

**MOUNT LOFTY BOTANIC GARDEN
WALK FROM THE LOWER CAR PARK**

OCTOBER 2023



To help keep visitors COVID-19 safe we provide a copy of this walk on the Noticeboard at the Gardens which may be photographed or there is a downloadable version on our website (<https://www.friendsbgadelaide.com/guided-walks>)

One of the jewels in the Mount Lofty Botanic Gardens (MLBG) is its collection of Rhododendrons. Late September and October are the best times to visit the collection which may be found in Rhododendron Gully. This area may either be entered via the Duck Pond paths or from the Upper Car Park. Note that there are steep paths in Rhododendron Gully, but the collection and its display are well worth the effort.

Rhododendron is a large genus in the heath family (Ericaceae). Most species are native to eastern Asia and the Himalayas although smaller numbers occur elsewhere in Asia, North America, Europe and Australia. Rhododendrons may be either evergreen or deciduous.

Noel Lothian was the sixth Director of the Adelaide Botanic Garden, and it was his vision, with Government funding support, which allowed him to be the instigator of these cool temperate gardens. In 1967 work on the Southeastern Freeway from Adelaide to Stirling was started. The Freeway route carved through many established gardens. Sir Edward Stirling owned one of several gardens in Stirling and Crafers where rhododendrons were introduced in the late 1800s. Noel Lothian knew that these plants had to be saved if possible and the MLBG was beginning to take shape, albeit very slowly. A formal letter was sent by the Director to the Highways Department regarding the future of these plants. Some two years later a reply was received back saying in effect that the gardens with the plants to be saved had now been procured for the purpose of the new freeway and if the Botanic Garden wanted any of them, they had 3 weeks to remove them before they would be bulldozed. This happened to be the height of mid-summer.

To the credit of the Director and the staff from MLBG, work began immediately to salvage as many plants as possible. Over the next few weeks five staff lifted 95 mature plants from the freeway site gardens and transported them to the gardens. They were mostly rhododendron hybrids with a small number of other ornamental trees and shrubs. Many of the rhododendrons were over 10 feet tall and needed to be drastically reduced in size to ensure survival. The plants were maintained in rows at the top of the garden in a nursery type situation. Sprinklers were used to mist the plants regularly throughout the hot summer's days to keep them alive until eventually planted out in the garden during autumn.

The Focus of the MLBG Collection is to grow rhododendron species largely from China and to establish a Taxonomic Collection. As many wild origin plants have been collected as possible to ensure provenance. For the collection to thrive, a diverse eco-system mimicking their natural habitat has been developed. This includes the planting of deciduous trees to create a canopy to protect them in summer and allow light penetration in winter and planting in groups of at least 10 to ensure survival. In addition, the leaf drop adds natural humus to the acidic soil and the MLBG fertilises with a commercial organic based product in December when new growth occurs and April when flowers begin development for the following season. Plantings are established on slight mounds to prevent water logging and watered regularly (twice a week) for 4 hours. There are misters used in summer to produce humidity.

Rhodo-dendron literally means Rose Tree. They have a Hardiness Zone of 3 on a scale with 0 for Antarctica and 15 for tropical. Some rhododendrons have fine hairs on the backs of the leaves, appearing as a brown rust-like coating, known as indumentum. These hairs help insulate plants in cold and help absorb atmospheric moisture. The habit of drooping leaves evolved to allow snow to fall off. In their native habitat, smaller leaved plants tend to frequent the highest altitude whilst larger leaves are prevalent at lower altitude (in shady gullies larger leaves can absorb more sunlight). Some species are perfumed, and many are poisonous. Many of the specimens grown in MLBG are not found growing anywhere else in world. There are 180 species in the MLBG collection, out of at least 1000 which have been described.

