Rhododendrons have been used extensively in New England landscapes for nearly a century and a half. Everywhere you go you see them: in parks and public buildings, lined up in front of filling stations, in residential foundation plantings, and sometimes even naturalized in woodlands. I think that qualifies them as “traditional favorites.”

But I would guess that 99 percent of the rhododendrons commonly seen represent a very small group—perhaps ten or a dozen—of “tried and true” varieties, such as ‘Roseum Elegans’, or the ubiquitous ‘PJM’, or the evergreen azalea ‘Hino Crimson’, or occasionally some of the flamboyant Exbury hybrid deciduous azaleas.

Now I have nothing against these old-timers. They have proven their mettle by surviving and flourishing despite the vicissitudes of our notorious New England climate. But they represent only the tip of the iceberg—a small fraction of the spectrum of size, form, foliage, and flower that characterize this extraordinary genus.

The genus Rhododendron is one of the largest in the plant kingdom. There are between eight hundred and one thousand species that inhabit the wild areas of the world, and from them have been developed (and are still being developed) literally tens of thousands of hybrids. They range in size and habit from forty-foot trees to spreading groundcovers only a few inches tall; from leaves a massive fifteen inches in length to a diminutive dime size; and flowers from large trumpets to tiny stars, in nearly every color of the rainbow.

In this article I will introduce a small sample of this large and varied palette—plants that are proven performers in New England’s hardiness zones 5 and 6 (and some even in zone 4) but are virtually unknown and unused by landscape professionals and home gardeners.

In landscape value these can be grouped into several categories: First, plants that represent the expanded range of flower color that is now available. Second, plants of low-growing and even dwarf stature that are more appropriate for today’s smaller properties. Third, plants that extend the blooming season from early April through late July or even August. And
last, plants with special foliage interest that makes them even more valuable during the fifty weeks a year that they are not in bloom.

A Fresh Look at Flower Colors

One fault found by many landscape professionals with the standard "ironclad" varieties is that the bloom color—especially the pinks and reds—is tainted with a purplish or lavender cast. Rejoice! Many hybrids with blooms in clear, unflawed colors are now available. One of the most outstanding of these is 'Bali', which has a neat, dense, mounding habit, reaches three to four feet in height and five to six feet in diameter at maturity, and bears flowers of a pale pink, lit with a yellow throat. 'Dexter's Champagne' has a more open, rangy habit, which I can overlook for the sake of its creamy blossoms, tinged pink. ‘Janet Blair’, with large, ruffled, pale pink flowers, is acquiring a reputation as an all-time great performer in the eastern United States, equaling if not surpassing in vigor and reliability another pink-flowered rhododendron, the well-known and often used ‘Scintillation’.

Among the reds, ‘Vivacious’, bred at the Vineland Station in Ontario, offers cardinal-red blooms untainted with purple and superb leathery foliage. 'Firestorm', an introduction of the late Dr. Gustav Mehlquist of Connecticut, blooms with deep red flowers late in the season, usually the first or second week in June. And a sister seedling, ‘Scarlet Romance’, carries the vivid color of ‘Vivacious’ into that same period.

The old English cultivar ‘Purple Splendour’ is still popular in milder climates for its intense, deep violet flowers, but unfortunately it is not reliable in zone 5 and often fails even in zone 6. Happily, we now have several hybrids that supply the same regal color on a much hardier plant. One is ‘Jonathan Shaw’, with a low, densely branching habit; another is ‘Wojnar’s Purple’, another Mehlquist introduction, which grows somewhat taller.
The old English hybrid ‘Sappho’ draws rave reviews for its snow-white flowers with a startling blotch, or flare, of deep purple, but it is hopelessly tender for much of New England. Its hardier counterparts are ‘Calsap’ and ‘White Peter’, both with a fairly tall but densely branching habit.

Yes, Virginia, yellow rhododendrons really do exist, although until recently none were reliably hardy in the Northeast. But we now have a number of yellow- and near yellow-flowered evergreen rhododendrons that are reliably hardy in zones 5 and 6. ‘Arctic Gold’ and ‘Big Deal’, both introductions of Weston Nurseries in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, form reasonably dense, medium-growing shrubs with excellent foliage. ‘Vinecrest’, another introduction from Ontario, has light yellow blossoms that emerge from peach-colored buds on a taller, more open plant.

