

LIFE LESSONS

LEARNED FROM THE LAND

Renowned plant expert Paul James now is cultivating acceptance and inner peace.

STORY BY CHRISTINA NIFONG
PHOTOS BY SANDY FERRELL

If William Shakespeare were to write Paul James's story, he might be tempted to pen a tragedy.

He'd tell the tale of a humble, Franklin County man raised on little more than apples and love, who grew up to make good, landing a job out of high school then rising through the ranks until he owned the place. James sold the business at age 42 and retired for life. Then he headed home to the land of his birth, to plant a garden.

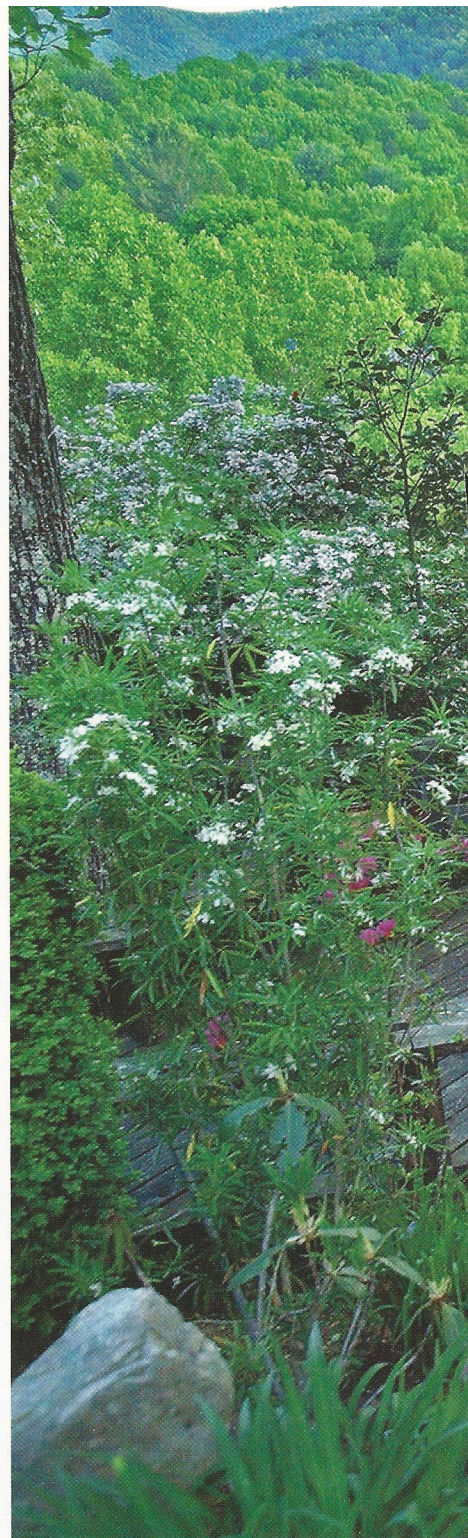
Over the course of 30 years of sun-up-to-sun-down hard labor, his garden grew to 15 acres, more than 10,000 different types of plants, thousands of rare azalea and the largest collection of Delp rhododendron in the world.

It was a marvel, attracting international experts the likes of an adviser to Queen Elizabeth. He hobnobbed with multi-millionaires and hosted groups — sometimes 500-strong — who traveled to a forgotten corner of Virginia just to see his life's work. James became a sought-after lecturer, a plant-world celebrity.

Then, just as his brilliant blossoms were garnering more notice than ever, a powerful pestilence moved in, more gradual than a devastating storm, more unstoppable than a ravaging disease. Deer began treading atop his miles of moss-covered paths. Dozens of them, day and night. They reduced decades of dedication to little more than sticks, poking up from the soft forgiving earth.

"Everything is so raggedy. It makes it hard for me to walk around here. All I see is the raggedy-ness," says James, surveying his garden on a gray day. "What do you do? What's left is so eaten up. It's just so sad."

But Shakespeare isn't writing this story. Paul James is. And he has no desire to be King Lear ranting on a rain-drenched heath. James has gained too much wisdom in his years of following his passion. He's

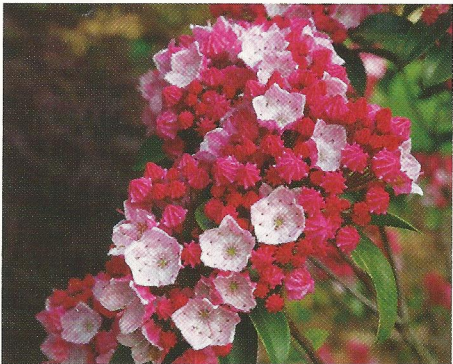


TOP: Rhododendron and various plantings surround a pair of garden benches in the garden of Paul James.

