

OFF THE BEATEN PATH:
Hidden Treasures of the Arboretum

Rough-Leaved Rhododendron

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DANIEL MOUNT



There are over 1000 *Rhododendron* species in the world. Though populations can be found in the Caucasus Mountains and Southern Europe, in the Appalachian Mountains, and on the West Coast of North America, by far the majority of rhododendrons are found in the Eastern Himalayas and on the Malay Archipelago. In its database, UW Botanic Gardens lists well over 1800 rhododendrons in the Arboretum collection. Nearly half of these are hybrids, but there is also a magnificent representation of species in our collection, too.

ABOVE: The hirsute foliage and beautiful early spring flowers of *Rhododendron scabrifolium*.



One of the newer arrivals in the Arboretum is *Rhododendron scabrifolium*, the rough-leaved rhododendron. The seed of this plant was originally collected as *R. spinuliferum* at 7200 feet between the villages of Midu and Chuxong, along the Old Burma Road in Yunnan, China. They were later discovered—in the refrigerator at the Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden (RSBG) in Federal Way—by Steve Hootman, when he took over curatorship there in 1992. It's unclear how long the seeds were in cold storage, but luckily for us, they germinated readily. And we received one of the plants from RSBG in 1995.

The rough-leaved rhododendron forms dense thickets on rocky slopes under pines and oaks at elevations of 5900 feet to 11000 feet in its native Yunnan. *Rhododendron spinuliferum* and *R. scabrifolium* have overlapping habitats and very similar growth habits and morphologies. In the field, and in seed, they can easily be mistaken for one another. Hootman corrected the misidentification in 2007, and the Arboretum followed suit.

Père Jean Marie Delavay, a French missionary and botanist, introduced the rough-leaved rhododendron to European gardens in 1885, two years after he discovered it. Delavay's contributions to horticulture and botany are legion, and he is commemorated by name in many Northwest garden favorites, like *Osmanthus delavayi* and *Paeonia delavayi*.

Though the rough-leaved rhododendron is not the showiest of what the Arboretum has to offer of the genus, it is certainly not a mere curiosity. The leathery leaves and very hairy branches are quite interesting in and of themselves. But the early flowers—with lovely pink anthers floating over the silky, white petals—make this plant a treasure.

Our specimen is easy enough to find along the steps leading down from Arboretum Drive into Rhododendron Glen. Small though it is, compared to the behemoths that surround it, you can't miss it when in flower in late March to early April. It spills right onto the path at the top of the second set of stairs descending into the shadows of the glen. ☺

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ABOVE: Close-up of the pink anthers and pink-edged white petals.