
Rhododendron farrerae

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R. farrerae is a little-known deciduous azalea in the Schlippenbachii series. The only reason I know anything about it is because I have encountered it in the wild while at loose ends on a weekend during a business trip in Hong Kong.

It seems to be public policy in Hong Kong to concentrate the people in dense neighborhoods, leaving the bulk of the land in its natural state. As a result, it is easy to get to the countryside. All I had to do is to take the subway a few stops from the business district of Kowloon and walk straight uphill. Within about three quarters of a mile, I was beyond the last habitation and on a steep hillside.

The vegetation of Hong Kong was not at all what I expected. The climate is tropical and wet. At some seasons, cloud cover hovers a few hundred meters above sea level. However, the vegetation is not lush. Instead, the hills are covered with shrubby scrub, usually not more than knee high. A few trees are found in ravines. This is the natural habitat of *R. farrerae*.

The examples I saw were at and nearby a location named Tait's Cairn. This location is about 500 meters above sea level. The plants were scattered in the scrub. Flowers observed on April 1 were pink, white or pale lavender. There were one or two flowers per head. In some cases the flowers had appeared ahead of the leaves. In other cases they were nestled among obviously new leaves. The plants were about 18 inches tall, and somewhat wider than they were tall.

I tried to gather some pollen from the plants. The pollen did not survive the trip back to the United States, but then, being unprepared, my techniques were unsatisfactory. A few years later I obtained some *R. farrerae* pollen from an avid rhododendron collector, Harold Epstein of Larchmont, New York, and made a successful cross with *R. viscosum*. Unfortunately, the seedlings died of damp-off when very small. I wish I could try the cross again.

A little library research indicates that *R. farrerae* was discovered very early by occidental botanists, in 1829¹. It was early known as *Azalea squamata*². It is very tender. The British¹ rate it as H1-2, which means that it is barely hardy enough to grow outside in a protected English garden. In its native habitat, cold hardiness is not important. Hong Kong and the surrounding area have seasons, but even in January a temperature of 70°F is not unusual.

The Chinese call *R. farrerae* "ding xiang dujuan" which is translated as "lilac rhododendron"³. This designation is probably a reference to the most common color form, although my limited experience indicates that flower color is variable and other colors are common.

The natural habitat of *R. farrerae* is in the south China coastal provinces, from Guangxi to Fujian. One source⁴ says that it also grows in Hunan and Jiangxi provinces, which are still in southern China, but inland. These regions are tropical [or subtropical, Ed.] .

Does *R. farrerae* have any importance to American azalea growers? It certainly does not have enough cold tolerance to grow in most of the United States. On the other hand, it does tolerate high temperatures more than most azaleas and it does root easily⁵. Other deciduous azaleas are hard to root. It comes in a clear pink color form, it is floriferous, and it is smaller than most deciduous azaleas. Perhaps its genes have a place in a breeding program to produce versatile varieties capable of coping with the continental climate found in the central United States.

R. farrerae is representative of the many Chinese azaleas that are little known outside the orient. Reference 2 lists 11 species of azalea as growing in the same region as *R. farrerae*. Only two (*R. molle* and *R. simsii*) have been used in occidental breeding programs. Tam⁴ lists 15 additional newly discovered Chinese azalea species. This collection should include genes that would be useful to future azalea development.

[D. F. Chamberlain and S. J. Rea, *A Revision of Rhododendron IV—Subgenus Tsutsusi*, Edinb. J. Bot. 47(2) :145 (1990) place *R. farrerae* Tate in Section *Brachycalyx*, citing it as the type species of the Section. Chamberlain and Rae state that it was introduced by Capt. Farrer from China in 1829. Ed.]

References

1 *The Rhododendron Handbook*. The Royal Horticultural Society, 1980.

2 *The Species of Rhododendron - Azalea Series* as reprinted by The Pacific Rhododendron Society.

3 *Rhododendrons of China* published by the American Rhododendron Society and The Rhododendron Species Foundation, 1980.

4 *A Survey of the Genus Rhododendron in South China* by Tam Puicheung, World Wide Publications, Hong Kong, 1983.

5 *Azalea Squamata* in the Botanical Register, vol. 33, 1847.

David Purdy has been growing and breeding azaleas for many years, initially in central Virginia, then for twenty years on Long Island near New York City and currently in Omaha, Nebraska. His favorite azaleas on Long Island were a group of R. nudiflorum x Ilam hybrid, and a group of Martha Hitchcock x an unknown azalea. He is currently trying to cope with Nebraska's climate. If anyone has pollen or plants of R. tschonoskii to send him, he would appreciate it. Iron hardiness is a necessity for a breeding program in Nebraska.

By vocation, David is an engineer engaged in power plant and railroad projects. □