

Winter is a pretty brief affair in the far south west of Cornwall however and in reality our mild climate means that there is very little to separate the end of autumn and the beginning of spring. The close of this flowering season is already overlapping with the start of the next and the first of our *Camellia sasanqua* blooms are now emerging. Before we know it the magnolias and rhododendrons will be upon us and the whole cycle will start again!

Ned Lomax

A couple of variations of *Rhododendron williamsianum*

Unlike many species, *Rhododendron williamsianum* does not vary significantly in any of its characteristics over its range in the wild. However, a garden environment where, for instance, it is growing in a dry, hungry situation, can produce leaves much reduced in size. Crowding by other shrubs can push its height to 2m or more. Typically the species makes a small, compact shrub about 1m in height by 1m across with oval to rounded bright green leaves up to 4cm, cordate at the base. The 2-4 flowers of the inflorescence are most conspicuously rose-pink bells, 3-5cm across.

New shoots tend to start to emerge prior to the flower buds opening. The leaves they bear are dark chocolate in colour at first, transforming the overall aspect of the shrub for a few weeks, providing an additional, pleasing feature until they turn green. These young shoots are susceptible to frost and I have known them damaged through to late-May. However, they very quickly push out new growth but such later growth is unlikely to produce flower buds for the following year.



Over the years I have come across two variations from the type; the first being in habit of growth. This, which I call the 'prostrate' form, (*left*) came to me from an elderly couple in Scotland nearly fifty years ago. They had been given their plant by Dr. Davidian, from Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. The cuttings they gave me struck readily, a fortunate characteristic of *R. williamsianum* of which I have made use over the years to spread the plant around.

The one planted in my own garden drapes itself over a bank covering a 2m diameter circle but only achieving 50cm in height. Interestingly, Kingdon Ward in *Rhododendrons for Everyone* published in 1926 states about *R. williamsianum*: 'In this country it forms a low, sprawling, intricately-branched under-shrub, the stems rising a foot above the ground. To all intents and purposes the plant is as flat as a pancake so that it is perfectly suited both in size and shape to the rock garden'. Perhaps this low-growing form was one of the earliest introductions.

The other form came as *R. williamsianum* 'Exbury White' (*below*) - I believe I obtained it from Exbury. As the flower buds open one feels that maybe the people at Exbury got this wrong as they are quite pink. But once fully expanded they do become white and there are always plenty of them. In all other respects this is a typical *R. williamsianum*.

Rhododendron williamsianum is an undemanding plant to grow, having a useful attribute for a rhododendron in that it can be grown successfully in soils of up to pH8, a tolerance of lime that it passes on to its hybrids.

Ernest H. Wilson, who discovered and introduced the species from western China in 1908, named his find after J.C. Williams of Caerhays, Cornwall, after being very impressed with the pioneering work Williams was doing with Chinese species in British gardens.



Barry Starling