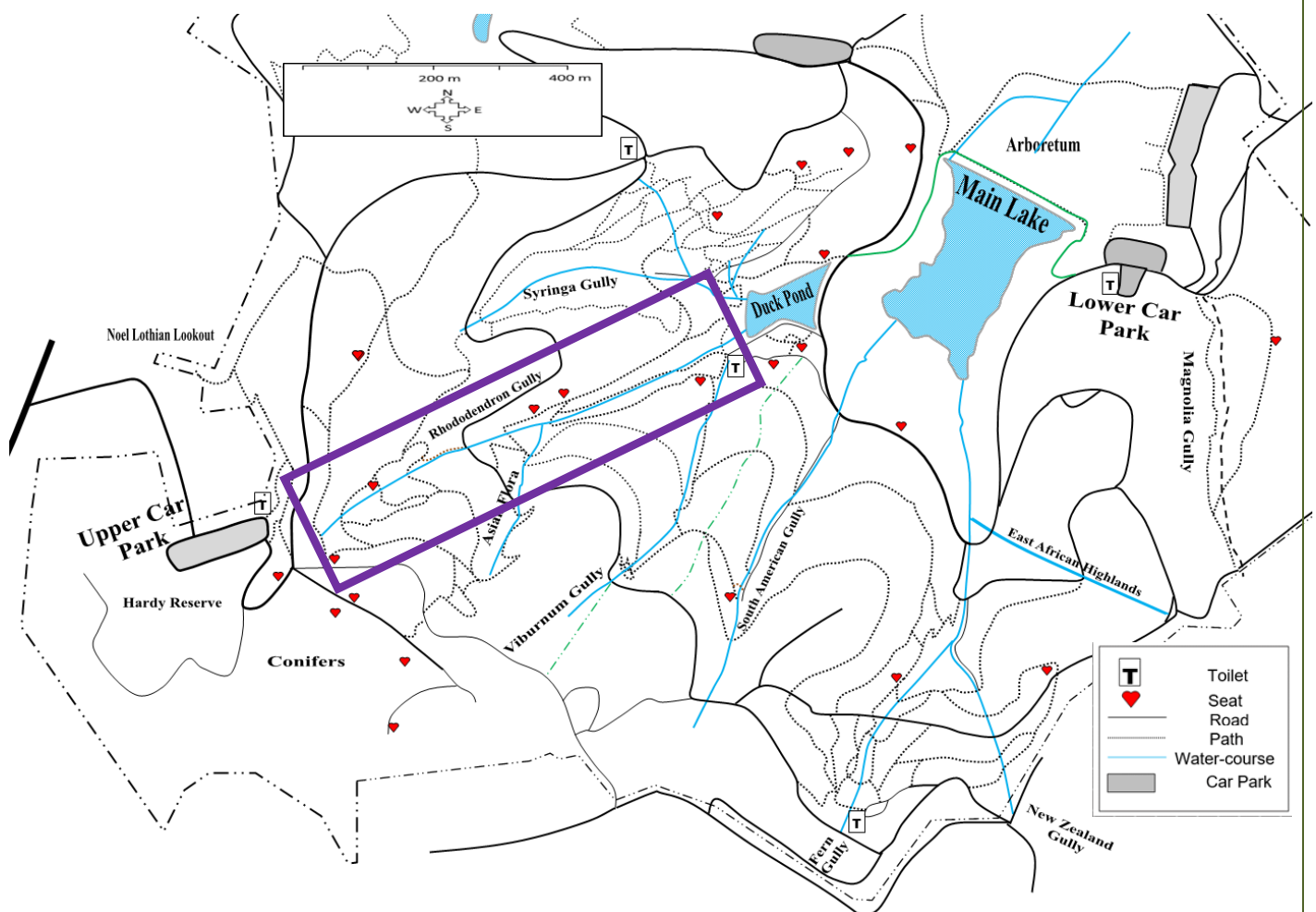
Rhododendrons have fragrant blossoms in an array of colors - from pure white and light pastels to brilliant orange and gold to purple and red. Some blossoms change colour over time or are marked with contrasting colours. Many insect-pollinated flowers, particularly those which conceal their nectaries at the end of a long tube, have dots and lines which lead from the outer lip, to guide insects to the nectar within, and some rhododendrons clearly show this feature.

Nestled amongst the rhododendrons are azaleas which belong to the same Ericaceae family. In this genus, both rhododendron and azalea are used as common names. Rhododendrons are usually evergreen and those labeled azaleas are generally deciduous, although there are some evergreen azaleas.

Rhododendrons are erect, growing up to 25 metres high, while azaleas are twiggy, spreading bushes, usually reaching a height of no more than 2.5 metres. Rhododendron flowers are borne in groups called trusses, at the end of branches, and there are generally 5 petals and 10 stamens. They usually have large paddle-shaped leaves. Azalea flowers are borne singly, usually with 5 petals and 5 stamens. The leaves are generally small. It should be mentioned that the tropical *Vireya* rhododendrons don't have a truss either and look more like azaleas but are in general treated as a special class, different from most other rhododendrons and azaleas.

Keep an eye out for some of our favorite specimens when you visit Rhododendron Gully. In climbing from the Duck Pond *Rhododendron carneum* is distinctive and has fragrant flowers featuring over a long flowering period. These start as pink buds and become whiter as the flowers age. This species originates in the mountains (above 2,500m) of Northern Myanmar. It is a medium sized upright shrub that grows to about 1.5 tall and 1.2m wide. Further on, by the second set of steps is *Rhododendron decorum*, which also has flowers which are white to pale pink. Its habit is a shrub or small tree 1–6 m in height, with leathery leaves that are oblong, oblong-ovate or oblong-elliptic. It grows at altitudes of 1000–3300 in a range from Myanmar to Yunnan in China. Further on is an intriguing specimen in *Rhododendron irriatum* var 'Polka Dot'. It features striking flowers that are white, with a pink flush, and deep purple spots within the trumpet. Nearby is a stunning specimen of *Rhododendron kyawii* with bright red flowers. It was described by John Henry Lace and William Wright Smith in 1914. Continue and discover your own favorites amongst this unique and comprehensive collection.

HM, RH and DS 10//23



This leaflet has been prepared by the Garden Guides and funded by the Friends of the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide Inc.
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