

people  
places

New England & New York Edition

# plants™

## The Best NEW Flowers

IN THIS ISSUE:

Shade Gardening  
Hardy Perennials  
& Design Ideas

Rhododendron  
Gardens

Lettuces &  
Salad Greens

*Echinacea*  
'Orange Meadowbrite'

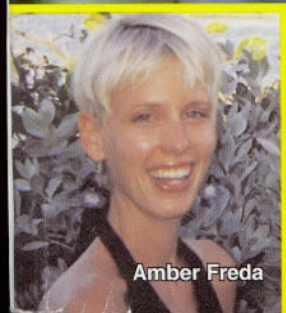
Readers' Choice Winners!

Are You Ready for an  
Irrigation System?

◀ De Niro's Healing Garden

\$4.95 (CAN.\$6.95)

www.ppplants.com  
Spring 2005



Amber Freda

# Unexpected Treasure

**The owners of Gleaner Gardens revel in what other potential buyers didn't want: a paradise for rhododendrons**

TEXT AND PHOTOS

BY BARBARA GEE

**C**HUCK HORBERT and Cindy Gianfrancesco had an inkling of what they had stumbled on when they bought their new home in North Scituate, R.I., but it wasn't until they moved onto the property that they realized exactly what: an extraordinary three-acre collection of mature rhododendrons, many of them unusual varieties.

"Not even the realtor really knew what was here," Horbert said. "The day we came to look at the house was in February. The first thing we did, of course, was walk around the yard. We looked at each other and said, 'These are all rhododendrons — this must look fantastic in the spring.'"

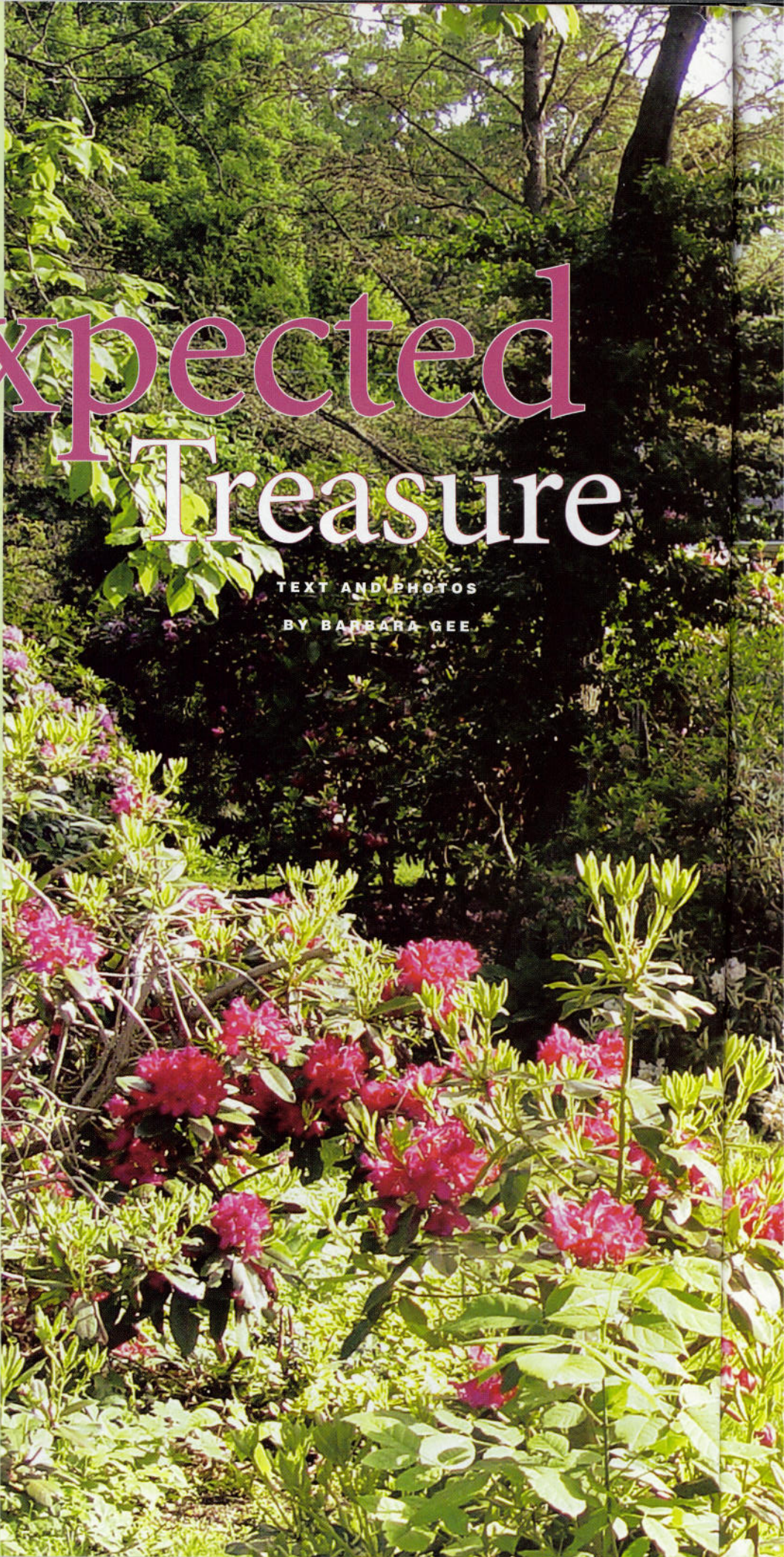
And it does.

