

Horticultural News and Research Important to American Gardeners

Plant Hunters Rediscover Lost Rhododendrons

Three previously described but never introduced rhododendron species were among the plant treasures discovered by a group of Scottish plant hunters during an expedition to India last October. The rediscovered rhododendrons are a low-growing species called *R. trilectorum*, the low-altitude, pink-flowered *R. arunachalense*, and *R. kasoense*, a yellow-flowered species that blooms in fall. A fourth species identified by the team, *R. boothii*, had been introduced in 1928 and 1952, but lost to cultivation.



Father-and-son team of Peter and Kenneth Cox, above, rediscover *R. kasoense*, right.

Arunachal Pradesh—made by Peter Cox, his wife Patricia Cox, and their friend Peter Hutchison in 1965—had been curtailed by the unsettled atmosphere following the Chinese invasion of that province. Nevertheless, it yielded three new species and tantalizing glimpses of the rich flora.



Thirty-seven years later, the team of plant explorers was able to identify 40 species.

Cox describes the October bloom of *R. kasoense*—which was in flower at the time the

The team of nine adventurers—led by Peter Cox, one of the world's foremost authorities on rhododendrons, and his son, nurseryman and author Kenneth Cox—succeeded in penetrating the remote Indian province of Arunachal Pradesh, on the border between India and Tibet, "one of the last regions on earth to be properly explored," says Kenneth Cox.

"The heavy rainfall, steep terrain and almost impenetrable jungle give rise to a...very rich, little-known flora," explains Kenneth Cox. It is also a combination of factors that make exploration difficult. In addition, the political climate can be equally discouraging at times. A previous attempt to explore

team identified it—as "a very nice surprise," noting that although autumn-blooming rhododendron species were discovered as early as the 1920s and '30s, none had been brought into cultivation until recently, when *R. monanthum* was introduced. "We think *R. kasoense* is a better looking and more showy plant," says Cox. "It should be suitable for the Pacific Northwest and northern California. Crossed with hardy species, it might provide hybrids suitable for the eastern United States." An article about the expedition will be published in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of the American Rhododendron Society*.

MANY-SPLENORED GRASS

Lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*, USDA Zones 10–11, AHS Zones 12–1) is far more than just another pretty face in the garden. A single clump can flavor foods, provide tea, *and* keep you healthy to boot.

An aromatic member of a tropical genus that also includes citronella, lemon grass is a staple in Vietnamese and Caribbean cuisines. Its lemon-flavored culms—the tough, fibrous stems—are starting to find their way into American cooking. The flavorful blades can be

stuffed into baking chicken and chopped into soups and stews.

As useful medicinally as it is in the

kitchen, lemon grass can be steeped for a sedative tea that is a traditional headache remedy in the Caribbean. The essential oil is an antiseptic with bactericidal and fungicidal qualities and has been used to treat athlete's foot, acne, and ringworm. But lemon grass's most promising use may be against colon cancer. In Thai



An attractive ornamental, lemon grass also shines in the kitchen and medicine cabinet.

and Japanese studies, lemon grass extract inhibited the development of two early markers (pre-cancerous formations) of colon cancer.

Lemon grass is also drop-dead gorgeous. In warmer climates (USDA Zone 8 and above) the handsome blue-green blades will reach six feet. In colder areas, lemon grass may survive temperatures as low as 10 degrees Fahrenheit if heavily mulched, or can be potted up and brought into a bright, frost-free place over winter.

ENDANGERED CYCADS STOLEN

Fairchild Tropical Gardens in Coral Gables, Florida, is offering a \$25,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons who stole 43 cycads from the Gardens between March and August 2002.



This *Zamia pseudoparasitica* at Fairchild is one of the cycads thieves did not take.

There is not much to go on—"no evidence, no witnesses," says Detective Edward Cloughton of the Coral Gables Police Department. "They have been stolen for a personal collection by an avid collector, or by someone dealing in them for profit."

Among the missing is the extremely rare *Encephalartos laurentianus*, "the largest and most majestic of the living cycads," says Loran M. Whitelock, author of *The Cycads*. Also missing is a *Zamia amplifolia*—a victim of habitat destruction in its native Columbia—and an enormous *Zamia pseudoparasitica* with eight-foot leaves. Although many cycads become huge, it's a slow process—sometimes taking 100 years or more.

Cycads have been traced back more than 200 million years in the fossil record, so the thefts are an enormous loss to

Fairchild as well as to science. Considered endangered in their natural habitats, cycads are protected by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

Nevertheless, theft of cycads, says Cloughton, is an international problem. In South Africa, trafficking in these protected plants is so commonplace the government has set up a special task force to crack down on theft. Many of the plants now have microchips embedded in them to aid in identifying them in case of theft. And South Africans must be licensed to possess a cycad.

Anyone with information about the Fairchild Tropical Gardens thefts is asked to contact Rick Echeverria, Fairchild's director of facilities and security, at (305) 667-1651 ext. 3319, or by e-mail at rechevarria@fairchildgarden.org.

NATIVE CINQUEFOIL MAKES A COMEBACK

Not all the news on the conservation front is gloomy: For the first time ever, a plant listed on the federal list of Endangered and Threatened Plants has been removed from the list because of successful conservation efforts.

Robbins' cinquefoil (*Potentilla robbinsiana*), endemic to the treeless alpine zone of White Mountain National Forest, was on the brink of extinction 22 years ago when it was placed on the list. Now, thanks to the concerted efforts of the New England Wild Flower Society, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Appalachian Mountain Club, numbers of known plants have grown from a low of only 3,700 to today's more than 14,000. ♪



Robbins' cinquefoil is making a comeback in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

People and Places in the News

SHEPHERD'S SEEDS CATALOG FOLDS

The Shepherd's Garden Seeds catalog is no more. The popular line of heirloom and gourmet seeds will still be sold under that name through the White Flower Farm catalog and Web site, but the retail portion of Shepherd's Garden Seeds has been acquired by former owner Renee Shepherd and will be folded into her Renee's Garden business.

IN MEMORIAM: JOANNA MCQUAIL REED

Legendary gardener Joanna McQuail Reed, 85, whose Longview Farm in Malvern, Pennsylvania, has been the subject of countless books and articles, died October 21, 2002.

Reed received the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Distinguished Achievement Medal in 1985, the Catherine H. Sweeney Award from the AHS in 2001, and numerous awards from the Herb Society of America.

Typically working in the garden until dark, she once instructed an interviewer to call her at 10:30 p.m., saying, "No, it's not too late. I'll have a long time to rest later, and there are still so many things I want to do."



Joanna Reed

NICHE GARDENS CHANGES HANDS

Kim Hawks founded Niche Gardens in 1986 to produce quality mail-order plants and to propagate southeastern natives in an eco-friendly manner. In 17 years, Niche Gardens became one of the most successful innovative small mail-order nurseries in the country. On October 17, 2002, Hawks passed the baton into the "good hands" of the new owner, Blair Durant, who, says Hawks, is the man to bring Niche Gardens "to the next level."