



## MILLAIS NURSERIES

# Nursery profile

Among the most flamboyant of shrubs with their dazzling flowers, rhododendrons display surprising diversity in size and form. **Roy Lancaster** visits a nursery in Surrey that specialises in these plants. Photography by Tim Sandall

**IT WAS THE KIND OF MORNING** in May that remains long in the memory. The sun blazed in a sky the colour of a dunno's egg and before me lay wave upon wave of rhododendrons in flower. I was reminded of occasions in Bhutan and China when I have gulped at the sight of these plants staining the high pastures and forests in shades of pink, red, blue and yellow. But this time I was on rather more familiar ground, enjoying a visit to the largest grower of rhododendrons in the South of England, Millais Nurseries of Crosswater Farm at Churt, near Farnham in Surrey.

The nursery was started in a wooded area as a retail and mail-order business in 1970 by the late Ted Millais and his wife Romy. In later life, the couple travelled in the Himalaya and China, introducing seeds of rhododendrons and other plants of interest. Their son David joined the business in 1990 and is now the present owner.

### A love of rhododendrons

It was David who showed me round the nursery, which immediately impressed me by its orderliness in contrast to the nearby woodland garden where

rhododendrons, azaleas and related plants are displayed in a looser, natural manner. I have to admit, at this point, to a fondness for these plants, and not only due to my experience of them in the wild. They burst into my consciousness in the late 1940s and 1950s in south Lancashire. There, old hardy hybrids such as *Rhododendron* 'Pink Pearl' were popular in urban gardens and parks with acidic soils, their rich colours providing brightness in often-drab surroundings; indeed they are still reliably colourful performers.

Millais Nurseries grow an impressive

number of hybrids and species in a wide range of sizes and shapes suitable for almost every situation, from the smaller garden or patio container up to the large estate or woodland garden.

Plants in the sales area are grouped according to type and flower colour and have informative picture labels. Visitors can also count on the advice of a small but efficient staff who, true to the catalogue claim, love their plants.

Among the plants I saw I noted several older hardy hybrids, which remain favourites with customers. They included *R.* 'Gomer Waterer' with rosy buds

opening to white, flushed mauve-pink at the edges with a yellowish flare (marking on the uppermost lobe). The blooms open in early June and in 10 years plants reach approximately 150–180cm (59–70in). Another favourite, *R.* 'Furnivall's Daughter', has conical trusses of bright pink flowers with a strawberry-red flare in May–June (120–150cm/47–59in). Both are deserved recipients of the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM), as is *R.* 'Lady Clementine Mitford' which has blush-white flowers with pink edges and dark spots within in early June (140–160cm/55–63in). Among ►

### FLOWERS AND FOLIAGE

*Rhododendron* 'Furnivall's Daughter' (far left) has flowers with markings on the upper lobe, known as a 'flare'.

Roy and nursery owner David Millais admire the foliage of *R. sinogrande* (left); according to David, the tunnel's green plastic covering encourages bushier growth.

The glowing blooms of *R.* 'Unique Marmalade' (above left).

In late spring the nursery is filled with colour (above)



**GOLDEN TRUMPETS**  
The yellow blooms of *Rhododendron* 'Nancy Evans' open from orange buds (right)

more recent hybrids on display was *R.* 'Hachmann's Constanze', producing dark rose-pink flowers with a paler throat and red spotting on the upper lobe in May (140–160cm/55–63in). Almost glowing when in bloom, *R.* 'Unique Marmalade' features pink-edged, orange, funnel-shaped flowers in early May (80–90cm/31–35in), while *R.* 'Horizon Monarch' has red buds opening to pale yellow flowers with pink tones and a small, vivid red flare in May (150–180cm/59–70in).

*Rhododendron* 'Lem's Monarch', with huge trusses of pink flowers with red margins in late May (150–180cm/59–70in) and *R.* 'Nancy Evans' with orange buds opening deep golden yellow in early May (140–160cm/55–63in), are both AGM plants, and were also on offer.

**Pots and foliage**

Millais also stocks dwarf rhododendrons – which are good for containers in areas without acid soil. I noted *R.* 'Ginny Gee', with bright pink buds opening blush-pink then white (40–60cm/16–24in). *Rhododendron fastigiatum* 'Blue Steel' also stood out with deep lavender-blue flowers (30cm/12in). Both are April flowering and AGM plants.