A motivating factor behind their purchase was the realtor's retelling of the response from other potential buyers: "We won't buy it because it would be too much work to rip out all of the rhododendrons and put in a lawn."

Horbert and Gianfrancesco's response: "We have to buy this place or somebody's going to destroy it!"

They knew they had their work cut out for them, not only with the garden but also with the house, which had fallen into disrepair. But even then they didn't know what their garden contained. It took a while for them to realize their wealth of beauty.

"We had no idea there were so many





When Chuck Horbert and Cindy Gianfrancesco bought their property in North Scituate, R.I., they found 100 tagged varieties of rhododendron. Many more were untagged and unidentified.

### Partial List of Rhododendrons at Gleaner Gardens

- |                          |                           |                           |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 'America'                | 'Greeley'                 | 'Parson's Gloriosum'      |
| 'Baden-Baden'            | 'Halfdan Lem'             | 'Party Pink'              |
| 'Bell Ringer'            | 'Hello Dolly'             | 'Percy Wisemen'           |
| 'Belle Heller'           | 'Hino-C' (azalea)         | 'Pink Petticoats'         |
| 'Ben Mosley'             | 'Hot Shot' (azalea)       | 'Pinnacle'                |
| 'Besse Howells'          | 'Ice Cube'                | 'PJM Elite'               |
| 'Blue Ensign'            | 'Ignatius Sargent'        | 'PJM Regal'               |
| 'Blue Peter'             | 'Janet Blair'             | 'Powder Puff'             |
| 'Brown Eyes'             | 'Kelley DX'               | <i>R. dauricum</i>        |
| 'Candy'                  | 'King Tut'                | <i>R. macronulatum</i>    |
| 'Caractacus'             | 'Lee's Best Purple'       | 'Rosebud' (azalea)        |
| 'Colonel Coen'           | 'Lodestar'                | <i>Roseum elegans</i>     |
| 'Congo'                  | 'Low Red Frill'           | <i>Roseum 'Superbeum'</i> |
| 'Crete'                  | 'Luxor'                   | 'Roslyn'                  |
| 'Dexter's Brandy Green'  | 'Madame Carvahlo'         | 'Salmon' (azalea)         |
| 'Dexter's Cream'         | 'Madrid'                  | 'Scintillation'           |
| 'Dexter's Pink Satin'    | 'Malta'                   | 'Springdawn'              |
| 'Dolly Madison'          | 'Mardi Gras'              | 'Springtime'              |
| 'Dorothy Amateis'        | 'Mars'                    | 'Trude Webster'           |
| 'Elsie Straver'          | 'Mary Belle'              | 'Vernus'                  |
| 'Flaming Snow'           | 'Moonlight Bay'           | 'Vulcan'                  |
| 'Furnivall's Daughter'   | 'Mrs. Charles S. Sargent' | 'Vulcan's Flame'          |
| 'Gartendirector Glocker' | 'Mrs. R.W. Coe'           | 'Wheatly'                 |
| 'Giganteum'              | 'Mrs. Tomas H. Lowinski'  | 'Willard' (azalea)        |
| 'GiGi'                   | 'Naomi Exbury'            | 'Windbeam' (lepidote)     |
| 'Girard Rose' (azalea)   | 'Nepal'                   | 'Wyandanch Pink'          |
| 'Gloxineum DX'           | 'Nova Zembla'             | 'Yaku FCC'                |
| 'Gog #10'                | 'Olin O. Dodds H-2'       | 'Yaku Princess'           |
| 'Goldfort'               | 'Parker's Pink'           | 'Yaku Queen'              |

varieties of rhododendron on the property," Gianfrancesco said.

