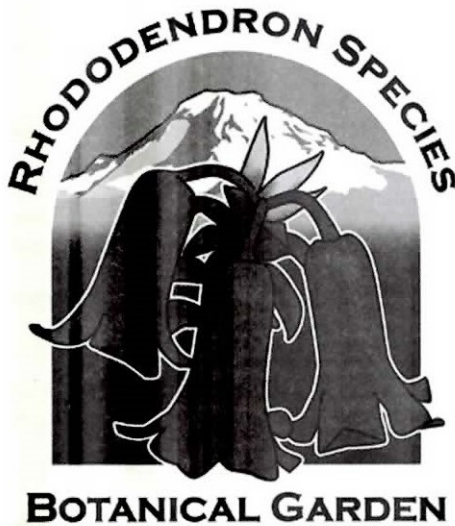


Rhododendron Species 2014



Rhododendron Species

2014 Volume 9



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Front cover: *Rhododendron forrestii* ssp. *forrestii* Repens Group,
Arunachal Pradesh. Ulrich Pietzarka.

Back cover: Bob Cherry of Australia admiring the massive leaves of the vireya
Rhododendron pleianthum, Papua, New Guinea

Line drawings reprinted with permission from *The Rhododendron Species, Volume II—
Elepidotes, Part 1 - Arboreum-Lacteum*—H.H. Davidian

The views expressed by our contributors are their own and represent no official view
of the Rhododendron Species Foundation. Through controversy and dialogue comes
knowledge.

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Contents

Contributors	ii
Rhododendron Species Foundation Officers and Board	iii
Foreword	v
The 1997 Expedition to Yunnan, China (revised from a series of articles previously published in the RSF Newsletter).....	1
<i>Steve Hootman</i>	
Full Circle: Polo De Lorenzo, Warren Smith, and the Sonoma Horticultural Nursery.....	15
<i>Elaine Sedlack</i>	
Rain, Mud and Rhododendrons: Exploring Arunachal Pradesh (Northeastern India) in the Monsoon Season	23
<i>Hartwig Schepker</i>	
Below the Crater Rim: Orton Bradley Park and the Rhododendron Collection	41
<i>Martin Wilkie</i>	
Ryukyu Azalea Group.....	55
<i>Akihide Okamoto</i>	
Plant Hunters in China.....	81
<i>Alleyne Cook</i>	
<i>Rhododendron</i> subgenus <i>Rhododendron</i> , subsection <i>Saluenensia</i>	115
<i>Peter A. Cox</i>	
The Rhododendron Rock Garden at Exbury	121
<i>Lionel de Rothschild</i>	
Gardening into the 21 st Century.....	127
<i>Charles Lyte</i>	
Kimchi, Soju, and Other Revelations in the Land of the Morning Calm.....	133
<i>Philip MacDougall</i>	
Species Rhododendrons in the Commercial Market: "Can You Send Us More?"	137
<i>Mike Stewart</i>	
The Rhododendron Species Foundation and Botanical Garden	147
Index.....	149
Catalog - 2014 Spring Distribution	

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Full Circle: Polo De Lorenzo, Warren Smith, and the Sonoma Horticultural Nursery

Elaine Sedlack

Horticulturist, University of California Botanical Garden at Berkeley

Photos on page 69

In the best of situations, beneficial early influences form a continuum as we grow older, but Fortune’s trajectory doesn’t always allow a clear connection with what, to many, may be only distant and disconnected memories of long ago. Of course, optimally, memories and vocation are linked by our interests, and childhood experiences can ultimately be the key to a fulfilling life.

Polo De Lorenzo grew up in the Canary Islands, on La Palma, the most northwesterly of the archipelago – called “The Green Island”, and “La Bonita”. Though there weren’t any rhododendrons growing there, the inner courtyard of his home had been planted by his grandmother and all the rooms surrounded a vibrantly colorful and lush interior landscape. Polo remembers crotons, birds of paradise, orchids, ferns and palms. With the light shining through the foliage, this palate of tropical patterns informed Polo’s love of plants from childhood.

Encompassing a large, six-mile-wide caldera, La Palma has the highest elevation in relation to area of all the Canary Islands. The dramatic elevation changes allows one to spend time at the beach in the morning, and later on the same day travel to snow covered heights! Perhaps this extreme diversity of landscape also shaped Polo’s future appreciation of gardens.

