

Kalmia × *Rhododendron* is a myth

Mike Grant

photograph © Mike Grant



Rhododendron 'Everlasting' which has an abnormal saucer-shaped corolla, photographed at Wisley on 20 April 2004.

The article by Dick van Hoey Smith in the last *IDS Yearbook* (van Hoey Smith 2004) explores the origin of two supposed *Kalmia* × *Rhododendron* hybrids. He refers to our DNA sequencing work (Grant, Toomey & Culham 2004; Grant, Toomey & Culham 2005) which disproves the putative hybridity of *K. latifolia* × *R. maximum*. We showed that it is a variant of *R. maximum* with abnormally long petioles and a reluctance to flower. We named and registered it as *R. 'Kalamity'* (Grant, Toomey & Culham 2005). Van Hoey Smith has succeeded in delving much further than we did into the origin of *R. 'Kalamity'* and established that it was originally collected in the wild in North Carolina.

Van Hoey Smith (2004) also mentions the other supposed *Kalmia* × *Rhododendron* hybrid, reputed to be *K. latifolia* × *R. williamsianum*, and registered under the name 'Everlasting' (syn. 'No Suchianum'). Unfortunately he does not refer to our same work, cited above, which also disproved that this was a *Kalmia* × *Rhododendron* hybrid. We showed that it was a *Rhododendron*, possibly derived from *R. brachycarpum*, with an abnormal, saucer-shaped corolla. The accompanying photograph shows it flowering on 20 April 2004 at RHS Garden Wisley.

While I and most other woody plant enthusiasts would like to see a genuine *Kalmia* × *Rhododendron* hybrid, these two plants are not evidence of such an achievement. Indeed, I think it is unlikely that such a cross will be achieved by conventional breeding. One of the reasons for this is the fact that *Kalmia* and *Rhododendron* are quite distantly related within Ericaceae, the former belonging to tribe *Phyllodoceae* and the latter to tribe *Rhodoreae*.

I hope that our work and this note will clear up any lingering confusion about the two plants and help dispose of the attractive but erroneous *Kalmia* × *Rhododendron* myth.

References

- Grant, M.L., Toomey, N.H. & Culham, A. (2004) Is there such a thing as *Kalmia* × *Rhododendron*? *Journal of the American Society for Horticultural Science* 129(4): 517-522
- Grant, M.L., Toomey, N.H. & Culham, A. (2005) *Kalmia* × *Rhododendron* debunked. *Rhododendrons with Camellias and Magnolias* (RHS): 25-31
- Van Hoey Smith, D. (2004) *Kalmia latifolia* × *Rhododendron maximum*. *IDS Yearbook*: 54-55