

The Bushkill Hidden Rhododendron Sanctuary
By
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In Bath, “you can’t get there from here,” Pennsylvania, I am visiting my Cousin Judith, whose back nine consists of pristine woods, bordered by the Bushkill Creek. The deer, which live here, have mapped the land and created pathways for us humans to enjoy. Today, on my walk, I noticed a huge wall of rhododendron along the far bank of the Bushkill, close to two hundred feet wide and thirty feet high. Behind this grove of bright, deep green, healthy bushes is a steep embankment ninety feet high. No paths, no access, nothing that could explain what the rhododendrons were doing there. The wood sprites, sensing my silent question, whispered the answer into the breeze. This is what I heard.

In 1727, Samuel J. Van Nord, a widower, married the widow Ursula Van Stemple. Ursula’s family offered a large dowry as they needed her room for their growing brood. Truth was, while they could have worked it out, she was driving them crazy. Ursula, a prolific reader, never stopped talking. Samuel didn’t care because he needed the money for hundred acres farm northwest of Philadelphia, in the land of the Pennsylvania Dutch. If it didn’t have to do with planting seeds, harvesting crops or running the farm, he wasn’t interested. The marriage was not ideal.

Although a fair man, Samuel took care to divide the farm’s everyday duties so she could partner in their life together, he was a dower man of few words. Consequently, through no fault of his own, he forgot many of those he did not use. For example, he called his wife Woman, as in “Woman, cook-eth dinner,” or Thee, as in “Did Thee cook-eth dinner” or simply nothing, as in “Dinner?” Over time, he forgot her name too. Ursula, unperturbed by her new circumstances, learned patience and took refuge in her books, literary guild meetings, quilting bees and church.

One spring morning, on the third of May, 1728, Ursula noted in her journal that she and Samuel had one of their rare conversations.

“Thee, what is-eth that?” Samuel asked at breakfast, his eyes avoiding hers.

“What is-eth what?” Ursula asked.

“On the window uh, uh, umm ...,” Samuel said, pointing with his fork while looking down at his plate.

“Doth thou mean-eth the sill? The window sill?” Ursula asked.

“What is-eth it, Woman?” he said, wanting answers not questions.

“We have-eth received-eth a gift.”

“Of what?”

“A plant.”

“What kind?”

“It is-eth a baby Rhododendron.”

“Doth thee eat-eth it?” he said, unsure of why a plant would be inside.

“No.”

“Is-eth it animal fodder?”

“No.”

“Doth it make-eth soap?”

“No.”

“Kill-eth bugs?”

“No.”

“Shine-eth leather?”

“No.”

“Seal-eth wood?”

“No.”

“Make-eth furniture?”

“No.”

“What then?” Samuel said.

“It grow-eth in shade,” Ursula said. “It hath ornamental qualities and it stay-eth green all year. It love-eth an acid soil. It flower-eth in the spring. Trim-eth it after blossoms fade-eth to stop-eth it from getting-eth leggy. It will get-eth tall and wide and it will be-eth beautiful.”

“A good-for-nothing plant.”

“It pleasure-eth the soul.”

“Not now,” he said, giving a nod toward the window. “The sun rise-eth.”

“The plant, Samuel. The plant pleasure-eth the soul.”

“Dump-eth the umm, uhh...,” he said.

“Rhododendron.”

”Weed.”

“Gift.”

“Toss-eth it,” Samuel said and left for the barn, closing the door behind him.

And that was-eth that.

Ursula took the young plant to the back of the house, to the edge of the cliff and tossed it into the abyss. It fell short of the creek, its root ball catching in the tangle of tree roots and mud, where the overhead canopy screened out the sun. Alone, unfertilized, untrimmed and uncared for, the little Rhododendron managed to thrive. Over time, it became full grown -- the forbearer, and current member, of The Bushkill Hidden Rhododendron Sanctuary.