Polo’s father and uncle ran a business in La Palma distributing bananas through the Fyffes Company. Fyffes, the oldest fruit distributor in the world, with connections in the Canary Islands, established a branch in London in 1901. (It is from the huge shipments of bananas, pineapples and melons arriving on the



Polo De Lorenzo

Thames that the Canary Wharf is named.) Given this childhood environment, a logical future would be in agriculture, and when Polo eventually enrolled in the Polytechnic University of Tenerife, this was his choice of study. Then, in the early 1960s, he took his life in an altogether different direction: moving to Madrid, he



Warren S. Smith

obtained a license in hotel management! (Simultaneously, he took evening courses in the Department of Social Sciences at the University of Madrid.) To those acquainted with Polo's magnanimous personality, this turn is not surprising – he epitomizes the gracious gentleman; he belongs in the public sector. He began his career in this capacity in Madrid, also living in London and Paris. Then, in 1971 he became connected with the Sheraton Hotel in New York City. It was in New York where he met his life partner Warren Smith. Warren, who had a degree in art from the University of California, was the sales representative for Oxford University Press, covering the West Coast. An orchid grower, he had over 300 varieties. In 1974 Polo left New York and traveled west, eventually coming to reside with Warren in the Montclair district of Oakland, California.

The thread of Polo's life had brought him to a different hemisphere, but one with much latitude for creativity, and for an appreciation of flowers. Polo now became truly involved with the plant world, reviving those long ago memories. He enrolled in Merritt College's horticulture program to begin a course of study towards realizing this new career and phase of life – one which would sustain him for the long term. He even put in a stint working at Berkeley Horticultural Nursery. The nursery has been a launching place for many people with botanical interests, especially because at that time it had greenhouses for propagation, enabling those working there to grow the unusual plants for which the nursery was known. It was during this period that the University of California Botanical Garden also drew Polo's attention, furthering his appreciation for the world's flora – there was even a group of plants from the Canary Islands! And, this is at least one place where he discovered the great diversity of rhododendrons, because the Botanical Garden had a beautifully developed display of species and hybrids growing in its Asian section.

With this growing interest in plants, the next move would be to find a place with enough room to actually grow them, and the Sonoma Valley seemed an ideal, and idyllic, location. The rural property Polo and Warren were to acquire was already a working nursery, specializing, prophetically it would seem, in azaleas.

In 1964, Stewart and Audrey Barber had begun what was to become Sonoma Horticultural Nursery with an emphasis on growing and hybridizing Exbury azaleas. They also grew *satsuki* and *nakaharai* hybrids, but not Kurumes. When Polo and Warren purchased the nursery in 1977, it only consisted of the gardens by the house, and growing areas that are now the parking lot and lath houses. The Barbers helped guide them in the early years and Warren assisted with potting up cuttings. These

first gardens still contain many of the original azaleas, but they have been much augmented with stately hybrid and species rhododendrons, sheltered by the oak, pine and magnolias. They now form a screen around the house and along the road. In the beginning, the rest of the 7½ acre property was overgrown with nettles and Himalayan blackberries. Over the years, Polo and Warren stabilized the banks of the spring-fed pond and Blutcher creek, and cleared away the weeds in order to create the gardens that exist today. Warren was also skilled at carpentry and electrical work, and along with developing the irrigation system, he brought these talents to constructive use. The large pond had already been excavated, but initially only one *Magnolia x soulangiana* and an unknown *Philadelphus* cv. were there. Stuart Barber had purchased magnolias from Gresham's, but these are unlabeled. Today, there are seven and a half acres of mature gardens, a nursery overflowing with rhododendrons, and over one and a half miles of pathways to explore and enjoy.

Sonoma Horticultural Nursery is situated approximately 20 miles from the Pacific Ocean, and therefore receives some coastal influence in the summer in the form of fog and afternoon breezes. Otherwise, summers are warm and dry, with temperatures ranging between 75°F to 85°F. Temperatures climb to 90°F and 100°F on occasion, until the fog returns to cool things down. Winters are cool and wet, with between 35 to 45 inches of rain. Average night-time lows range between 40°F to 50°F with occasional frost. Infrequent freezes can bring the temperature down to 15°F for short periods. It is hard to imagine a more amenable situation for growing rhododendrons, especially given the protection of the now-present tree canopy.

