

History of the Founding of the ARS and Major Awards

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As early as 1931 Guy Nearing wrote to Joe Gable: "We really need a rhododendron society in this country" (Livingston and West 1978). World War II helped bring the ARS into the world, because it interrupted most British rhododendron activities, on which the founders of the ARS were quite dependent. In September, 1940, Guy complained to Joe Gable that his letter to the British Rhododendron Association took so long to get there that the seeds he had hoped to purchase were all sold and the yearbook no longer available: "Under the circumstances, it might be worthwhile to launch an American Rhododendron Association, and try to keep up the interest until the British one resumes" (Livingston and West 1978).

George Grace and John Henny travelled up and down the coast of the Pacific Northwest in 1942 and 1943 talking to rhododendron growers trying to kindle interest in a rhododendron society. As ARS Editor Rudolph Henny recalled it, "The founding members had met on the day of the great invasion of Europe (June 6, 1944)" (Henny 1955). Those in attendance were: E.R. Peterson, George Grace, W.G. Tucker, H.H. Harms, John Bacher, John Henny, and Rudolph Henny. All of these men had outstanding collections of rhododendrons.

It was agreed at this meeting that this newly formed group be known as "The Rhododendron Society." It was agreed to meet only four times a year, and the officers elected on this date were: John Henny, President; George Grace, Secretary; and E. R. Peterson, Treasurer. John Bacher declined the vice presidency, but declared "A day to be remembered in horticultural history" (Henny 1955). W. G. Tucker was extended the honor of having membership card number one. It was also agreed that evening to have the first public meeting in September. In the meantime both large Portland dailies, the *Oregonian* and the *Journal*, were given the story of the new organization and articles appeared in the Garden Sections of both. In September of that year about 40 persons attended the first meeting in the auditorium of the Public Service Building in Portland.

The two great national gardening magazines, *The Flower Grower* on the East Coast, and *Sunset* on the West Coast mentioned the formation of the Rhododendron Society

and almost immediately applications for membership were received from many States (Henny 1955). In a few months after this first public meeting the membership was well over 150 members. The name “The American Rhododendron Society” was adopted.

At the fall meeting some other details were discussed:

- Registration, naming and control of new hybrids.
- Judges to be experts and permanently appointed. Eventually to make awards for exceptional plants.
- To have a test garden and to promote an annual show.
- The Constitution.
- Election of Officers.
- Membership fees were \$5.
- Dates of Meetings.
- That the president appoints an editorial committee to publish a monthly bulletin and a yearly outline.

On January 9, 1945, the articles of incorporation of the American Rhododendron Society were signed. *The Oregon Journal* underwrote the cost of incorporating the new group. All board members were from Oregon and Washington. The first annual meeting was held in Portland, Oregon, and featured an extensive collection of blossoming plants and cut trusses.

Within six months the ARS began the tradition of an annual Rhododendron Show with a non-competitive exhibition of blossoming plants on Park Avenue in front of the art museum in downtown Portland. The exhibition included collections of cut trusses from as far away as Bremerton, WA, and Eureka, CA. Twenty to twenty-five thousand persons visited the grounds. Each variety was clearly labeled. Soon the membership grew to over 1,700 including members from many foreign countries.

The ARS published a series of informative yearbooks on Hybrids (1945), Species (1946), Stud Book (1947) Azaleas (1948), and Hybrids again in 1949. It started a quarterly bulletin in 1947 and in 1949 the membership chose to focus the ARS’s efforts on the quarterly *Bulletin*, edited by Rudolph Henny.

The 1948 Rhododendron Show held in the old armoury in downtown Portland was truly an extravaganza. A 30-foot waterfall cascaded from the balcony to the lower floor, where it meandered in a stream before being pumped again to the balcony. Hybrid and species rhododendrons were artistically placed along the banks. The show was aesthetically beautiful, but it was a financial failure and that plunged the ARS into debt. The \$1,000 deficit was made up by contributions from the show exhibitors. In January 1949 new leadership was voted into office, with Claude I. Sersanous the new president.

When the ARS was created, all members were members-at-large of the society. The meetings were held in Portland, Oregon. 75 members and prospective members from the east coast attended a meeting at the Essex House in New York on Oct. 30, 1949, to form the “Eastern Division of the ARS” (Hardgrove 1950). Donald L. Hardgrove was

elected secretary. This development led to a proposal for local chapters for members too far from Portland. In 1951, the by-laws were revised to include local chapters. The next year the society approved affiliation of the Eugene, Middle Atlantic (Virginia), New York, Seattle, and Tacoma chapters.

In 1952, at the request of the board, C. T. Hansen designed a medal to be awarded to individuals for their outstanding contributions to the genus *Rhododendron* in its various phases. The first recipient of this Gold Medal was President Sersanous “for outstanding meritorious service” (Hansen 1953). Early in 1953 Joseph B. Gable received the second, “in grateful acknowledgment of 30 years of accomplishment in the investigation and hybridization of the *Rhododendron* genus.” Joseph F. Rock was the third recipient in April 1954 “in grateful acknowledgment of his horticultural work as a plant explorer and achievement in the discovery of new and valuable species of the genus *Rhododendron*” (West 1994).

