

Rhododendron Obtusum Group

Donald H. Voss — Vienna, Virginia

Disagreements about plant classification and nomenclature arise when we probe beyond the superficial level of those to whom any shrub is “a bush” or any conifer “a pine tree.” This has been evident since the Greek Theophrastus wrote about the nature and names of plants circa 300 B.C.

Early Treatments of *R. obtusum*

In 1846, the English botanist Lindley named *Azalea obtusa*. A French botanist who studied and named many plants from the Orient published the new combination *Rhododendron obtusum* (Lindley) Planchon in 1854. In addition to Lindley's *Azalea obtusa*, synonyms of *Rhododendron obtusum* cited by Wilson (1921) include:

- A. indica* Thunberg, in part [not *A. indica* of Linnaeus] (1784)
- R. thunbergii* Planchon (1854)
- R. sieboldii minor* Miquel (1863) *
- A. thunbergii* Andre (1865)
- R. indicum* var. *obtusum* Maximowicz (1870)
- A. indica* var. *obtusum* Rehder (1900)
- R. indicum kirishima* Millais [1917] *
- R. obtusum* f. *honkirishima* Komatsu [1918]

* Rank of infraspecific epithet not indicated.

The plant explorer E. H. “Chinese” Wilson, noted for his collections in China and Japan, named 12 of the 13 infraspecific taxa that he listed in the species *R. obtusum* (Lindley) Planch. (Wilson, 1921). The havoc in *Rhododendron* taxonomy wrought by the diversity of plants once included in this species is evident in the 58 synonyms listed by Wilson for these taxa. (Wilson's nomenclature and synonymy are cited here for illustrative purposes; other authors' lists would support the same conclusions.) A few of the synonyms simply reflect a change in genus between *Azalea* and *Rhododendron*, and some may have resulted from lack of knowledge of other botanists' having named certain plants. But many, certainly, are at-

tributable to the diversity of the plants themselves. In addition to this diversity, considerable differences in the taxonomic criteria applied by individual botanists must be taken into account.

The degree to which botanists subdivide a given genus depends on the breadth and depth of their knowledge of plants and on their concepts of the appropriate criteria for separating species, subspecies, varieties, and forms. “Lumpers” will concentrate on major differences in characteristics that separate one group of plants from another and accept a range of minor variations within the groups they name. “Splitters” will emphasize minor variations and name a greater number of species and/or infraspecific taxa in the genus—or, indeed, create a new genus. That said, one must note the common practice of yesteryear to designate as separate species variants which today are widely considered within the natural bounds of a single species. Minor variations in form or color that once gave rise to named botanical varieties or forms are now often treated as cultivars.

Wilson's comments relating to the origin and diversity of *R. obtusum* are relevant here:

It is always unfortunate when a selected or garden form has to do duty as the type of a species. Such is the case here ... The typical form has rather pointed corolla lobes ... At Kurume in Kyushu this typical form is called “Hiryu.” In the nursery district round Osaka a form with rounded corolla lobes is grown and sold as the Kirishima Aza-

lea, and it is this form that is grown in many Western gardens as the real *R. obtusum* Planch.

Wilson then described the various flower forms encountered in the species and mentioned the dimorphic leaves. He explained the difference in the character of the deciduous spring leaves and the overwintering summer leaves, adding: “The overlooking or inappreciation of this single fact has resulted in much confusion in the classification of the species and forms.”

Wilson stated that the wild form of the species is *R. obtusum* f. *japonicum* Wilson. In his extensive description of this form, he observed: “... [it is] apparent that this plant is responsive to varying ecological conditions and that its extreme forms present a very different appearance. This is indeed true, nevertheless this form is well marked ...” Wilson listed the following synonyms of f. *japonicum*:

- R. indicum* var. *amoenum* f. *japonicum* Maximowicz (1870)
- R. kaempferi* var. *japonicum* Rehder (1907)
- R. indicum* var. *japonicum* Makino (1908)
- R. kiusianum* Makino (1914)
- R. amoenum* var. *japonicum* Bean (1914)
- R. obtusum* Miyazawa [not *R. obtusum* of Planchon] (1918)

Wilson also recognized other varieties and forms of *R. obtusum*. The extensive synonymy and the number of forms named by Wilson attest eloquently to various botanists' interpretations of the many different character states found in the plants that

were considered as members of this species.