When they fully explored their newly acquired property, now named Gleaner Gardens, they realized that there were at least 100 varieties that were easy to identify because they were still tagged. But there were many more rhododendrons, all different hybrids.

"There were a lot that we couldn't find tags for, but we knew they were different from the others," Gianfrancesco said. "Then we found at least another 30 tags that were on the ground, and we couldn't tell which plants they came from."

A frustrating but delicious dilemma for the couple.

Horbert and Gianfrancesco, both avid gardeners, are now necessarily passionate about rhododendrons. Horbert, however, did not start out as passionately devoted. He was drawn in by Gianfrancesco.

"We always had a vegetable garden when I was growing up, and I was turned off," he said. "I was expected to work in it but I was



The rhododendron landscape at Gleaner Gardens was started by George Howarth, who had planned to open a nursery on the property.

a kid — I'd rather go play baseball than weed the beans. When I met Cindy and she started planting around my house, I got a lot more into it. When we bought this place I didn't really have a choice!"

You would never imagine he had initially been reluctant, and both partners are out in the garden as much as possible. They both have demanding careers as environmental scientists with the state Department of Environmental Management, so they're gone by 7 in the morning and not back until 4 in the afternoon.

"But when the weather lets us, we work in the garden until dark," Gianfrancesco said. "We work together and it's nice."

They have owned Gleaner Gardens for six years and in that time have done considerable research into the history of the property. What they discovered was a delightful story of rhododendron love.

The man who planted the rhododen-

## Rhododendron Gardens of the Northeast

Here is a brief list of other rhododendron gardens in the region. For more information and more sites to visit, contact your local chapter of the American Rhododendron Society ([www.rhododendron.org](http://www.rhododendron.org)).

### CONNECTICUT

**Bartlett Arboretum** — The Mehlquist Garden at the state arboretum features a unique collection of rhododendrons and azaleas of native, Japanese, Korean and European origin. 151 Brookdale Road, Stamford. 203-322-6971 or [www.bartlettarboretum.org](http://www.bartlettarboretum.org).

**Connecticut College Arboretum** — The arboretum's native plant collection boasts nearly 300 kinds of woody plants on 20 acres, including displays of azaleas in May and giant rhododendrons in July. 270 Mohegan Ave., New London. 860-439-5020 or <http://arboretum.conncoll.edu>.

**Highstead Arboretum** — A sanctuary for the study and appreciation of woodland habitat, the arboretum has 14 species of deciduous azaleas that provide color and fragrance from April through July. 127 Lonetown Road (Route 107), Redding. 203-938-8809 or <http://highsteadarboretum.org>.

### MAINE

**Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens** — The landscape along the Back River features 128 acres where the woods meet the shore. The Entrance Garden is the site of the rhododendron collection. Barthers Island Road, Boothbay. 207-633-4333 or [www.mainegardens.org](http://www.mainegardens.org).

**Lyle E. Littlefield Ornamentals Trial Garden** — This facility dedicated to research, teaching and demonstration features a collection of more than 2,500 woody and herbaceous plants, including 150 rhododendrons. University of Maine, Orono. 207-581-2948 or [www.ume.maine.edu/~nfa/lhc/little.htm](http://www.ume.maine.edu/~nfa/lhc/little.htm).

**Pine Tree State Arboretum** — The arboretum has more than 300 species of trees and shrubs amid two dozen collections, including a rhododendron grove. The five-mile trail system is open year-round from dawn to dusk. 153 Hospital St., Augusta. 207-621-0031 or [www.pinetreestearboretum.org](http://www.pinetreestearboretum.org).

### MASSACHUSETTS

**Arnold Arboretum** — The Linda Davison Rhododendron Path, designed by Julie Messervy on the banks of Bussey Brook, is one of the most delightful new areas of the arboretum. The Arborway, Jamaica Plain. 617-524-1718 or [www.arboretum.harvard.edu](http://www.arboretum.harvard.edu).

**Heritage Museums and Gardens** — The estate of Charles O. Dexter displays several thousand species that he collected and more than 100 of his own hybrids. Pine Street, Sandwich. 508-888-3300 or [www.heritageplantation.org](http://www.heritageplantation.org).

