

Rhododendron Festival Self-Guided Tour

Welcome to the historic home of Charles Owen Dexter, who spent 22 years hybridizing various plants on the property, from 1921-43. Today, Dexter is best known for his work with rhododendrons, many of which you can still see during your visit! **Look for circular numbered signs around the grounds** that correspond with the “stops” on this tour.

1

Begin your tour with an **introduction to Charles Owen Dexter**, while you stand on the **grassy hill near the front entrance**. Dexter, a 60-year-old New Bedford textile manufacturer, purchased this land, known as Shawme Farm, in 1921. We are celebrating the 100th anniversary of his purchase of the property this year! At the time, Dexter was ill and was told by his doctor he had only two years to live. He was advised to quit his job, relax, and enjoy his life. Dexter followed this advice and spent time partaking in beloved hobbies. Amazingly, he ended up defying his doctors and living another 22 years! While also an accomplished violinist, photographer and yachtsman, Dexter is best known for his work as an amateur botanist, most noted for the many new plants he created by hybridizing and propagating rhododendrons.

Some of Heritage’s most renowned rhododendrons can be seen here, lining the promenade. The bright pink blooms are Dexter’s ‘**Scintillation**,’ one of the easiest cultivars to find at nurseries today. Another, hybridized by Dexter’s successor Jack Cowles, is ‘**Cheryl’sChoice**,’ a cultivar known for its bright white blossoms and subtle honey scent.

This rhododendron was named by Heritage’s first Director of Horticulture, Heman Howard. Continue down the promenade to the McGraw Family Garden of the Senses for your next stop, to learn about Dexter’s hybridization work.

2

Two rhododendrons that perfectly exemplify Dexter’s hybridization work can be seen here, behind the sign at the **entrance to the McGraw Family Garden of the Senses: ‘Dexter’s Spice’** (white flowers) and ‘**Dexter’s Honeydew’** (pink/orange flowers). To develop his plants, Dexter collected rhododendrons from all over the world through gifts of plants from renowned collectors and horticulturists. Most rhododendrons that survive in the Cape Cod climate have much smaller flowers. Dexter hybridized these smaller, cold-hardy varieties with rhododendrons from Asia with much larger blooms. Dexter is credited with creating over 10,000 seedlings a year. His breeding goals were hardiness, clear bright colors, fragrance, and big beautiful blooms.

Today, his plants are well known for their large size and huge flowers. Both ‘Spice’ and ‘Honeydew’ have large, showy blooms and exude a light and fruity fragrance.

After exploring the Garden of the Senses, use the brick path at the bottom of the garden to access the lawn in front of the Administration Building to learn more about Charles O. Dexter.



3

While today this building houses **Heritage’s administrative offices**, the photograph on the sign here shows this building as **Dexter’s home** during his ownership of Shawme Farm. While living here, Dexter propagated hundreds of thousands of rhododendrons. Surprisingly, rhododendrons need about five years from being hybridized to grow big enough to produce blooms, which means that Dexter often had many seedlings around that were not mature enough to know if his cross-breeding was successful in achieving the traits he was seeking.

During his time here, Dexter and his wife also hosted many notable scientists, botanists, and friends on the property. As a parting gift to his visitors, Dexter often gave away trays of rhododendron seedlings as gifts. Unfortunately, Dexter didn’t keep very good records about his hybridizations, nor who he gave them to, and since he didn’t wait to see if the crosses resulted in a successful cultivar, much of his work went unrecognized. By the end of Dexter’s life in 1943, at the age of 81, he had yet not secured a good reputation as a botanist and many of his cultivars were lost.

Take the brick path back to the Garden of the Senses, turn left, and exit the garden. Walk across the main pathway towards the Flume fountain to see the foundations of Dexter’s greenhouse.

4

Look towards the **Flume Fountain** to see towering examples of various Dexter hybrids. While these gorgeous plants provide a beautiful backdrop to the dramatic waterfall from the fountain, we actually want you to see something much more hidden! Beyond the sign showing the greenhouse as it looked in Dexter's day, you will **find the foundation stones of the greenhouse, tucked under the hollies**. It was here, during the 1920s and 1930s, that Dexter propagated thousands and thousands of seedlings in his efforts to create successful cultivars like 'Scintillation.' So how did he do it?