The landscaped garden that grew along with the expanding nursery reflects Polo and Warren's interest in a wide variety of plants of practically every genus, combined with sensitivity to the different aspects and microclimates of the property. In the garden, plants abound; no space is under utilized, and no camera lens can capture the complexity and breadth of the plantings. What is striking is the large scope of the garden, the informality and fullness of the plantings and the obvious love given to their growing. Rhododendrons quickly became the most prominent element.

Early in their new endeavor, Polo decided that it would be good for the nursery to offer species rhododendrons in addition to hybrids. He avidly pursued this interest by joining the American Rhododendron Society and attending conferences in order to learn more about them. At this time he obtained permits from the University of California Berkeley Botanical Garden and Strybing Arboretum in San Francisco to take cuttings for this purpose, and began acquiring plants from all over the world. Often found on the rhododendron labels are references to famous gardens, such as Brodick, Trewithen and Glendoick. A 5' tall *R.* 'Phalarope' is one of Peter Cox's early hybrids; to have already grown to this height it must have been acquired shortly after it was released. The nursery offers an unusually large number of species rhododendrons for sale, including big leaf types from several sources, all representing a lifetime spent looking for the best forms. Not surprisingly, Polo is also a member of the Rhododendron Species Foundation, and many plants are wearing labels with RSF numbers. In addition to 350 species and 650 hybrid rhododendrons, there

are over now 500 varieties of azaleas offered, including new wild collections of *R. occidentale*, as well as stock dating back to the Barbers' time. The nursery also produces a great selection of magnolias, styrax, dogwoods, hydrangeas, pieris, camellias, and maples - both species and cultivars. It's a good place to find interesting vines, mainly clematis and lapageria. The hydrangea relative *Schizophragema hydrangeoides* var. *rosea*, is scarce in commerce, but Polo grows it.

The name "Sonoma Horticultural Nursery" gives no indication that there is also a garden here, but of this fact local people are well aware. Once, on my way there, I got lost, so I rolled down my car window and asked a woman coming along on her bicycle if she could direct me to McFarlane Road; her immediate response was, "Are you looking for the nursery?" Of course, this is the last turn before Azalea Avenue, so it may have been obvious. Many people come just to visit the garden.

The nursery and the garden overlap at many points. Well, mostly the garden has crept into the sales area. But if you love being surrounded by beautiful plants, this is a logical development, especially when everything else is already developed! There are roses gracing all the greenhouse and lath house doors - mostly David Austens, which do well here even without very much sun. Another signature plant is clematis - the large flowered hybrids are used extensively. They grow luxuriously in this climate, thriving in the amended soil. 'Marie Boisselot' is especially nice; 'Sho Un', a newer variety, is beautiful deep violet blue with pale green stamens. It is floriferous but still presents a tidy appearance. Some older favorites, both doubles, such as 'Belle of Woking' and *Clematis viticella* 'Purpurea Plena Elegans', drape over their wooden supports. Upon first entering the nursery, besides seemingly endless rows of nursery stock in the lath houses on each side, there is a dramatic view of a 50' *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Frisia' in the distance. Its luminous yellow crown glows against the background of dark coast redwoods, but this spectacular picture is given a whimsical slant by the presence of a 50 cubic-yard mountain of rhododendron planting mix in the foreground! This blend of fine grade fir bark and red lava rock is used throughout the garden to build planting mounds for the rhododendrons, and is available for purchase, sold by the bag to customers to ensure the longevity of their new plants.

