THE WHITE FLOWERING RHODORA

The rhodora is a typical New England shrub, growing from Labrador and Newfoundland, south to Pennsylvania. The correct scientific name is *Rhododendron canadense*, though it is known throughout New England by its synonym, *Rhodora canadensis*. It is one of our hardiest woody plants, being hardy in areas where the temperatures may go from 35 to 50 degrees below zero during the winter months. It is known and readily recognized for its delicate rose-purple flowers, appearing in the early spring before the leaves. It is usually found growing in slightly marshy ground. In ornamental plantings, it is valued for its early spring flowers and is used especially in naturalistic plantings.

A good place to see it is to go to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s grave in Concord on May 25, his birthday anniversary. Because of his poem “Rhodora” and his affection for the flower, some admirer will have carried out the tradition. Whether the flowers come from the neighborhood or from far afield, there will be a bunch laid reverently upon the grave.

The white flowering variety of the rhodora, known as *Rhododendron canadense albiflorum*, is not a particularly “new” plant, but try to find it in any of last year’s nursery catalogues! Not a single American nursery listed it last year or any year prior to that, as far as I know. However, it has been known to exist since 1894, at least, when it was described by Rand and Redfern in their “Flora of Mount Desert Island.” The white flowering variety of *Rhododendron canadense* has all the characteristics of the species except that its flowers are white.

Fortunately for present-day gardens, Mr. Richard W. Hale of Boston became very much interested in this plant. In fact, he admired its qualities so much that he took it upon himself to locate individual plants or groups of plants with white flowers, in order that this variety could be propagated and become readily available to the average gardener. Mr. Hale has located *Rhododendron canadense albiflorum* growing at about nine different places. He advertised in various local papers in Maine and in “Horticulture” in order to find sources for good shrubs with pure white flowers. All plants which he has located are definitely white flowered.

Even though this plant had been growing in several places, no one had taken an active interest in propagating it and placing it on the market until Mr. Hale began to collect plants from the wild and to propagate them.
The only successful propagation so far has been by root division, which is altogether too slow. In this work Mr. Hale has had material assistance from Mr. Will C. Curtis of "Garden in the Woods," Sudbury.

However, even though Mr. Hale has over fifty plants now and can obtain more by collecting them from certain places in Maine, his supply would not go very far if there proved to be a large demand for this interesting native.

He has seen this from the first. The problem of a commercial supply for the introduction of this beautiful shrub is one of commercial propagation, and this rhodora is apparently going to be recalcitrant. The Boyce-Thompson Institute very kindly volunteered an attempt and candidly reported a failure. There may be some doubt whether the material supplied to them was adequate. Then Mr. Hale and Mr. Curtis went to East Boxford and laid the problem before Mr. Harlan P. Kelsey, Sr., who enthusiastically took on the task. Without waiting for plants of the white rhodora, he began experimental propagating of the purple form and looks forward to mastering the problem. We hope that in an early number of Arnoldia we shall be able to make a supplementary announcement, perhaps even stating that there will be some plants commercially available in the spring of 1942.

And so horticulture has one man to thank for his painstaking efforts in making this plant available to the gardening public. Mr. Hale, in locating sources for the white rhodora, in obtaining plants and growing them under his personal supervision to make certain the flowers were white, and finally in turning over his stock to a commercial propagator so that the plants will eventually become generally available, has done an exemplary piece of work. As a result, it is hoped that one more worthy shrub will soon become a common resident in gardens, not necessarily as a plant to be used in place of the purple flowered *R. canadense* but as one which can be used in combination with the latter, to supply an interesting color combination in early spring.

Donald Wyman