

University of Connecticut Rhododendron Introductions®

Mark H. Brand

Department of Plant Science, U-4067, University of Connecticut, 1376 Storrs Rd., Storrs, CT 06269-4067 U.S.A

Anyone who is a University of Connecticut basketball fan has been enjoying the last decade of hoops in Connecticut. In 1999, we celebrated the men's basketball conquest over the Duke Blue Devils in the NCAA championship. In 1995 and 2000, we cheered on the women's team as they put away the Tennessee Lady Vols to bring home their own championships. To celebrate all of this basketball success, the University of Connecticut has named six new and improved rhododendron hybrids with basketball-related names and dubbed them the "Raise the Roof" series. For those of you who may not be rabid basketball fans, "raising the roof" is an arm gesture basketball players use to get the crowd to cheer loud enough to "raise the roof" off the arena. The "Raise the Roof" cultivars are 'Buzzer Beater', 'Hoopla', 'Huskymania', 'March Madness', 'Slam Dunk' and 'Tip Off'.

The rhododendron breeding program at the University of Connecticut was started in 1960 by Gustav A. L. Mehlquist. Unfortunately, Dr. Mehlquist passed away last August after a long and distinguished career in plant breeding. The goal of the UConn rhododendron breeding program was to develop cold-hardy, pest-resistant rhododendron in new flower colors and plant forms; in other words, to expand the palette of rhododendrons that are rough enough to handle the harsh winters of southern New England. Hundreds of crosses were made and tens of thousands of seedlings were grown and evaluated for up to 40 years. The "Raise the Roof" rhododendrons are some of the best to come out of all of these crosses.

'Buzzer Beater' was given its name because it was the last one to be included in the group. Therefore, it just beat the buzzer. This cultivar resulted from a 1969 cross between a very cold-hardy white-flowered rhododendron and an insufficiently hardy plant that had straw-colored flowers. 'Buzzer Beater' combines the cold hardiness of one parent with the yellow flower color of the other parent. Cold-hardy, yellow-flowered rhododendrons are rare, so 'Buzzer Beater' will be a welcome addition to New England gardens. It can handle -15°F and come through the winter fine. Although yellow, 'Buzzer Beater' is light yellow, so do not expect canary-yellow flower color.

Another rare flower type in cold-hardy rhododendrons is bicolor flowers. 'Hoopla' produces bicolor flowers with pink petal lobes and a yellow throat. It is a relatively early bloomer, typically blooming in the second week of May in Storrs, Connecticut. 'Hoopla' was created in 1965 from a cold-hardy, white-flowered plant and an insufficiently hardy pink and yellow-flowered plant. 'Hoopla' can take -25°F during the winter and show no ill effects.

'Huskymania' is the plant for you if you want to show off your UConn blue and white colors. Although 'Huskymania' flowers are not true blue, they are about as blue as you can find on a large-leaf rhododendron. I would describe it as bluish-purple. 'Huskymania' is an easy plant to grow in the landscape and is not phased by Connecticut winters. Flowering time for 'Huskymania' is toward the end of the large-leaf rhododendron bloom season, usually in early June.

'Slam Dunk' looks like it may be the first of the "Raise the Roof" series to hit garden centers in large numbers. It has proven to be very easy to tissue culture and grow in containers using standard nursery production techniques. 'Slam Dunk' was created by crossing 'Sefton', an old cultivar with beautiful burgundy flowers and a poor sprawling growth habit, with a white-flowered, compact plant. The result was a more compact plant with the same burgundy flowers of 'Sefton'. 'Slam Dunk' also blooms relatively late in the season, extending the period when you can have color in your landscape from rhododendrons.

If you really want to stretch the blooming season of the large-leaf rhododendrons in your yard, you need a plant of 'March Madness' and 'Tip Off'. Both of these cultivars were bred to be early bloomers. They bloom 3 weeks, or more, ahead of the majority of large leaf rhododendrons. Most years they bloom during the first week of April in Storrs. 'March Madness' has lavender-rose flowers and 'Tip Off' has large white flowers with a striking burgundy blotch or flare in the throat. Both cultivars have large, long, tropical-looking leaves and develop dense mushroom-shaped canopies. They ultimately get quite large and develop "beefy" main trunks. If you want a different look to the rhododendron in your garden, you will not be disappointed by either of these unusual plants.

The "Raise the Roof" rhododendrons were only released in 1999, so it may be a few years before they become plentiful in the marketplace. Keep asking your local garden center to get some "Raise the Roof" rhododendrons. More requests for the plants will demonstrate a demand for them. Without a demonstrated demand for a plant, nursery growers can be slow to adopt new cultivars. Plant "Raise the Roof" rhododendrons to show your support for the UConn Huskies and get some pretty nice landscape plants at the same time!