When Polo and Warren obtained the nursery, there were already a number of maturing trees, including a *Quercus dentata* and many *Sequoia sempervirens* that the Barbers had planted, mainly near the house. A row of 100' Monterey pines have recently been removed (with much care; the neighbor of the adjoining parcel very kindly allowed them to be felled onto his land to avoid damage to the nursery). Now, the row of Sequoias that were planted to eventually replace them is flourishing. A couple of strong linear elements anchor this otherwise free-form garden. The Barbers planted a tall hedge of *Sequoia sempervirens* to screen off the view of the lath houses from the house. It is sheared into an impressive 15' tall, 50' long, rectangular dividing wall. A delightful 4' *Rhododendron williamsianum* occupies its space nicely at one end. A line of mature poplars is another prominent feature; the rustling of their leaves combines with the other sounds of wildlife in the garden. There are many songbirds, woodpeckers, and raptors, while the pond attracts night herons, kingfishers, ducks,

and turtles. On warm days the air hums and clicks from a variety of insects and the buzzing of assorted species of bees, actively pollinating their main nectar source – the many hundreds of rhododendrons planted in the garden and those of blooming age in the nursery. Add to this the fragrance of the rhododendrons, and the experience is heavenly.

Choice specimens of the finest trees known to horticulture are sited throughout the garden. These represent the nursery's other specialties: the different magnolia, dogwood, and styrax cultivars for which it is also known. These are complemented by ornamental cherries, birches, a couple of *Parrotia persica* cultivars and *Eucryphia x nymansensis* 'Mount Usher'. All of the stewartia species are planted beside each other to highlight the differences in their bark patterns. Underneath them is ground covering assortment of *R. keiskei* and its hybrids. The Barbers had planted one metasequoia near the office, then Polo and Warren planted a whole grove of them that are now established in the moist low area where the stream flows, including *M.* 'Sheridan Spire' from New Zealand. I don't know of any other 'nursery' with such a remarkable overstory. *Acer* 'Eskimo Sunset' is beautifully sited with these as the backdrop. When it is sunlit it becomes a strong focal point. Polo states that this maple cultivar comes true from seed. A long wooden walkway (built by Warren) takes one through a birch grove and an inspired planting of *Gunnera chilensis*, *Lysichiton americanum* and *Iris pseudacorus*, leading to the bridge (also Warren's creation) over Blutcher Creek, and into the garden beyond. Besides the redwoods and metasequoias, a variety of other conifers give textural balance to the evergreen rhododendrons and the deciduous trees. Three trees with a weeping habit attract attention: *Sequoiadendron giganteum* 'Pendulum' lurches at a 45° angle; several small specimens of weeping *Larix kaempferi* serve as accents in the garden; while *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Pendula' has branches that cascade all the way to the ground. Polo made a space within its curtain of foliage for a small bench, and every year a Japanese family comes, sets up a table in this green room, and has lunch!

One tree in particular is practically a namesake of the nursery. The superlative, SHN form of *Davidia involucrata*, the dove or handkerchief tree, has lower bracts to more than 7" long, noticeably larger than the typical species. This clone originated at Toichi Domoto's legendary nursery in Hayward. It was purchased by the Barbers and planted at their former home in Alameda. Stuart told Polo it had very large bracts, and that when he moved to the nursery his friends helped him to dig it up and move it here because he couldn't bear to leave it behind. Good thing for all of us! This tree, which turns 50 this year, was planted next to the house. It is now taller than the second story, and several younger ones are growing up nearby. It has been designated "Sonoma County Heritage Tree #20", as the plaque so states, citing Ord. # 3651. The late, knowledgeable plantsman J. C. Raulston was crazy about this tree and promoted it widely. Polo has distributed scion material to others, but due to low percentage success at rooting it is not widely available. Large banks of deciduous azaleas from the Barbers' hybridizing work are massed beneath the trees, along with rhododendrons, camellias, and evergreen azaleas. Especially nice are examples of

the ‘Sonoma Dwarf’ azalea series: low, compact evergreen cultivars developed at the nursery. Because of their ‘Satsuki’ parentage, they are late blooming.