At Edinburgh, circa 1920, Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour created a scheme of "series" to classify plants in the genus *Rhododendron*. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, plant exploration in the Orient had increased rapidly, and the number of new species to be classified virtually exploded. Using readily distinguished morphological characters as criteria, Balfour divided the genus into series and subseries. The large number of evergreen azalea species from the Orient became Series Azalea, Subseries Obtusum in the Balfourian system. Useful in its day, this system has been supplanted by one developed in recent decades from proposals presented by German botanist Sleumer in 1949. (The present arrangement of subgenera in *Rhododendron* is shown in Voss, 1998, pp. 28-29.)

Modern Treatments

The complicated nature of the group of plants that was traditionally identified as *R. obtusum* is implicit in the treatment found in the *Rhododendron Handbook 1980* (Leslie, 1980). This source viewed *R. obtusum* as "one of the many intermediate forms between *R. kaempferi* and *R. kiusianum* and as such should be known as *R. 'Obtusum'*." As noted above, current nomenclatural practice applicable to cultivated plants would modify this to *R. Obtusum Group*.



Rhododendron kiusianum Makino 'Amoenum', earlier considered by plant explorer E. H. Wilson to be a form of *R. Obtusum*.

Galle (1987) presented the classification of evergreen azaleas in terms of the old Balfourian Subseries Obtusum and Tashiroi. Because Subseries Tashiroi comprises a single species, all other evergreen azaleas in this scheme fall into Subseries Obtusum. Galle designated a cultivar *R. 'Obtusum'*, to be considered "as a hybrid within the orbits of *R. satense* [sic], *R. kiusianum*, and *R. kaempferi*." He also referred to the garden origin of plants in this group.

The Edinburgh botanical revision of *Rhododendron* subgenus *Tsutsusi* (Chamberlain & Rae, 1990) does not recognize *R. obtusum* as a good species, listing it in a section headed "Doubtful or Incompletely Known Taxa." Several synonyms are cited for the species:

- A. obtusa* Lindley (1846)
- R. indicum* var. *obtusum* (Lindley) Maximowicz (1870)
- A. amoena* Lindley (1852)
- R. amoenum* (Lindley) Planchon (1854)
- R. indicum* var. *amoenum* (Lindley) Maximowicz (1870)
- R. obtusum* f. *amoenum* (Lindley) Wilson (1921)
- R. thunbergii* Planchon (1854) [nomen nudum—without description]
- R. macrostemon* Maximowicz (1870)

Chamberlain and Rae attribute the various plants included by earlier authors in *R. obtusum* to "cultivated selections of *R. kaempferi*, of *R. kiusianum* or of hybrids between these two species." They recommend treating *R. obtusum* "as a group of cultivars, some of which may have a complex parentage." Under provisions of the Cultivated Plant Code, these constitute the *R. Obtusum Group*; *R. obtusum* as an accepted species is gone.



Properly named, this is *R. (Obtusum Group) 'Georg Arends'*, seen in the Van Gelderen garden.

The revision cites *R. obtusum* var. *japonicum* (Maximowicz) Kitamura as one of the synonyms of *R. kiusianum* Makino var. *kiusianum*. It designates a new combination at changed rank in *R. kiusianum*: *R. kiusianum* var. *sataense* (Nakai) Chamberlain & Rae (formerly *R. sataense* Nakai). The authors consider that var. *sataense* may be a hybrid of *R. kiusianum* var. *kiusianum* and *R. kaempferi*. An additional change in the revision is reversion of *R. obtusum* var. *tosaense* (Makino) Kitamura to *R. tosaense* Makino.

Davidian (1995) remains an adherent of the old Balfourian series and subseries, placing 'Obtusum' in the Series Azalea, Subseries Obtusum. He states that 'Obtusum' is now regarded as hybrid, "derived partly or mainly from *R. kiusianum*, or from natural hybrids between *R. kiusianum* and *R. kaempferi*."