With the growth of the organization it became necessary to establish chapters where increased membership was centralized. With the constantly increasing interest in rhododendrons more chapters were added as needed. In 1952, the centers of interest were along a narrow strip of the West Coast from British Columbia to Southern California, and along the East Coast from Massachusetts to Georgia, with a good representation of states in between. Some 23 states were represented in the membership as well as Canada, England, Holland, and New Zealand.

In early 1952, chapters were approved in Seattle, Tacoma, and Eugene. By mid-1952, chapters were approved in New York and Richmond. The directors suggested that Portland, which was the home to all previous ARS meetings, form its own chapter. Portland was not fully recognized as a chapter until 1955: in the interim it was “the ARS.” Its leaders did double duty as chapter and national officers. In addition they oversaw the national test garden at Crystal Springs Lake Island, which was later turned over to the Chapter to manage. However, the Portland Chapter did not exist until 1955 when it finally drew up bylaws. Then in 1955, the members in Portland formed the Portland Chapter.

By 1964, the ARS had nearly 1,000 members with chapters at Portland, Seattle, Tacoma, Eugene, Northern California, New York and Virginia (called Middle Atlantic). A plant-name registry was established (coordinated with the RHS), standards for plant ratings and awards were adopted, rules for flower shows were promulgated, and two plant explorers (J. F. Rock and F. Kingdon-Ward) were funded and their seed collections distributed.

By the 20th anniversary in 1964 there were 2,500 members, and 15 more chapters had been added (including Vancouver, BC). A salaried post of Executive Secretary and Editor was created following the unexpected death of the Editor, Rudolph Henny, in 1963. J. Harold Clarke was appointed and the only individual to have held all three offices of President, Editor, and Executive Secretary. The Vice-President, Edward B.

Dunn, became the fourth ARS President. He served a five-year term.

For the first 25 years, the ARS had always been centered in the Pacific Northwest. The four presidents were from Oregon and Washington. Starting in 1969 the President's term of office was two years. The board changed the bylaws to provide for two vice presidents, one from the East and one from the West. The immediate past president was made an automatic member of the board. The board adopted this on Sept. 14, 1969. The first Silver Medal Award, a new regional award, was presented to Rocco Cappelli, owner of Hillside Nursery, for his work in helping to organize Portland Chapter shows and for his interest in growing rhododendrons.

Besides the officers and directors of the ARS, each chapter president was also on the board. The great expansion of chapters and membership had not been foreseen. The Board of Directors (six officers and 12 elected Directors) was increased when the new Chapter Presidents were made Directors. By 1974, with 38 chapters, the Board with 56 members was unwieldy. Decisions of meetings, held alternately on West and East coasts, tended to be inconsistent. New by-laws, approved in 1981, reduced the board to 19. Chapters were grouped together geographically and were represented by a District Director. In 1979, the full-time position of executive secretary was created. Esther Berry became the first executive secretary.

In 1981, ARS President George Ring announced a new ARS award, the Pioneer Achievement Award. The award was for pioneering and original achievement in the advancement of rhododendrons. The award was made to a person in any country who made a significant contribution toward growing rhododendrons in America. Since the award could not be made more often than once in every two years, only those persons with the highest achievements were to be selected by a panel of international experts. In 1983, the Pioneer Achievement Award was awarded to Joe Gable who had died in 1972. The citation was very long, but mentioned Joe's dedication to the genus *Rhododendron*.

In 1991, an agreement was reached with the Rhododendron Society of Canada and its three chapters: Atlantic, Niagara, and Toronto. The RSC became a new district of the ARS, and the three RSC chapters became ARS chapters. At the same meeting, the J. D. Hooker Chapter in Sikkim and the Tennessee Valley Chapter were welcomed.

By 1994, the 50th anniversary of the ARS, there were 72 Chapters, some of them overseas (represented by a Director at Large), and 5,600 members. Dues were \$25. An Executive Director was responsible for the smooth running of this considerable organization.

Now, in the spring of 2015, there are 62 chapters and a non-chapter membership, but membership has declined significantly to just over 3,100 in 2014. Lists of past Presidents, Executive Secretaries, Executive Director, Chapters, and recipients of Gold Medal Awards, Silver Medal Award, and Pioneering Achievement Medal Awards can be found at <http://www.rhododendron.org/awards.htm>

References

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The ARS 50th Anniversary Celebration Portland, Oregon, May 10-14, 1995



View of Portland, Oregon, and Mt. Hood. Portland was the site of the 1995 50th Anniversary Celebration. Photo by Ernie Metcalfe.



Cecil and Molly Smith of Newberg, OR, were two of 14 members who received ARS Founding Members Awards in 1995.



Crystal Springs Rhododendron Garden and Fred Paddison Memorial Fountain. Crystal Springs was one of many gardens visited during the Celebration. Photo by William Robinson.

The ARS 75th Anniversary Celebration will be held in Portland, Oregon, in the year 2020.