

Rhododendron kesangiae ►

A striking and vigorous tree-forming plant with large, glossy, dark green leaves. Trusses of pink or white bell-shaped flowers open in mid- to late spring. This species of rhododendron was named in honour of Kesang, The Queen Mother of Bhutan.

- ✦ Height: 2–3m (6½–10ft); spread 2m (6½ft) in 10 years.
- ✦ Likes: sheltered site in part shade in well-drained, acidic soil.
- ✦ Hardy but needs wind shelter. All the species featured (except *R. titapuriense*) have survived -18°C (-0.4°F) for the author.

The joy of discovery

What is it like to find a new plant? The managing director of Glendoick Gardens recalls a plant-hunting expedition, and profiles some recent rhododendron introductions

Author and photographer: **Kenneth Cox**, plant hunter and authority on rhododendrons



New rhododendrons



▲ Rhododendron ochraceum

From the Chinese province of Sichuan, this compact, slow-growing rhododendron is ideal for smaller gardens. Rounded trusses of waxy, rich red flowers appear in April, with handsome dark leaves and bristles on the stems. Consider it a tougher, more compact version of better-known *R. strigillosum*.

- ✦ Height and spread: 2m (6½ft) in 10 years.
- ✦ Likes: sun or part shade in well-drained but moist, acidic soil.
- ✦ Hardy; will grow almost anywhere in the UK.

I was exhausted, dehydrated, sunburnt and hungry, and any desire to do any plant hunting had long disappeared. I had been stumbling along in the stifling heat and humidity trying to keep up with my companion and seasoned explorer David Burlinson on a unexplored ridge in Arunachal Pradesh, northeast India in 2001. The expedition had seemed doomed from the start. A massive landslide into the Siannng/Tsangpo River resulted in a

delay, so our nine-day trip was reduced to four. We were near the Tibet border and could not venture too far for fear of being arrested by the Chinese army.

A new species

Then I spotted a strange leaf on the path. It was covered with brown hairs, so I thought at first it might be from an evergreen magnolia, but when I looked up I was surrounded by tall rhododendrons that appeared to be different from any I had seen before. I realised these could be something new and, with this, my energy levels returned. Was it possible these trees, more than 20m (66ft) high, had been undiscovered by the outside world until now?

The answer turned out to be 'yes'. It was a rhododendron species completely new to science. It took two further expeditions to get the plant introduced into cultivation, and another 10 years before another explorer photographed its large, rounded trusses of cream flowers. ►►

The leaves of *Rhododendron titapuriense* with their appealing brown undersides (right). Discovered by the author in India in 2001, this species has yet to flower in cultivation but is proving hardier than its low-altitude origins suggest. It will survive outdoors in most of the UK in a sheltered site.



Rhododendron dendrocharis ►

Dwarf species introduced from the Chinese province of Sichuan around 1990, with tiny leaves and masses of flat-faced flowers. Easy to grow in a raised bed or container. A potential parent of drought-tolerant cultivars in the future.

- ✦ Height and spread: 50cm–1m (20–39in) in 10 to 20 years.
- ✦ Likes: well-drained, acidic soils
- ✦ Hardy but requires excellent drainage.

▲ Rhododendron sinofalconeri

Introduced to the UK from Vietnam more than 10 years ago, this species has huge oval leaves with cream to yellow flowers in April and May. Although from areas of low altitude, many of these plants have survived recent severe UK winters.

- ✦ Height and spread: 3–5m (10–16½ft) in 10 to 20 years.
- ✦ Likes: most acidic soils.
- ✦ Hardy but requires wind shelter.



SUPPLIERS INCLUDE:

- ✦ Glendoick Gardens, Glendoick, Perth, Perthshire PH2 7NS; 01738 860205; www.glendoick.com; mail order available.
- ✦ Millais Nurseries, Crosswater Lane, Churt, Farnham, Surrey GU10 2JN; 01252 792698; www.rhododendrons.co.uk; mail order available.

Rhododendron yuefengense ▶

This rhododendron produces unscented, pinky-white blooms in early June (on plants aged two years and older). It has a compact and spreading habit, and the handsome oval leaves make it an attractive foliage plant year round. Easy to grow and suitable for almost any garden with acidic soil.

✦ Height: 2m (6½ft); spread: 3m (10ft) in 10 to 20 years, depending on conditions.

✦ Likes: sun or shade in acidic soil.

✦ Hardy; will grow almost anywhere in the UK.



▲ Rhododendron flinckii

Also listed as *Rhododendron lanatum* Flinckii Group. A handsome foliage plant with leaves covered with attractive brown hairs (or indumentum). Plants usually have cream or yellow flowers but may occasionally be pink. A compact and slow-growing species.

✦ Height and spread: 1.5–2.5m (5–8ft) in 10 years.

✦ Likes: sharp drainage and plenty of organic matter in the soil.

✦ Hardy but requires sharp drainage.

‘Many people assumed all the good plants had been found.’

Prior to its official description (to be published this year) I have tentatively named the plant *Rhododendron titapuriense* after the sacred Tibetan pilgrimage route where I found it. As the species is from fairly low altitudes and begins growth early, it is best for mild coastal UK gardens.

Many more to find

My story is one of several recent rhododendron discoveries and introductions (many proving to be fine garden subjects), and answers a question I’m often asked; ‘Haven’t all the species been discovered?’. The same question has been asked for 150 years. The great botanist Joseph Hooker was advised not to go to Sikkim in the 1850s as ‘everything had probably been found already’. Hooker ignored this and discovered dozens of new plants. When China and most of the Himalaya was closed to exploration in the 1950s, many

people assumed all the good plants had been found. Yet when China reopened its borders in 1980, plant hunters such as Roy Lancaster and my father Peter Cox found new and never-introduced plants, and also relocated plants such as splendid red-flowered *Meconopsis punicea* which had died out in the West.

More than 50 new species of *Rhododendron* have been introduced from the wild since 1981 and some are significant garden plants, worthy of widespread cultivation. Furthermore, I am convinced that we have not found them all yet. ●

More from the RHS Kenneth Cox profiled more new rhododendrons in the Dec 2012 issue of *The Plantsman*, sister publication to *The Garden*; www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman; 020 7821 3401.

✦ The RHS yearbook *Rhododendrons, Camellias and Magnolias: 2013* will be available from RHS bookshops in March.