

Years ago our wedding was conducted at a downtown church and afterwards everyone drove to my parent's house for an outdoor garden reception. Earlier that day I cut boulder sized purple rhododendron boughs from the garden for decoration in the church and those plants stood in silent great masses next to the alter and watched us take our vows. Some of the stems even looked downward as if in prayer and contemplation during the ceremony.

Decades later the man I married is living with me in the same house that I grew up in and that magnificent mass of purple rhododendron still lives, sort of, in the southwest corner of the yard. The plant seems ancient with some trunks and branches twisted and gnarled beneath the weight of the overhead branches. But the past few years gave the old shrub one challenge after another as bugs and heat inflicted stress upon it and then the man and I came along and added to the problem. A decision was made to heavily prune the plant thinking that more air flow would help it breathe and growth would return to a vigorous nature. The decision to prune was wrong and now it looks like we will lose this beautiful rhododendron. That pruning event consisted of three days with shears, saws, clippers and ladders and conversations about which branch looked closer to death than the next one. The anticipated loss of the purple rhododendron is especially sad knowing that it came to our wedding.

But it is just a plant, right?



Purple rhododendron, wedding attendee



I found a new appreciation for our garden and its leafy inhabitants when we hired a professional landscape designer to redesign our entry garden and give us her opinion

on the garden in general. “Is there anything we should be doing differently?” we asked. “Anything to avoid as we make changes to some garden beds?” The designer’s advice was great and the entry garden is a “wow” statement that we still love. During our consultation we walked through the outdoor spaces talking about the garden beds, where to transplant certain shrubs and what to add to trouble areas in the yard, hoping to ensure plant growth and vigor. With all the talk about transplanting established shrubs I said what I was thinking in the moment: “Will they do ok with a transplant? Will they survive?” I asked. This was worrisome to me. The designer, a known garden lover who spends at a minimum of three hours a day tending to her own garden responded, “well, its just a plant” (pronouncing plant as plont) meaning if it died it



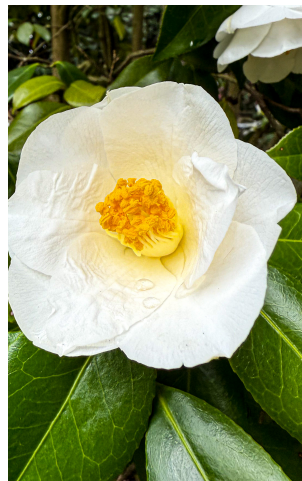
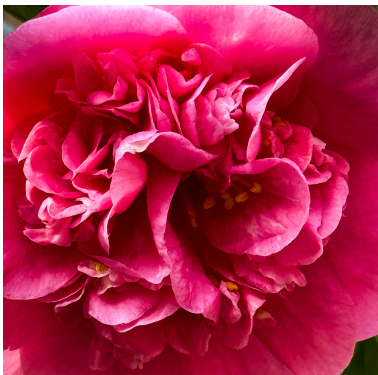
Varigated pink azalea, this is not a plont!

could be replaced. Its just a plont I thought with question. I knew I couldn’t mindfully place plants or at least certain plants in this category of “oh well, its just a plant and it can be replaced.” Logically this is true but the emotion that certain plants evoke is just too great to put them in the “its just a plont” category in my world. Most of the emotion evoking plants in our yard attended outdoor family gatherings along with us, went to the cemetery with us, sat alongside family at the table during Thanksgiving dinner. Others greeted us for years as we came and went. I found myself realizing that I would not be able to discard a plant as easily as our professional.

Since that poignant conversation regarding plonts I found myself paying attention to how I would categorize the plants around us; a plant vs. plont or those plants that I wouldn’t mind losing and on the other hand those leafy friends that would create a hole in my heart if they up and died. A short list of what I would call our emotional plants include the purple rhododendron I mentioned earlier. That rhodie came to our wedding, attended the reception and later acted as a backdrop for other family weddings. Through the years as the plant threw out branches that touched the

ground, took root and engulfed an entire section of the yard so when in bloom it was a fifteen foot tall beast that spread to become the size of a small swimming pool. When in bloom it looked like a big purple bouquet. The rhodie is not a plant.

The white and pink camellias in the back yard were my Mother's favorite and now they are my favorite too. For years that stand of camellias was topped into a hedge form but now we let the plants grow as they desire. Approaching twelve feet tall the old shrubs tower along the north side of the yard. Last year in particular those camellias really went to town and the branches nearly bent in half with the weight of blossoms as if taking a bow after a performance in a theater. The camellias serve as a year round privacy screen when not in blossom. The camellias are not plants.



The daphne that lines the entry pathway is also distressed and a few will have to be replaced. After a heat dome a few years ago the daphne on the south side of the house just hasn't been the same. Parts of the plants simply up and died and the remaining shrub consists of bare twigs with a stubble of tiny leaves here and there. But the fragrance of daphne evokes memories each and every spring. "Wow, did you smell the Daphne?", we will ask one another. It is a happy smell. The daphne is not a plant.

And along the north side of the house there are several hydrangeas that my niece gave to the family. Those plants are stunning and the blooms last an extra long time in the shade of the house. One of the hydrangeas sits in just the right soil pH rendering the blossoms nearly indigo blue. When that hydrangea is doing its thing I always make sure to have a few cuttings in vases in the house when someone comes by to visit. The blossoms always bring effusive praise. The hydrangea is not a plant.



Inspired by my inner conversation regarding plant vs. plant I put pen to paper and wrote some words about gardening, gardens, the lives of the plants in the gardens and the people who take time from their lives to make the garden a great place for plants and humans alike. I hope that you enjoy these essays and find that the plants come alive for you as they have for me.

