy and a bit sad;
- When I found out it was possible, I selected rhododendron varieties with hardiness I guessed would be appropriate to where we live. 4 as an absolute minimum, preferably 5 or 6. I don't know if the hardiness rating system is accurate, but I've tried to follow it and I haven't lost any plants to the cold – yet;
- I've tried to locate plants where they have some shelter from the wind. Invariably this has meant some have then had more shade than others. I read somewhere that rhododendrons in Scotland need all the sun that they can get. This seems to be true in Aberdeenshire, and it has been necessary to cut back or remove tree branches or other shrubs to increase the sunlight getting to some plants;
- Purely by luck I've generally avoided planting rhododendrons or azaleas in areas prone to deep snow drifts. I have accepted some snow damage is an acceptable risk;
- As far as possible I've tried to obtain new plants from a reliable source. In recent years most of my hybrids have come from Glendoick Gardens near Perth – probably well known to most SRS members. They have all been top quality plants, disease free and have grown on with no problems. I haven't had the patience to attempt growing from seed;
- We have one area which gets very wet during autumn and spring rains, so I have avoided that area. In most other places the drainage seems to suit the plants. This year I planted several young hybrids, just before it got hot, and they have clearly needed quite a bit of watering. Time will tell whether this was just due to the 2018 hot spell / drought;
- Our soil is a bit sandy in places, but seems to be sufficiently acidic. I have always added generous amounts of ericaceous compost whilst planting, but after that the plants seem to survive happily enough on their own. Leaf falls from previous years seems to provide all the mulch they require if any. Getting underneath some to add mulch actually risks breaking the lower branches;

The future

The main effort in the future will be to keeping the number and height of our many trees under control, as well as maintaining light levels. This will mean topping some, maybe removing a few and cutting back branches.

I've little room left for more rhododendrons. I need to balance the garden. Unless something spectacular come along (maybe with gorgeous flares like Cassata or Sappho) I'm going to be concentrating elsewhere – I've planted quite a few roses this year.

The rhododendrons seem to pretty much take care of themselves. So far only a few along a garden path need a bit of pruning width wise. If we get more hot summers, I can see regular watering becoming necessary. Apart from that our rhododendrons and azaleas seem to find life in the wilds of rural Aberdeenshire is acceptable. Long may that continue.

Some side notes. We have a few plum trees which crop every year, but this year the crop was phenomenal - hundreds per branch. In August we also had an increase in butterflies by several orders of magnitude, maybe 50 at a time on one buddleia alone. The huge increase in butterflies apparently was seen in Aberdeen as well. This must be due to the unusually hot spring and summer. So maybe climate change will not be all bad. Finally, Scotland has a reputation for midges. Here the problem is not midges, it is the damned horse flies!

Conclusions – not necessarily applicable generally

- Careful selection and appropriate positioning seems to be sufficient to allow commercially available hardy woodland hybrids to survive in rural Aberdeenshire. The local Ponticums seem to be bombproof. I haven't attempted species rhododendrons.
- Creating a garden from a blank sheet of paper, without deadlines or restrictions can be a joy – it was for me.
- However, the creation of a big or woodland garden from scratch may be best started before you reach pensionable age. The clearing of ground, the necessary digging, cutting back of tree branches, chainsaw use, cutting of grass possibly requiring a brush cutter may be too much for old bones and joints. (Unless you can afford to pay people to do it for you – but then what is the point.) I was 48 when I started, and even that might be a bit late. I'm still doing it all at nearly 67, but the majority of the hard work has been completed.
- My discovery of rhododendrons and azaleas other than Ponticums has transformed our hillside garden. They are boringly green most of the year, but for several weeks in the spring they are just breathtaking.

Some pictures – all from our garden

These are in no particular order



A view North along a garden path – Percy Wisemans if I remember correctly and about ten years in the ground.



The same path looking South.



Rhododendron Sappho – two years after planting I have eight of these, four in a group.



Rhododendron Mrs T.H. Lewinsky – two years after planting, one of my favourites. I have two adjacent to the group of four Sappho – big flare heaven!



Rhododendron Cassata – one year after planting, probably my favourite Rhododendron.



Approximately eight years after planting – Gomer Waterer if I remember correctly – sorry.



Rhododendron Rasputin – four years after planting



Finally, forgive me for not cutting the grass before I took this picture – in 2016.