One of my all-time favourite rhododendrons, perfect for smaller gardens or again containers, is *R. yakushmanum*, a Japanese species whose dome-shaped, compact habit, silvery-downy young growths and rounded trusses of pink-budded, white flowers in May are a fine combination. For years I grew an outstanding plant derived from the original introduction, known as *R. yakushmanum* 'Koichiro Wada'. It is offered by Millais along with *R. yakushmanum* hybrids *R.* 'Teddy Bear', *R.* 'Silberwolke', *R.* 'Golden Torch' and *R.* 'Fantastica', all recipients of the AGM after trials at RHS Garden Wisley.

A bonus with many rhododendrons, often unappreciated by first-time gardeners, is ornamental foliage. Many species are worth growing for this alone, especially young leaves in spring which can be blue, silver, bronze, buff or red,



as well as the colour of the indumentum (felt-like hair) on the underside of mature foliage. Good examples include *R. lanatum* (syn. *flinckii*), *R. mallotum*, *R. argyrophyllum* subsp. *nankingense* 'Chinese Silver', *R. pachysanthum* 'Crosswater' and *R. campanulatum* subsp. *aeruginosum*. The size and shape of mature leaves varies, from the narrow slivers of *R. roxieanum* var. *oreonastes* to the huge pads of *R. sinogrande*.

**Dazzling azaleas**

We must not forget those plants often called azaleas, especially the deciduous kinds, among which Millais offers my favourite, *R.* 'Homebush' with carmine-pink, double-flowered pompon heads in May and June. Later-flowered and fragrant *R.* 'Stopham Lad' is a new selection whose trusses in late June are a mixture of reddish-pink shades and pinky-white with a yellow flare.

Evergreen azaleas are also popular and just as attractive. Some dwarf selections (60cm/24in in 10 years) that flower in May attracted my attention: *R.* 'Elsie Lee', an AGM plant making compact mounds flooded with double lilac-lavender,



long-lasting flowers; *R.* 'George Hyde' which produces orchid-pink, semi-double flowers; and *R.* 'Magic Flute' with purple-pink, bell-shaped blooms. Also superb is *R.* 'Valentine Surprise' with large, two-tone flowers of apricot-pink with pale centres.

During our tour of the nursery I was shown a propagation house filled with trays of seedlings, mostly from seed collected by modern-day plant hunters including David's late father. We also walked through standing areas, trial beds and plastic tunnels – one of which fair took my breath away, filled as it was

**NEW LEAF** Many *Rhododendron* display colourful indumentum (downy hair) especially on the lower surface of their leaves. Pictured are:  
1 *Rhododendron kesangiae*  
2 *R. arboreum*  
3 *R. pachysanthum* 'Crosswater'  
4 *R. crinigerum*  
5 *R. arizelum*  
6 *R. roxieanum* var. *oreonastes*  
7 *R.* 'Teddy Bear'  
8 *R. lanatum*  
9 *R. mallotum*  
10 *R. argyrophyllum* subsp. *nankingense* 'Chinese Silver'



**'A BONUS WITH MANY RHODODENDRONS, OFTEN UNAPPRECIATED BY FIRST-TIME GARDENERS, IS ORNAMENTAL FOLIAGE'**

with young, healthy-looking plants of large-leaved rhododendrons including *R. sinogrande*, *R. falconeri* and magnificent *R. kesangiae*, all native to the Himalaya.

The nursery produces about 35,000 rhododendrons annually, grown in a peat and bark mix; the emphasis is on cleanliness of production and healthy plants. Accordingly, there has been a reduction in the use of pesticides and an increasing use of organic feeds.

David feels that rhododendrons are among the most reliable and satisfying of all garden shrubs, so long as they do not become overcrowded or neglected

– something I find reassuring, given concerns over the role of *R. ponticum* in the spread of *Phytophthora* diseases (see News, p298). Indeed, his confidence in the continuing garden potential of these magnificent shrubs is something I both admire and support. ■

Roy Lancaster VMH is a member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee

@ For more rhododendrons that David Millais thinks should be better known, visit: [www.rhs.org.uk/learning/publications/pubs/garden0509/rhododendron.htm](http://www.rhs.org.uk/learning/publications/pubs/garden0509/rhododendron.htm)

**GROWING FROM SEED**  
Many of the more unusual rhododendron species offered by Millais Nurseries are cultivated from seed (above left)



**MILLAIS NURSERIES**

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**Open** 10am–5pm, Mon–Fri (Mon–Sat from late Feb–early June and mid-Sept to late Oct). Closed Christmas and New Year's Day  
**Wheelchair access:** yes  
**Toilets:** yes  
**Catalogue:** searchable website and secure online ordering  
● Millais is exhibiting at RHS Chelsea Flower Show this month