The pond is arguably the most picturesque part of the nursery; at least it is the most visited. The path which winds around is flanked with different varieties of azaleas which flow together in a continuous 50' display, trimmed as an undulating hedge so as not to obscure the view of the pond. Among the older arboreal species of rhododendrons, at the north end of the pond *R.* ‘Ivery’s Scarlet’ is reflected in the water, followed by *R.* ‘Loderi King George’, making a lovely picture. The *R. arboreum* ssp. *cinnamomeum* was grown from cuttings from Strybing Arboretum; the straight species *R. arboreum* (from the University of California) is nearby. There is a mass of azaleodendron hybrids growing in a tangle, their different colors at first glance seeming to be on one plant. All the plants around the pond have achieved mature height, creating a blossoming tunnel with views opening over the water. Consorting with *Acer japonicum* ‘Vitifolium’ is *R.* ‘Chevalier Felix de Sauvage’. This ‘father’ of ‘Mrs. G.W. Leak’ is a deeper, warmer pink, so it reads well from the other side of the pond. This plant’s toughness may derive from its *R. caucasicum* parent. Polo grew this from cuttings given him by the late Harland Hand in El Cerrito, California. *Rhododendron lutescens* and *R. spinuliferum* intertwine across the path from a 6' tall *R. keiskei*. A European larch reaches towards the redwoods behind them, while deer ferns, corydalis and stream orchids, hellebores and *Primula japonica* are tucked into the open spaces between rhododendrons. There is a very nice *R. praevernum* (one of several in the garden) at the south end. Across from this is an unknown *Philadelphus*. This beautiful cultivar (planted long ago by the Barbers) has very large, wide-open, pure white flowers; some seem almost semi-double with an overlapping fifth petal. Picnic tables at the pond are popular, and during the height of the bloom season photographers are frequent visitors.

The area I especially love is the yellow garden. Here, *Laburnum vossii* is planted on a long arched arbor, in the classic style of Bodnant Gardens in North Wales but on a smaller, more intimate scale. It is under-planted with golden leaved hostas and dwarf narcissus. The yellow theme is expanded upon with *Magnolia* ‘Elizabeth’, *R. sinogrande* (from seed purchased at Brodick Castle), and early-blooming *Edgeworthii papyrifera*. Opposite these, a healthy young *R. macabeum* will be glorious here as it fills out. There are a couple of unknown yellow elepidote rhododendrons outside the arbor. When I asked the source of these, Polo responded they were “Number 1 and Number 2” – unidentified plants which everyone seemingly asked about, so, he gave them numbers! Other yellow rhododendrons in the vicinity are *R. luteum* and *R.* ‘Lemon Lodge’. Here are yellow daylilies, a large-flowered herbaceous peony – yellow of course, and more lilies, yarrow, and roses for the summer. Roses ‘Golden Showers’ and ‘Graham Thomas’ climb on the nearby gazebo – a comfortable vantage point from which all this can be appreciated.

The garden is packed with rhododendrons of every type. Big-leaf rhododendrons are found throughout the grounds, and species and hybrids are all grown together. Species originating from the University of California Botanical Garden cuttings

include a fine old *R. vernicosum*, *R. decorum*, *R. arboreum*, *R. fortunei* ssp. *discolor*, a Kingdon-Ward collection of *R. tanastylum*, *R. spinuliferum*, a Forrest collection of *R. griersonianum*, and, behind the house, a fine 12' tall *R. yunnanense*. Even though it is too cold for most of the maddenias (their flowers can be nipped in cold springs), Polo still succeeds in growing an extensive array of these, and has many more for sale. There is a sizeable plant of *R. polyandrum* (now a synonym of *R. maddenii*) near the house. Plants grow freely here, nestled among ferns and low herbaceous ground covers, with bright splashes of color from Exbury hybrids. Open pollinated seedlings of these are always for sale. A very pretty pink *R. irroratum* is about 15' tall; this may have come from the University of California. An innovative use of *R. racemosum* is to espalier it over an arch for its cloud effect. There is a 6' tall *R. denudatum*. This is a species not many can grow well in this area, but it seems healthy here. Among the hybrids, *R.* 'Helen Druecker' is stalwart – it never burns and is reliably productive. *R.* 'Beauty of Littleworth' is 25' tall, next to an old *R. diaprepes*. These are also planted at the house. Many visitors no doubt time their spring trips to coincide with the flowering of the Loderi hybrids; numerous ones are grouped together. The predictably early blooming red hybrid *R.* 'Cornubia' is succeeded by *R.* 'Bibiani' and finally by *R.* 'Etta Burrows'. There are numerous *R. williamsianum* hybrids; *R.* 'Kimbeth', 'Mission Bells' and 'Carlene', among others. 'Carlene' is *R. williamsianum* crossed with a with Lem hybrid. The flowers are warm apricot with peach centers – delicious! All are charming plants for smaller gardens. In late May, *R.* 'Crest' opens its clear yellow flowers. Another 'event' in the garden is heralded by *R.* 'Eleanore', a 1937 Rothschild cross of *R. desquamatum* x *augustinii*. The *R. desquamatum* parent gives the flowers more substance and adds height to the plant. (Currently this 'species' is reduced to *R. rubiginosum* Desquamatum Group, to separate it from the typically smaller flowered species *rubiginosum*). Another primary hybrid, *R.* 'Polar Bear', must need a long hibernation; it is one of the last of the season to make a show. This plant is incredible – vigorous and sun tolerant, and fragrant! Its combined parentage of *R. diaprepes* x *R. auriculatum* was bound to produce a winner. Polo has named a clear pale yellow, open-pollinated 'Exbury Calstoker' hybrid in Warren's honor – *R.* 'Warren Smith' – though it isn't registered. Two spreading plants of the dainty species *R. serpyllifolium* complement the larger flowered azalea cultivars. This list could go on; everything is here! All the rhododendrons have grown to very large proportions, giving one the impression of being in the wild forest from which they originated.

