

Remembering Bill Wilgenhof (1921 – 2019)



Ken MacAulay, Liverpool, NS.

I joined the ARHS in the mid '90s.

My first visit to The Willow Garden in Maryvale, near Antigonish, was for an annual garden tour and pot luck, at which Bill told his visitors that he needed some more space for planting and that they could have any of his rhododendrons growing on a certain plot behind his shed.

In the ensuing enthusiasm, members were digging up plants energetically, and the result was labels lost or trampled. Consequently, many of the plants which came home with me had questionable labels or no labels. Many of these plants went on to establish

a sort of hedge, now around 8-foot high, along part of my property.

Most appear to have *R. fortuneii* as one parent.

Bill invited me to visit several times after that pot luck.

As I had a small truck at the time, he seemed determined that it never come back empty to the “banana belt”, here in the Liverpool region. Bill was a prodigious seed grower and I was always amazed to see his basement, crammed with a variety of seedlings, not just rhododendrons and azaleas, under batteries of lights. He was always generously insisting that I try this or that. Of course, no visit was complete without a sampling of Bill’s wines, usually accompanied by a story or two.

I don’t have many of Bill’s “named” hybrids, but many of his seedlings are growing in my yard, which has become a bit of a jungle in recent years. (I’m told I created a monster!) Bill’s many creations have found homes in countless Nova Scotia gardens, and I’m sure his abilities and generosity will be long remembered.

Sheila Stevenson, long-time ARHS director. Fergusons Cove, NS

It was long ago, but I remember the sense of relief at the time when Sharon and Bill Wilgenhof took on our Seed Exchange. I had no idea: who were these people living near Antigonish and willing to do so much work to promote propagation by seed?

I remember the ‘dig-in, dig-out’ pot luck hosted by Sharon and Bill that Ken Macauley writes about, when quite a crowd saw, for the first time, The Willow Garden and Bill in his element. Then we were able to appreciate that seeds were clearly the thing for Bill. It was clear as well that

Sharon was not going to discourage his passion.

The blurb about their presentation, “**Growing Rhododendrons from Seed**”, for the November 2004 ARHS meeting, says: *Bill and Sharon’s garden near Antigonish, ‘The Willow Garden’, is filled with rhodos in all stages of growth. They have been very generous, giving many seedlings to members.*

The blurb for their March 5, 2012 presentation eight years later, “**Yes, you can grow that from seed**”, goes into more detail: *They (Bill and Sharon) will show us some of the plant forms they’ve grown from seed over the years. The wide assortment has a strong lean towards Rhododendrons and Azaleas, but will include many trees, shrubs, and perennials... ARHS members Sharon and Bill are long-time ‘seedaholics’...*

Bill was one of those seed people, enchanted by the magic of seeds transformed into plants, who loved to share the enchantment. My co-gardener, Stephen Archibald, and I cherish the two Wilgenhof-grown ARS-seed-exchange rhododendrons we brought back to Rockburn from that pot luck as much for their association with joy and friendship as for the pleasures of the plants themselves.

Search the ARHS website for “Bill Wilgenhof” or “The Willow Garden” to see how often those names come up: <http://atlanticrhodo.org/?s=bill+wilgenhof> and <http://atlanticrhodo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Oct04ars.pdf>

Jamie Ellison

I’m sitting in my basement sowing copious amounts of rhododendron seed and reflecting on why I get such enjoyment from such a tedious task. One of the last packets on my table is an azalea mix donated by Bill Wilgenhof in 2019. I started to think about how many packets of seed Bill has donated and sowed over the years. The results of his efforts are evident throughout Atlantic Canada and beyond. In my own garden I have a beautiful *R. calophytum* that came from him, and several other plants he’s given me over the years. I am sure this has already been said, but his generous spirit will live on in his plants and in people’s gardens, for many years to come. I recall my first visit to The Willow Garden during peak Rhododendron bloom a few years back. Tim Amos and I were on our way back from a conference. Bill always had time for visitors and treated both novices and experienced gardeners in a respectful way. Both Tim and I were speechless when we saw what was growing in this challenging climate. I admired the endless rows of *Cornus kousa* and tree peony seedlings arranged

in a very orderly and considered manner. We also were in awe as we watched him whizzing around on his tractor and generously digging up clumps of *Clematis recta* for us, while talking about his methods for successful propagation from seed. As we came around a corner, we were both taken by one Rhododendron that stood out from the group. The truss was large, and each flower had a freckled blotch. Bill told us it was called *Rhododendron* 'Sproeten'. We both thought it an unusual name until he told us 'Sproeten' means "freckles" in Dutch. A perfect name for such a lovely plant. The remainder of our trip back home we talked about Bill, his youthful energy, and the fantastic setting he and Sharon had created.

Thank you Bill, you were an inspiration to me, and to many of us. ☺

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