BOTTOM LEFT: Kalmia close up

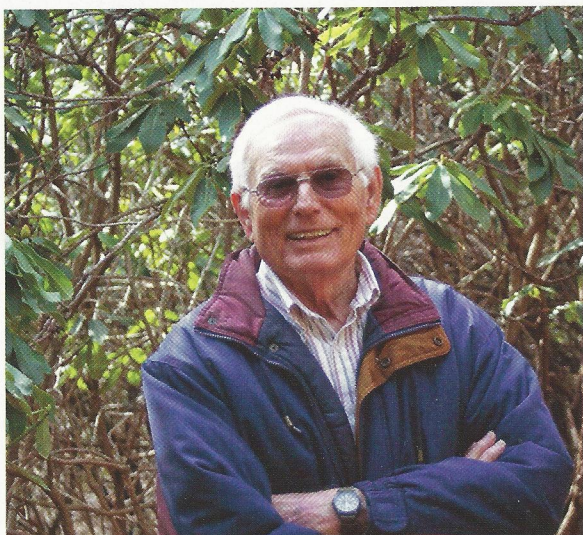
BOTTOM MIDDLE: Spot Magic (Delp Rhododendron)

BOTTOM RIGHT: Close-up of a rhododendron



TOP: Paul James credits his love of horticulture to his grandmother, who was an herb doctor and soap maker.

BOTTOM: Plant-lined paths offer stunning views of James's garden.



gathered up too much gratitude for his days as an unlikely hero.

This is the story of a man in the winter of his life, letting go of his pride and his prized possessions. James has decided to channel his frustration and disappointment and turn them into something far harder to achieve than all the awards, the press, the invitations and the admirers he has won in his 77 years.

James is vowing to accept the things he cannot change — in his garden and in his life. He is still planning to propagate — plants, yes, but also inner peace.

A WINDING PATH

James's garden — despite the flattened deer trails, the piles of scat, the gnawed branches, the absence of understory, the bark worn away by rubbing, the dozen deer themselves looking on from the distance — is still a sight to behold.

It's a magical land of rock-lined paths that twirl along a steep hillside and are dotted with modern art sculptures and potting tables and benches for enjoying the breath-taking views.

Something is in bloom in every season, from winter's Snowdrops and Hellebores, to spring's spectacular show of azaleas to summer's parade of day lilies and autumn's on-fire Japanese maples. At every turn, there is a dramatic surprise: one of Virginia's oldest oak trees, the red, peeling trunk of a rare Paperback maple, the fantastical spirals of a Himalayan conifer.

The backdrop to it all are head-high rhododendron, marching up every slope, shambling out in every direction, as far as the eye can see.

James credits his love of the botanical to his grandmother, an herb doctor and soap maker, who lived in a log cabin on the same 400 acres that's been in his family for more than 200 years. James's parents raised 11 children plus a few more they took in, growing apples and vegetables they sold from their truck at the downtown Roanoke market and beyond.

James "couldn't wait to get away from the farm," and at 17 landed a job with Roanoke Photo Finishing Co. — the first place he applied. For 19 years he rose through the ranks until he purchased a company subsidiary, Ropho Graphic, in 1974. Eight years later, with no children to feed and the support of his wife Barbara, James sold the company,



GARDEN ADVICE

Paul James's 10 easy rhododendrons and evergreen azaleas:

Rhododendrons

English Roseum, Blue Peter, Scintillation, Janet Blair, Vulcan, Catawbiense Album, David Gable, Dexter Hybrids, Parker's Pink & Taurus

Evergreen Azaleas

Delaware Valley White, Glacier, Fashion, Salmon Bells, Coral Bells, Tradition, Elsie Lee, Herbert, Hershey's Red, Sunglow

TOP: Peach Fuzz

BOTTOM LEFT: Rhododendron and boxwood line this path in James's garden.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Vibrant red rhododendron, one of James's favorites

OPPOSITE PAGE: Cahas Mountain overlooks the Franklin County property.



leaving behind the life of ringing telephone and chiming desktop computer forever.

"I've been a free man ever since," James says with a chuckle.

His first passion was a desire to discover, illuminate and preserve the rich diversity of plant life in the Southern Appalachian mountains.

But James's interests were as meandering as his garden eventually became. Just as he dug in one shrub or tree and then moved to the next, never adhering to a master plan but letting whimsy and desire dictate his design, so his dedication to particular plant types ebbed and flowed.

"All I wanted to do was to get to know the plant and the only way to get to know the plant is to grow it," he explains in his soft, Southern lilt.

The flame azalea stole his heart for a time. Azaleas led to rhododendron (they are in the same plant family), and there James found a special calling.

He connected with a North Carolina nursery owner, Bill Storms, who was working with an almost mythical figure in the realm of rhododendron, a top-notch hybridizer out of Pennsylvania named Weldon Delp.

"He was turning out new cultivars by the hundreds," James recalls. "He had more than a thousand to his credit."

James was smitten with these rhododendron, cross-bred for their showy colors and ability to thrive in the chilly, damp conditions in which both Delp and James worked. Delp and James became friends, master and student, propagator and planter. James brought home nearly every cultivar Delp created, just to see: Would it bloom? Would it thrive?

"I became his best customer. He couldn't grow them fast enough," James says.

