

2012 July Plant of the Month



Rhododendron maximum L.

Great Laurel, Rosebay

The hot and steamy days of summer are here and one plant that blooms in this oppressive heat and humidity is the rosebay or great laurel, *Rhododendron maximum*. Rosebay is our region's native evergreen rhodo. It is also the last of this group, the old subgenus *Eurhododenron*, to flower. Most of our regions evergreen rhododendrons are non-native ornamentals that produce somewhat gaudy purple, pink and yellow blooms in late April and early May. In contrast, this native is a late bloomer, producing the pale pink to rose-colored tubular flowers in the heat of late June and early July.

Rosebay is a large shrub or a scraggly tree. The plant commonly reaches heights of 10 meters with large broad evergreen leaves as long as 25 centimeters. It forms dense thickets that are nearly impassable by all but the hardy. Clusters of the former year's seed capsules often hang on the terminus of non-flower branches. Their dark cinnamon brown colors are a stark contrast to the forest-green leaves arrayed within whorls at the branch tips.

Most of our followers would know this shrub from our Kittatinny Mountains or richer soils of the Piedmont. There, it forms dense thickets on the north side of hills and steep slopes where it enjoys the shade and cooling affects of the north facing slope. Yet, this plant also extends south into the Coastal Plain. The distribution follows the Delaware River's steep shorelines south into the vicinity of Kinkora, Florence Township Burlington County as well as few scattered out liner populations in Sicklerville/Albion area of Winslow Township, Camden County and in the vicinity of the broad lowlands near Atsion, Burlington County. Botanists surveying the ravines of the Big Timber, Mantua, Raccoon and Oldmans Creeks should be on the lookout for additional small colonies where similar dark and moist habitats persist.