**Maudsley State Park** — This former estate on the Merrimac River features a beautiful woodland underplanted with huge rhododendrons, mostly Catawba hybrids. Intersection of Merrimac, Spofford and Moseley streets, Newburyport. 978-465-7223 or [www.rosebay.org/chapterweb/mspgt1.htm](http://www.rosebay.org/chapterweb/mspgt1.htm).

**Weston Nurseries** — This nursery and garden center has acres of plants, a large sales yard and display gardens. It is well-known for the development of small-leaved rhododendrons and summer-blooming azaleas. Route 135, Hopkinton. 508-435-3414 or [www.westonnurseries.com](http://www.westonnurseries.com).

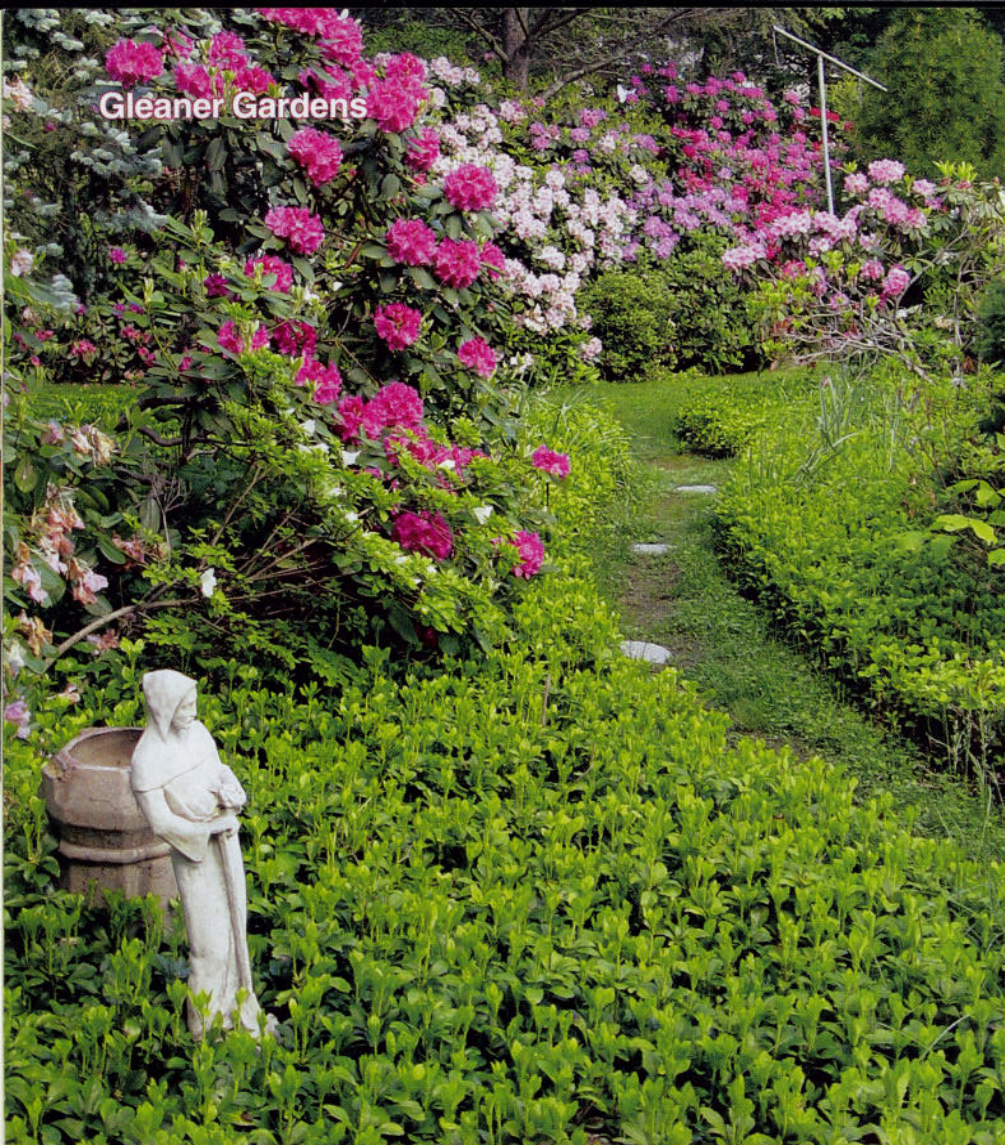
**Case Estates of Arnold Arboretum** — This suburban property includes American Rhododendron Society display gardens and an outstanding collection of azaleas. Wellesley Street, Weston. 617-524-1718 or [www.arboretum.harvard.edu](http://www.arboretum.harvard.edu).

