

## Plant of the Week

# *Rhododendron* cv. *Elegans*



The tall pink *Rhododendron* in the Biology courtyard is a selected form of *Rhododendron catawbiense* from North America (See map<sup>1</sup> - red arrow). It is also sometimes described as **Roseum Elegans**. Our specimen was planted when the beds were laid out in 1978. **Elegans** is extremely hardy and is the large flowered **Rhododendron** most often seen in Sydney suburban gardens. Its popularity comes from its ability to set flowers without exposure to low temperatures and its resistance to root fungi.

Rhododendrons are predominantly a Northern Hemisphere group with species occurring from North America to Eastern China. The tropical **Vireya** subgroup (~300 species) occurs in islands of the Malay Archipelago (blue arrow) and far south as Australia.

The showy flowers of Rhododendrons have made them favourites of gardeners throughout the world. Hybridisation is easy within many subgroups as shown by the registration of thousands of hybrid cultivars with the International Rhododendron Register of the Royal Horticultural Society. The love of Rhododendrons by the gardeners of England, Scotland and Ireland has led to a serious environmental problem. Escaped *Rhododendron ponticum* forms large thickets on grazing land and control is extremely difficult and expensive as physical removal leaves root and stem fragments which readily regrow.

Most gardeners will tell you that they can distinguish **Rhododendrons** from **Azaleas!** Botanists will tell you that **all Azaleas belong to the genus Rhododendron** and furthermore the azaleas belong to more than one taxonomic *Rhododendron* subgroup.

The genus **Rhododendron** is within the **Ericaceae** which also includes familiar plants of genera such as *Erica*, *Epacris*, *Pieris* and *Vaccinium* (eg blueberries). Taxonomically *Rhododendron* is complex – traditional taxonomy based on floral and vegetative characters recognised 9 subgenera but molecular biology shows some of these to be polyphyletic consequently considerable realignment is proposed<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, the genera *Ledum* and *Menziesia* have been relocated to *Rhododendron*. I am glad I am a gardener not a taxonomist.

1) Milne, R.I. et al. (2004) Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution 33: 389-401

2.) Goetsch, L. et al. (2005) Systematic Botany 30:616-626

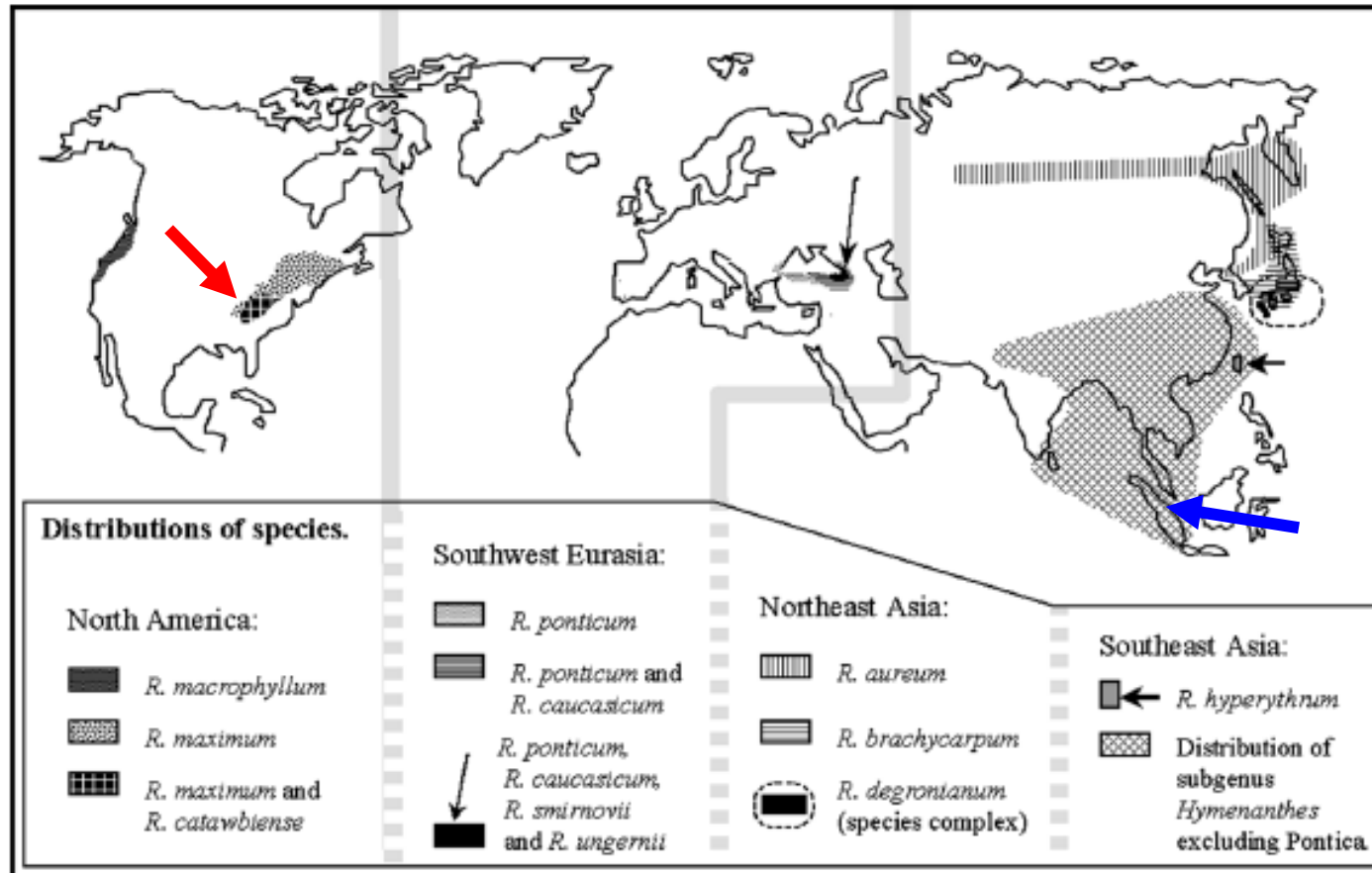
*Rhododendron* cv. *Elegans* image: Irina Pollard

**Roger Hiller, Department of Biological Sciences, 27.ix.2010.**

## Plant of the Week

# *Rhododendron cv. Elegans*

Roger Hiller,  
Department of  
Biological  
Sciences,  
27.ix.2010



1. Global distribution of *Rhododendron* subsection *Pontica*, and of the remaining 23 subsections that with it comprise subgenus *Hymenanthus*.