Hybridization is a relatively simple process, with the main requirement being patience. To make a hybrid rhododendron, the pollen from the male part of the rhododendron is purposefully placed on the female pistil of a different type of rhododendron. This must be done carefully as rhododendrons are "perfect plants," meaning they have both male and female parts, and therefore can pollinate themselves. The seeds produced from a successful cross-pollination then grow into a new type of rhododendron with qualities of both parent plants. In order to know if a cross achieve the desired characteristics, it takes another 5-7 years of growth to see what blooms the plant will produce. Now that you know how Dexter hybridized his rhododendrons, the next stop will show you some examples of his successful crosses. From here, wind your way along the main pathway, through the hydrangea gardens, past the Parade Field and Special Exhibitions Gallery, to the Dexter Terrace at the entrance to the Rhododendron Garden.

5

Here at the **Dexter Terrace**, take a few minutes to read the **interpretive panels** about Charles Dexter, the Rhododendron Garden, and the famous 'Scintillation' cultivar. If you're visiting between 11 am-3 pm, you can also visit with the interpreter at the **Garden Discovery Cart** to touch these amazing plants and learn about their care. As the panel indicates, this garden is the result of years of careful research and dogged sleuthing by a dedicated group of rhododendron enthusiasts, known as the Dexter Study Group. This group evaluated and named many of Dexter's cultivars and also tracked down and returned many lost Dexter hybrids to this garden. Heritage has continued to study Dexter's work, and recent new research has turned up an additional 135 cultivars, many of which will be returning to Heritage over the next few years. A walk through this display garden is the most dramatic way to see Heritage's collection of rhododendrons, many of which are at least 40 years old. The unpaved trails through the garden lead to a natural hollow where large specimens line the walkways, enveloping visitors with the sights and scents of our hybrid rhododendrons.

While you walk here, you might notice the **names of the rhododendrons** on their plant identification labels. During his lifetime, Dexter only named eight of the hybrids he developed. Later, the study group named 150 rhododendrons and had them officially registered with the Royal Horticultural Society in Great Britain. Dexter categorized his crossbreeds by alphabet letters, A-Z, then when he ran out of letters, he started over with AA-ZZ. To this day, when a cultivar is formally named and registered, its new name still follows the nomenclature system initially established by Dexter.

Interested in naming a rhododendron?
View the [commemoratives page](#) of our website or ask the staff how you can name your own.

6

Located along the **wood-chipped trails behind the Arbor Bowl**, the **Cowles Woods Walk** is home to a collection of unique rhododendron cultivars exhibiting the work of **Jack Cowles**. Cowles lived at Heritage, then known as the Dexter Estate, from 1957-67. He was the horticulturist for then property owner, Stanley Burns. Cowles' two main goals were to propagate, or make more of, the very finicky Dexter rhododendrons and to develop and build a hybridizing program based on the Dexter material. Cowles' hybridizing goals included smaller leaves and smaller plants, as well as continuation of the clear colors that Dexter created. He was also responsible for the selection and naming of several noteworthy Dexter cultivars. **Dexter's 'Appleblossom,' 'Apricot,' 'Brick Red,' 'Cream,' 'Giant Red,' and 'Spice'** are just a few of the cultivars named by Cowles, many of which you can see along this walk.

7

Take the **wood-chipped trail from the Labyrinth to the Treehouse** (or vice versa) to enjoy the vistas and towering rhododendrons of the **Lake Walk**. Follow your nose to find **R.carolinianum** – a native species that has an amazing scent. Behind the Treehouse, look for the large, Asian parent varieties used in hybridization by Dexter in his efforts to create larger and taller cultivars.

Thank you for visiting Heritage Museums & Gardens for the Rhododendron Festival!
[Learn more at www.heritagemuseums.org](http://www.heritagemuseums.org)