**Polly Hill Arboretum** — Polly Hill's hybrid azaleas are world-famous, and it has a great collection of unusual rhododendrons as well. Many of the plantings date back nearly 50 years. West Tisbury, Martha's Vineyard. 508-693-9426 or [www.pollyhillarboretum.org](http://www.pollyhillarboretum.org).

**Mount Holyoke College** — The Virginia "Timmy" Craig Rhododendron Garden was recently planted near the Art Building. College Street, South Hadley. 413-538-2116 or [www.mtholyoke.edu](http://www.mtholyoke.edu).

**Elm Bank** — The Alan Payton Rhododendron Garden is a new display garden planted by the Massachusetts chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. Route 16, Wellesley. 617-536-9280 or [www.masshort.org](http://www.masshort.org).

## Gleaner Gardens



Gianfrancesco initially drew Horbert into the rhododendron game, but he now shares her passion for their plants. "We work together (in the garden) and it's nice," she said.



drons was George Howarth, who, when not gardening, was superintendent of Parks and Recreation for the Department of Environmental Management. The fact that both Horbert and Gianfrancesco work there now is a coincidental twist, but it did enable them to do some up-close-and-personal research with several colleagues who had known Howarth and who could recommend others the couple could talk to. One recommendation was Dorothy Swift. If you know anything about rhododendrons, you will know that there is a hybrid named for this Rhode Islander.

Swift was on the board of the Massachusetts chapter of the American Rhododendron Society in the mid-1980s when Howarth joined. He was retired from the DEM and became a loyal member and participant in the chapter's ongoing propagating project, Plant for Members. Participants met every Saturday at Plane View Nursery in Portsmouth, R.I., where Swift worked part time on tissue culture.

"I had worked for the University of Rhode Island culturing microscopic algae, so tissue culture, which was new then, was easy for me," she said.

At that time the late Dr. Gus Mehlquist, a plant geneticist at the University of Connecticut, was spearheading some of the tissue culture work.

"He was working to create rhododendrons that are hardy here in New England," Swift said. "He would bring plant materials to Rhode Island for us to work on. In about 1986 I was able to get two rhododendrons into tissue culture, so he decided to name one after me. It has pink buds that fade to white when open.

"I often hear people say, 'I have you in my garden,'" she said with a laugh.

One of the participants in Plant for Members was Chris Howarth, who worked alongside his grandfather.

"We mostly did cuttings, seedlings and grafting because tissue culture was so new," Chris said.

He enjoyed working with his grandfather and had been doing so since he was eight years old.

"I worked at Gleaner Gardens in the summers, on weekends and after school," he said. "George was such a lively guy and very hard worker. It was fun."

Howarth passed away at age 67 just before he was able to implement his plans to open a nursery on the property.

"I remember driving by his house one day with my Dad around lunchtime," Chris said. "We saw George walking in from the garden. Two hours later he was dead. He just lay down to take a nap and never woke up."

A sad loss, but perhaps an appropriate way for such a devoted gardener to go: at rest from his garden toils.

Gleaner Gardens holds many memories for Chris. One aspect of the garden of which he is particularly proud is the soil.

"I spent years spreading oak leaves down as mulch because the rhodies like the acid," he said. "When you push your finger down into the soil, it's soft and moist. It's fabulous black soil."

Judging from the rhododendrons, they like the soil, too. They are large and lush.

"The one that always stops people is the one on the corner by the road," Horbert said. "It's a bright orange native azalea — you don't see too many that are bright orange. We have a couple of different shades of orange."

Gianfrancesco said it has been hard to identify some of the rhododendrons that George Howarth planted because there are no records of his work.

"Unfortunately, the family discarded all of his notes when he died without realizing their value," she said.

Horbert and Gianfrancesco run a very small nursery at Gleaner Gardens, mostly by appointment, but when they open the garden to the public every weekend in May they also open the nursery. They sell rhododendrons and five or six native varieties of azaleas, along with other flowering shrubs, perennials, herbs and vegetables.

"We hope to get into propagating, but probably not until I'm retired," Gianfrancesco said. "It's time-consuming."

For now they just have to content themselves with happily wandering their property and pinching themselves — when they're not working in the garden.