‘Capistrano’, one of the last introductions of that master hybridizer, the late David Leach, forms a dense, low-growing mound with deep green foliage and flowers of a no-nonsense yellow. ‘Casanova’, also from Leach, has a similar habit and pale yellow flowers spotted with apricot-orange, opening from near-red buds. ‘Santa Fe’, somewhat taller growing, blooms in an unusual shade of orange-pink.

For white-flowered cultivars to set off this rainbow array of colors, one could hardly improve on two more hybrids from Dr. Leach: ‘Edmond Amateis’, which carries huge trusses of white flowers highlighted by a touch of red in the center on a vigorous, stiff, upright plant; and ‘Dolly Madison’, whose pink buds soften to white upon opening, with a more spreading and open habit of growth.

A Fresh Look at Smaller Rhododendrons
We’ve all seen new houses with “foundation plantings” of cute little rhododendrons plunked down along the front under the windows. They...
look great for two or three years, and the owners are delighted with the color they provide every spring. But rhododendrons have a way of growing, and in time the kinds that are commonly used in this way can get very large indeed. Before you know it, those cute little mounds are engulfing the house and blocking out the view. You can cut them back, of course, but you'll be faced with the same problem again in a few more years. If you must provide a foundation planting (and I'm suggesting that there are alternatives), at least use lower-growing rhododendrons; they will provide all the benefits of evergreen foliage and colorful bloom without frequent pruning. Such rhododendrons abound in today's nursery catalogs, and many of them are based on the species *Rhododendron yakushimanum* (now properly *R. degronianum* subsp. *yakushimanum*).

The species "Yaks" form a neat, dense, self-branching mound, from one to two feet tall at ten years of age. The leaves are held by the plant five or six years, sometimes even longer (versus the two or three years that the old ironclads retain their leaves), and display a thick, felt-like coating of fine hairs (indumentum) on the underside. The flowers open white from pink buds.

Plant breeders have gone wild over this species, crossing it with many other kinds in an attempt to capture its desirable traits of habit and foliage in hybrids with different colored blossoms. 'Hachmann's Polaris' retains the pink color in the flower instead of fading to white; 'Dorothy Swift', another introduction from Dr. Mehlquist, features the same colored blossoms as the species in a somewhat larger growing plant. (Most "Yak" hybrids are larger growing than the species.) 'Percy Wiseman' is already popular for its profuse peaches-and-cream flowers.

For really tight spaces there are dwarf plants, some even suitable for the rock garden: 'Ginny Gee' forms a spreading mound only 18 inches tall and two to three feet wide at maturity and smothers itself in bloom every spring. 'Tow Head' brings pale yellow blossom color to this group.
A Fresh Look at an Extended Blooming Season

Most rhododendron fanciers are familiar with *Rhododendron mucronulatum*, the so-called "Korean Azalea" (actually not an azalea at all, but a small-leaved rhododendron that happens to be deciduous); it opens the flowering season in early to mid April. A few years ago, this and 'PJM' were nearly the only April-flowering rhododendrons commonly available. Now early bloomers are available in a range of colors—'April Snow', another Weston introduction, with pure white, double, star-shaped flowers; 'April Song', still another from Weston, with soft pink flowers; 'April Gem', a Mehlquist hybrid, with fully double, white flowers like miniature gardenias; and 'Landmark', from Weston, with nearly red single flowers.

A brief digression: I’m often asked what the distinction is between azaleas and rhododendrons. Botanically speaking, all azaleas belong to the genus *Rhododendron*. They constitute two of the eight subgenera into which taxono-

mists have divided the genus: the deciduous azaleas (subgenus *Pentanthera*) and the so-called evergreen azaleas (subgenus *Tsutsusi*). Both groups are distinguished from other rhododendrons by several characteristics: their leaves and stems never have scales, as do such small-leaved rhododendrons as 'PJM' and *R. mucronulatum*; their flowers usually (but not always) have five stamens, unlike the other rhododendrons, which usually have ten or more stamens; and the hairs on azalea leaves are always simple, never branched, unlike the hairs that constitute the indumentum on species such as *R. yakushimanum*.

