

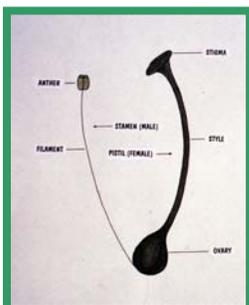
The ABC s of Hybridizing Rhododendrons

By

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The equipment needed to start hybridizing is simple. The first on the list is a pair of medium sized tweezers, which will be used to collect pollen. The second is a supply of empty gel caps to store the pollen. The third is a block of wood with holes drilled partially through it to dry the pollen. The fourth is material for labeling the cross.



Before going through the how to process, I am going to give you a crash course on flower anatomy so that you will understand the terms as I use them. Inside the petals or corolla are the reproductive parts of the flower. The female parts are called the pistil. It consists of the ovary, which will contain the seeds, the style or center tube and the stigma located on the upper end. The male part, or the stamen, holds the filament and the two tubes on the end are called the anther. The anther contains the pollen.



The first step in the process is to collect the pollen. This is accomplished by pulling the pollen laden anthers off of the filament. You can now rub the ends of the anther against the ripe stigma of another flower or in most cases, put the anthers into a gel cap to store the pollen for later use.



From an active hybridizers view, saving pollen is very important. If you want to cross an early blooming plant with a late blooming one, the pollen must be harvested when the early bloomer is in flower and then saved until the later bloomer opens. Also, if you want to cross a late bloomer to an early bloomer, you must harvest the pollen from the late bloomer and freeze it for use the following year.

After the pollen is taken from the flower and put into the gel cap, the open cap containing the pollen is stored in the refrigerator for three days so that it can dry out. Most household refrigerators dehumidify, which is perfect for this situation.



The top is now put on the cap, it is labeled and then put into the freezer for storage. When needed, it is taken out and used and then promptly returned to the freezer. It is believed that pollen can be saved up to ten years in this manner.



This photo shows a truss with flower buds that are perfect for hybridizing. The flower that is open must be discarded because of the chance that that it might have been pollinated by insects.



You must now decide how many flowers that you want to pollinate. The seed yield from each flower could be anywhere from two to two hundred. With this in mind, it is best to do a few flowers. If you feel generous and would like to share some seed with the seed exchange, you can do the whole truss. Remove the corolla and stamens carefully so as to not break the flower stem or accidentally self pollinate the stigma.



All of the corolla must be removed because the flower color is what draws the bees. After the flowers are cleaned, the pollen is removed from the gel cap with a tooth pick and placed onto the stigma. When the stigma is ripe it will have a gooey substance on the end. If it is not sticky, go ahead and pollinate it anyway, but check it the following day and each subsequent day until it does become sticky, and then repeat the pollination. Charmont is a plant that comes to mind that takes a few days to ripen after the flower buds are removed.



There are as many ways to label the cross as there are hybridizers. The important thing is to be sure that you label. It is best to use something visible because the new growth can easily cover the cross, so four to five months down the line when the seeds ripen, you might forget where to look for them.



In this picture we see the ripe seed pods ready to harvest. This can be done from about mid September on. It is alright to pick the pods while they are still green. If you wait until October, the pods may turn brown and open up. If this happens, the seeds could fall to the ground and be lost or once the pod opens there it an insect that loves to eat rhododendron seeds. He doesn't bore into the pods but once they are open, it won't take him long to find them.



After the pods are removed from the plant, put them into an envelope and set them in a warm dry place for a few weeks to dry. When they have dried, they are ready to sow. See "The ABCs of Growing Rhododendron Seeds" for easy instructions on how to grow the seeds.