#### Gleaner Gardens

299 Gleaner Chapel Road  
North Scituate, R.I. 02857

Phone: 401-934-9212

E-mail: [gleanergardens@juno.com](mailto:gleanergardens@juno.com)

## NEW HAMPSHIRE

**Manchester Cedar Swamp** — Preserved by the Nature Conservancy, the 602-acre site at Hackett Hill features a rhododendron loop trail and a rare ecosystem of forested wetlands. Countryside Boulevard, Manchester. 603-224-5853 or <http://nature.org>.

**Rhododendron State Park** — A National Natural Landmark and the state's only botanical park, Rhododendron State Park features a 16-acre grove of *R. maximum* that blooms in mid-July. A trail encircles the grove. Route 119W, Fitzwilliam. 603-239-8153.

**The Fells/Hay Estate** — This early 20th-century summer estate includes the Old Garden, planted in 1909 with shrub roses and perennials and replanted with rhododendrons, azaleas and a Chinese dogwood. John Hay National Wildlife Refuge, Route 103A, Newbury. 603-763-4789 or [www.thefells.org](http://www.thefells.org).

## NEW YORK

**Bayard Cutting Arboretum State Park** — Visit this 690-acre park in late spring when its extensive rhododendron collections are in bloom. Route 27A, Oakdale. 631-581-1002.

**Brooklyn Botanic Garden** — The Osborne Garden, a three-acre, Italian-style formal garden, abounds with color in May with rhododendrons like *R. obtusum* 'Amoenum,' *R. 'Fedora'* and *R. 'Hino-crimson.'* 1000 Washington Ave., Brooklyn. 718-623-7200 or [www.bbg.org](http://www.bbg.org).

**Clark Botanic Garden** — View specialty gardens featuring massed rhododendrons, azaleas and more on this 12-acre site. 193 I.U. Willets Road, Albertson. 516-484-8600 or [www.clarkbotanic.org](http://www.clarkbotanic.org).

**Cornell Plantations** — Visit Cornell University to see the rhododendron collection at the botanical garden and to explore 560 acres of trails, gorges and more. One Plantations Road, Ithaca. 607-255-3020 or [www.plantations.cornell.edu](http://www.plantations.cornell.edu).

**Highland Park** — Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, this park features hundreds of rhododendrons and azaleas. 180 Reservoir Ave., Rochester. 585-256-4950.

**Landis Arboretum** — More than 2,000 types of woody and herbaceous plants, including rhododendrons, are displayed on 96 acres. Lape Road, Esperance. 518-875-6935 or [www.landisarboretum.org](http://www.landisarboretum.org).

## RHODE ISLAND

**East Farm Display Gardens** — View more than 100 labeled rhododendron specimens at this University of Rhode Island site. Route 108, Kingston. 401-874-5372 or [bmaynard@uri.edu](mailto:bmaynard@uri.edu).

**Kinney Azalea Garden** — A treasure trove of azaleas and rhododendrons tucked behind a private home but open to the public. The six-acre site includes more than 800 cultivars, with some of them more than 60 years old. Admission is free. 2391 Kingstown Road, Kingston. 401-783-2396.

**Blithewold Mansion, Gardens and Arboretum** — A beautiful botanical garden on Narragansett Bay with 33 acres of trees, specimen plants and shrubs. Most of Blithewold's rhododendrons are 50 to 80 years old. One Old Ferry Road, Bristol. [www.blithewold.org](http://www.blithewold.org) or 401-253-2707.

**Eli Pond Preserve** — This Nature Conservancy site is an especially lovely area to view native rhododendrons in Rhode Island. Rockville Road, Hopkinton. 401-331-7110.

## VERMONT

**Jeudevine Falls Gardens and Maze** — The gardens contain the largest collection of deciduous azaleas and rhododendrons in northern Vermont. Open Memorial Day through Nov. 1. 2259 Craftsbury Road, Hardwick. 802-472-5486.

**Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historic Park** — With each new owner of the 1805 mansion, changes have occurred on the grounds. Among the many gardens at the park is the azalea and rhododendron garden. Route 12, Woodstock. 802-457-3368, Ext. 22.

**University of Vermont Horticultural Research Center** — For more than 50 years, UVM horticulturists have been testing new and unusual plants, including varieties of rhododendron, for their adaptation to Vermont's environment. Green Mountain Drive, South Burlington. 802-658-9166 or <http://pss.uvm.edu>.