

GARDENS

The Name of the Game: Reveling in Rhododendrons



IT'S HARD to believe that Frank and Gay Arsen's garden is only a third of an acre. It's a sylvan woodland of sassafras trees and copper beeches and umbrella pines, where hellebores and hostas share the shade with campanulas and columbines and Quaker ladies. Where a star magnolia twinkles in early spring and a pink dogwood sparkles in May.

But mostly, Frank and Gay Arsen's garden in Lindenhurst is a wonderland of rhododendrons.

The last time I visited them was nearly six years ago. I was reporting my first piece as a garden columnist, and Frank and Gay welcomed me as if I were an old friend. We walked around the yard, and they introduced me to rhododendrons I'd never seen before — Scintillation and GiGi and Janet Blair. Rhododendrons far more elegant than the mauve *Roseum Elegans* I had at home. Later, we sat under the shade of a wild cherry tree and Frank told me how he hybridizes his favorite flower, making countless crosses and creating blooms of many shapes and shades and sizes.

"Rhododendrons keep us young," Frank said. I was surprised when he said he was 80 years old.

When I left, they invited me to come again. I promised I would, and I remember thinking, "I bet I'm going to like this job."

Now — after so many seasons, so many columns — I'm finally walking through Frank's and Gay's garden again. And it's an extra special honor. Frank wants to name a rhododendron for me.

What could be a sweeter claim to a modicum of immortality than to have a flower named after you? I felt that way when my friend Herb Zipper of Baldwin named a rose for me. Now Frank Arsen is making my day with a rhododendron.

I'll be right up there with Gay Arsen, a floriferous beauty with rose blooms that fade to white. It was the first of his hybrids that Frank felt was good enough to name. Over the years, he's hybridized thousands of rhododendrons — but he's only named and registered four. After Gay Arsen came pink Agateen, named for a product of the Long Island City lacquer company where the couple met. Then Ambrose Light, named after the beacon in New York Harbor that welcomed a young soldier home after almost four years with a tank battalion in North Africa and Italy during World War II. Then Amber Lantern, after the restaurant where he and Gay had their first date in 1949.

And now there's Irene Virag. Wow.

We walk among the rhododendrons on a splendid spring morning. "We're going to be married 50 years on June 23," Gay tells me. "I want to have a party. Frank doesn't."

Frank shrugs. "I'm 86."

"I'm going to have a party anyway." Gay shrugs. "I'm 84."

She turns to me. "Last time, you visited in June. This time you're here for our early garden." The early garden is lush with lepidotes — small-leaved evergreens that kick off the rhodie show in April, almost two months before the main attraction heats up with the

large-leaved rhododendrons we all know. Here's Hudson Bay in frothy white splendor and PJM pretty in pink. There's blue-flowered *rusauntinii* and low-growing *keiskei* with creamy white flowers.

"The *keiskei* is one of mine," Frank says.

"I never named it. It's pretty, though, and I let it go at that. It's not easy to name and register a rhododendron."

When Frank explains how the parentage must be documented and the date of the first bloom recorded, I'm even more flattered. Every part of the flower and leaf must be measured and described according to the rules of the International Registration Authority of the Royal Horticultural Society in England. "I use a magnifying glass when I measure the anthers and stamen," he says. The flower color must be coded against an official chart that offers a dozen different shades of red alone. It will take months for my

namesake to show up on the International Rhododendron Registrar.

Frank walks along the paths he blazed himself over the 35 years he and Gay have lived in the mustard-colored house on a dead end street. "I

always had a yen for a garden," he says. He planted flower and vegetable seeds in wooden cartons on the fire escape when he was a boy in Astoria. "I always said, 'One of these days I'm going to have a place of my own to grow things.'"

He discovered rhododendrons in a nursery and said to himself, "God, these are beautiful things." The Arsens joined the Long Island chapter of the American Rhododendron Society in 1962, and he was on his way. Now the couple's yard is filled with hundreds of rhododendrons. And dozens of seedlings grow in pots.

"Here's the one I think should have your name," Frank says. We're standing in front of a pink rhododendron in a black plastic container. "To me, it's a feminine flower. And I like it because it blooms right before the rush. Of course, Gay wondered if you'd prefer the red one over there." He points to a nearby plant with bold blooms. It's no contest. "It's too blowsy for you," Frank says. "Besides, it has what we call a lax truss — the flower flops." That settles it.

My rhododendron has been a work in progress since 1990 when Frank crossed a rare *yakusimanum* with a cultivar called Dexter's Orange. He liked the offspring but decided to cross it with a yellow Phipps 32. He was going for yellow-orange. It took five years for that seedling to bloom — and Frank still wasn't satisfied. So he crossed it with Orange Marmalade. And he waited.

Last year, it bloomed for the first time. A nice big pink flower. "I nearly fell over," Frank says. "I said, 'Where did you come from?' I think a bee got to it before I did. It's a lovely flower, so I thank the bee."

And I thank Frank — and Gay, too. ●



Irene
Virag



Hybridizer Frank Arsen with his wife, Gay, and the rhododendron he developed, named and registered as "Irene Virag"

Newsday Photo / Bill Davis