Eventually, James's arboretum-sized garden became the official repository for Delp's rhododendron. At his garden's height, James boasted 385 of the 421 rhododendron cultivars registered by Delp, the largest collection anywhere in the world.

It was James's connection to rhododendron that raised him from a man with a large garden to a sought-after expert. He became president of the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society, led rhododendron tours of nearby natural collections in Roan Mountain State Park and Mount Rogers National Recreation Area and invited groups back to his own thousands-strong stands. In the late 1990s, James might conduct tours of his land every day of the month-long rhododendron blooming season.



"[James's garden is an] absolute symphony of color especially in late spring and early summer, that you won't see anywhere else (maybe the azalea path at Biltmore [Estate], but he's got that beat, in my opinion)," says Holly Scoggins, a horticulture professor at Virginia Tech and director of the Hahn Horticulture Garden. She has known James for more than a decade and taken scores of gardeners to visit his land.

"No one has that many mature rhododendron and azaleas altogether," Scoggins says.

James also became known for his generosity as much as for his expertise.

"I've never sold a plant and I've given away tens of thousands," he says. "My joy is growing them, and if I can please you by giving them to you to grow, well, that's wonderful."

So it went, for 10, 20, 30 years, travels and tours, growing and learning, cultivating and giving away, seeds and stalks and stems. James filled his life with leaves and roots, loam and Latin labels, making unlikely connections and often deep friendships with those as intrigued by the world of plants as he was.

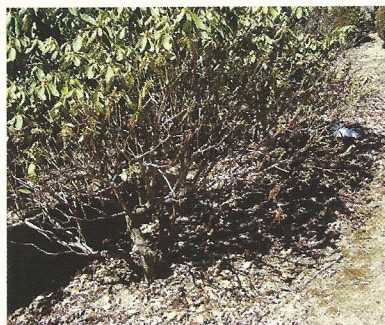
"I guess what I love more than anything else is getting to know so many amazing people," he says, perched at a kitchen table covered in photos and awards and articles lauding his work. "I walk around my garden and see plants they've given me. That's the best part of the plants, the people connected with them."

But then came the harsh winters of 2011 and 2014 — the kind with ice and heavy snow that break limbs and cause harm, especially to evergreens. At that same time the area deer population was tripling, quadrupling and in search of just the kind of environment James had created: vast, open land, filled with food and devoid of hunters. The combination created continuing, irreparable damage to James' life's

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Harsh winters and deer destruction have hit James's garden hard, but they have not killed his love of horticulture.



Deer damaged this plant in the garden.

"Damn, I hate to see that. That's a rare species." He bends down, feeling death between his fingertips. "The deer. They just tore it all to the devil."

work, the masterpiece he had dedicated almost every thought, every minute, every dollar to for the last 35 years.

"After spending every waking moment on plants and then to see it taken away" James stops and looks into the distance.

A LIFE AND A LEGACY

Sitting in his sunroom framed by stunning views of Franklin County's tallest mountain, James has the glint of a man who cannot wait to work in his garden.

But when he steps into the chilled air, his mood becomes as gray as the sky.

He walks his serpentine paths seeing only destruction the deer have wrought.

"Damn, I hate to see that. That's a rare species." He bends down, feeling death between his fingertips. "The deer. They just tore it all to the devil."

The level of devastation would be hard for anyone. But a younger man could think of creating anew with the knowledge he had gained from his first go 'round.

For James, who buried a brother a year ago, who knows he has "more years behind me than in front of me," there is no time to begin again.

"I thought I was going to start over, but that's not possible," James says.

Instead, he will trim and tidy, do his best to take what's left and showcase it as well as he can. In his silver-lining moments, he can see how thinning his collection could more dramatically feature what remains.

"I'm going to take out all the stunted plants, those damaged beyond revitalization," he says resolutely. "I'm going to focus on the special trees and highlight the plants that are beyond the reach of the deer."

That's the only choice I have."

Perhaps there is no better place than a garden to learn the hard lesson of letting go.

"So many people think that a garden is something you put in and say ... 'It's so beautiful.' But a garden is always changing," says Evelyn Elwell, friend to James and owner of Walter's Greenhouse in Hardy. "The reality is that all living things die. The garden teaches us that well."

A collection of rare plants, a composition of stunning beauty, the preservation of native and exotic species, this is what Paul James believed he would bequest this world when he left it.

But in the end, the garden may not be James's legacy. Despite his hard work, his dedication, his accolades, James may be leaving behind little more than anyone does: memories of time spent with loved ones and the collection of choices he made in the years he was given.

"Everyone writes their own story," James says. "It's our job to write a good one."

Here is Paul James's story: A man spent his days creating beauty and sharing it freely with everyone he met. In the face of disappointment and loss, this man struggled openly and honestly. He was a man who awoke every day grateful and ready to learn the lessons the land had to teach him.

Not a tragedy at all.

"It's just been a fabulous ride," James says. "I have been blessed beyond anything I could have imagined. That's all I can tell you." 🌱

Read more of what Christina Nifong writes at christinanifong.com.



Azalea (Koromo Shikibu)

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