Having established what an azalea is, let’s now consider extending rhododendron bloom beyond Memorial Day. Usually we don’t look for much except in the late-flowering rosebay, *Rhododendron maximum*. But the flowers of *R. maximum* are small and not very showy and
Rhododendron makinoi, often called 'Indian Run', tends to be hidden by the new leaves, which form much earlier. Now rhododendrons are available with large, impressive flowers that appear long after the midseason kinds are but a memory. Two examples are 'Summer Snow', a David Leach hybrid with snowy white flowers, and 'Summer Glow', with vivid pink flowers.

Bloom can be extended even into late summer with some recent deciduous azalea introductions, bred from several late-flowering, native American species. Just a sampling: 'Millenium', near-red bloom in early to mid July; 'Golden Showers', peach buds that open yellow, turning creamy white, in mid July; 'Pennsylvania', light pink, blooms in late July to early August. These azaleas have two additional virtues. Many of them are fragrant, and their foliage is much more resistant to mildew than the older Exbury hybrid azaleas, which often look pretty shabby by the end of our interminably hot and humid summers.

For prostrate groundcovers, Polly Hill's evergreen azalea introductions can hardly be surpassed. Their mature height is less than a foot, and they spread to cover an area two to three feet in diameter. A couple of examples are 'Alexander', flowering in late June, the color of ripe watermelon, and 'Late Love', a light pink.

A Fresh Look at Rhododendron Foliage

Varied foliage types and sizes can provide many diverse textures in the green landscape before and after the relatively brief blooming season. *Rhododendron makinoi* has long, narrow, almost spiky leaves. *R. kiusianum*, the Kyushu azalea from Japan, has delicate sprays of tiny, glossy leaves; its flowers, as an added bonus, come in a range of colors from white through pinks and lavenders to near-red.

The new growth of some forms of *Rhododendron degromanum* are handsomely colored by a powdery tomentum (dense matted hair). In 'Teddy Bear' the persistent indumentum on the leaf undersurface is a bright cinnamon color. In 'Golfer' the white tomentum covering the new growth persists for most of the summer, making a vivid contrast with the glossy dark green of the older leaves.
Finally, there are even rhododendrons with variegated foliage: *Rhododendron ponticum* 'Variegatum', with gray-green leaves edged in white, unfortunately not reliably hardy in zone 5 but fine in milder parts of zone 6 and along the Atlantic coast and Cape Cod, and 'Goldflimmer', which has a completely different leaf pattern, green-streaked and mottled yellow.

**Some Cultural Pointers**

Planted in too much sun, a rhododendron can resemble a variegated shrub. The old ironclad varieties are often planted in full sun, and yes, many of them tolerate the exposure—but tolerance does not constitute preference. They may bloom prolifically, but they always look stressed: the foliage tends to a yellow instead of deep green, and the annual growth is short and stunted. A rule of thumb is that the larger the leaf, the more shade the plant prefers. *Rhododendron maximum*, for instance, grows well in almost full shade. On the other hand, the small-leaved types, like ‘PJM’ and both deciduous and evergreen azaleas need plenty of sun to grow and bloom well.

Besides the amount of sun and shade, the most important cultural factors to consider are the following. First, plant rhododendrons in well-drained, open-textured, acid (pH 4.5 to 6.0) soil that contains copious quantities of coarse organic matter. [Remember that soil near a foundation, especially in older buildings, may be alkaline due to leaching of lime from mortar.]

Second, plant them shallow. Rhododendrons have a naturally shallow root system, and if the rootball is covered with soil, the roots can suffer from lack of oxygen. The top of the rootball should actually be above the surface of the surrounding soil.

Third, provide a year-round mulch of coarse organic matter to insulate the shallow roots from extremes of heat and cold, to conserve soil moisture, and discourage weeds. Pine needles, rotted woodchips, chopped oak leaves and pinebark are all appropriate for mulch, but be sure not to pile it against the stems of the plant, which will encourage disease. And finally, ask your growers and suppliers for these less-than-common rhododendrons and begin enjoying them soon.

Dick Brooks, a past president of the American Rhododendron Society, was awarded the Gold Medal of that organization in 1998. In 1999 he received the Massachusetts Horticultural Society’s Jackson Dawson Memorial Award for skill in the hybridization and propagation of hardy woody plants.