

Extra Plant of the Week

Deciduous Azaleas

This group of **Rhododendrons** is also referred to as ‘**Mollis Azaleas**’, possibly a corruption of *R. molle*, a species from China which has been used as a hybrid parent of the many forms in cultivation. As a group



Rhododendron luteum

these **deciduous Rhododendron** species are exclusively Northern Hemisphere. Their range is from **Western USA (*R. occidentale*)** to **Japan (*R. japonicum*)** via **Europe (*R. luteum*)**. Hybridisation was developed in the **Netherlands** at the beginning of the 20th century and flourished further in **England**. The **Knaphill** and **Exbury** strains are particularly noteworthy, the latter along with hundreds of other Rhododendron hybrids being the playthings of **Lord Rothschild** (and his gardeners!) on his 260 acre (~100 hectare) estate. The deciduous azaleas are very frost hardy but do not thrive in warmer frost free areas. They are readily grown from seed and almost all the cultivars can be interbred.



Rhododendron occidentale

In an effort to produce a **Mollis** azalea suitable for Sydney gardens, I made more than 60 Mollis crosses between 1975 and 1984. The project was abandoned when I found that **Dr Peter Valder** had made not 60 but hundreds of crosses using the same range of parents, with the same objectives but without success.

The extra plant of the week is one of the survivors of my experiments – its parents are ‘**Yamina Fireglow**’ and ‘**Gibraltar**’ and it has been a feature of the Macquarie Biology Garden for more than 20 years.

R. luteum the European deciduous azalea is notable for producing poisonous pollen which can contaminate honey as noted by the ancient Greeks. *R. luteum* is also another feral Rhododendron in the British Isles although not on the scale of *R. ponticum*, as it is confined to moister situations rather than open pastures.

Rhododendron luteum: commons.wikimedia.org

Rhododendron occidentale: tjhsst.edu

Rhododendron ‘Gibraltar’: rhododendron.org

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Rhododendron ‘Gibraltar’