When I visit the Sonoma Horticultural Nursery, seeing versions of some of the plants I care for at Berkeley in this different setting seems odd – how can the plants I know so well be in both places? But this has been fortuitous, as any gardener knows: when you want to back up your collection, make sure to share your plants! It is thanks to Polo that I have been able to restore some of the historic rhododendrons to UCBG, as he has carefully kept track of the UCBG accession numbers. I was able to replace our *R. yunnanense*, and I am hopeful of finding space for a replica of our *R. discolor*, which has died. Once, I wrote to the Azalea Society's on-line forum in order to locate a source for a lost *R.* 'Hino Orange'; a member in Chicago responded to say that "Polo has it". I was embarrassed that I hadn't contacted him at first, but then when

I wrote to confirm the availability of the plant, I asked, in fun, “Polo, may I ask, where did you obtain this plant?” Polo responded, “I would love to return this plant to its garden of origin!” Later, when I wrote to Harold Greer to ask if he would like me to bring one to him, he said, “Somewhere in my memory is the story of how my father got that plant to Berkeley”!! Little had I guessed at this interconnected history. A friend of mine has a theory that plants use people to move themselves around the world, and, though I’m not convinced that is what is happening here, it does seem that gardeners support this process by their acquisitive natures, but perhaps more importantly, by their generosity.

Gardens certainly return to us more than we put into them. The people connected with them are an intrinsic part of the cycle. The pleasure and work which obviously went into creating this place is a continuing gift to visitors. I hope to spend many more hours exploring the world of plants which has come together here; testament to Polo and Warren’s shared interests and remarkable achievement.

Note: Sadly, Warren Smith passed away in January 2005. Since then, Polo has been maintaining the garden and the nursery with a small but dedicated staff.

Sources: Most of the information in this article was obtained in conversation with Polo, from the Sonoma Horticultural Nursery website, and from exploring the garden in wonderment.

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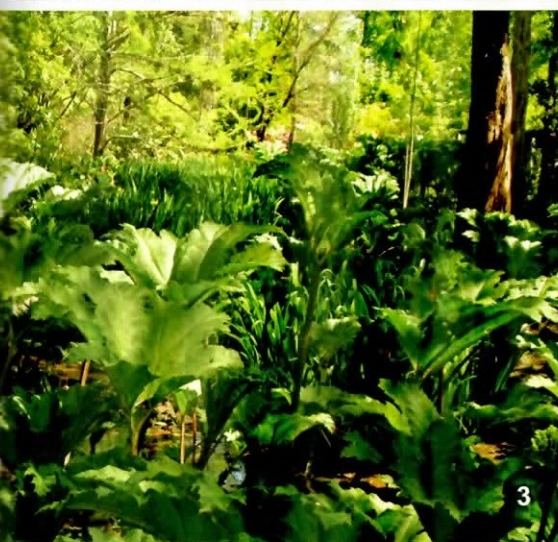
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Full Circle: Polo De Lorenzo, Warren Smith, and the Sonoma Horticultural Nursery
All photographs by Elaine Sedlack.

1. *Rhododendron* 'Ore Beni'.
2. *Davidia involucreta*, SHN
3. *Gunnera chilensis*.
4. Pond with cranes
5. *R. vernicosum*