The authoritative list of *Rhododendron* taxa published by the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (Chamberlain, 1996) does not contain a species entry for *R. obtusum*. In listing the *Rhododendron* equivalents of older names published as genus *Azalea*, however, this source shows *A. obtusa* Lindley as *R. obtusum* grex. While this shows clear intent to consider these plants as members of a "group," the *International Code of Nomenclature for Cultivated Plants - 1995* (ICNCP) provides that the term "grex" may

be used only with orchids.

The latest summary of the nomenclatural treatment of *R. obtusum* is the new *Rhododendron Handbook 1998* (Argent, 1997). In the following list of synonyms and accepted names from this source, those following the “=” sign and shown here in boldface type are the accepted names:

- R. obtusum* (Lindl.) Planch. forma *amoenum* (Lindl.) E.H. Wilson = ***R. kiusianum* Makino ‘Amoenum’**
- R. obtusum* (Lindl.) Planch. var. *japonicum* (Maxim.) Kitam. = ***R. kiusianum* Makino var. *kiusianum***
- R. obtusum* (Lindl.) Planch. var. *macrogemmum* (Nakai) Kitam. = ***R. kaempferi* Planch.**
- R. obtusum* (Lindl.) Planch. var. *mikawanum* (Makino) T. Yamaz. = × ***transiens* Nakai**
- R. obtusum* (Lindl.) Planch. var. *saikaiense* T. Yamaz. = ***R. kaempferi* Planch. var. *saikaiense* (T. Yamaz.) T. Yamaz.**
- R. obtusum* (Lindl.) Planch. var. *tosaense* (Makino) Kitam. = ***R. tosaense* Makino**
- R. obtusum* (Lindl.) Planch. var. *tubiflorum* (Komatsu) T. Yamaz. = ***R. kaempferi* Planch. var. *tubiflorum* Komatsu**

In the descriptive entry for *R. obtusum* (not shown as an accepted species), the *Rhododendron Handbook 1998* states that:

. . . the many of the forms and varieties described under that name are cultivated selections of *R. kiusianum*, or hybrids between it and *R. kaempferi* (see note under former species).

The entry for *R. kiusianum* var. *sataense* (Nakai) D.F. Chamb. states: . . . Var. *sataense* is intermediate between var. *kiusianum* and *R. kaempferi* and may have arisen as a hybrid. Hybrids with this parentage occurs [sic] in the wild and

selected forms have almost certainly been cultivated for several hundred years, giving rise to at least some of the cultivars described under *R. obtusum* and also those known as the ‘Kurume’ azaleas . . . *R. stenopetalum* (Hogg) Mabb. [syn. *R. macrosepalum* Maxim., ed.] and *R. ripense* Makino are also involved as parents in some of these cultivars.

The Bottom Line

Most growers, nurserymen, and even botanical gardens do not have



R. kiusianum Makino var. *kiusianum* ‘Hanejiro’.

the specialized expertise and resources to sort out which of the plants that came to them as *R. obtusum* belong to one or another of the possible botanical taxa shown above. If a plant can be firmly identified as *R. kiusianum*, for example, it should be so re-labeled. But many plants will not be clearly attributable to one or another of the taxa mentioned. When plantsmen are “unable to unscramble the egg,” the designation “*R. Obtusum* Group” should be used pending definitive identification.

A group name is to be styled in Roman type with initial capital letters. Thus a plant formerly known as *R. obtusum* or *R. ‘Obtusum’* that cannot be identified as belonging to a currently accepted botanical taxon (for example, *R. kaempferi* or *R. kiusianum*) should now be referred to simply as

a member of ***R. Obtusum* Group**. If a plant formerly attributed to *R. obtusum* is a named cultivar that cannot be assigned to an accepted species, the group name is placed in parentheses; for example, ***R. (Obtusum Group) ‘Georg Arends’*** or ***R. ‘Georg Arends’ (Obtusum Group)***.

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Donald H. Voss is an economist by training, and an active gardener with a scholarly interest in azaleas and rhododendrons. He is an expert on the azaleas of Robert Gartrell (Robin Hill hybrids) and is a former chairman of the Society's Board of Directors and former keeper of the Society's database. Don is currently volunteering at the herbarium of the U.S. National Arboretum.

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