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Horticulture



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- › Flowers to admire and eat
- › Chefs' favorite vegetable varieties

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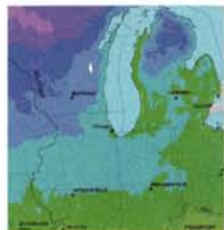
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- 1 | *Sedum reflexum* 'Blue Spruce' and *S. rupestre* 'Angelina' (yellow leaves)
- 2 | *Euphorbia polychroma* 'Bonfire'
- 3 | *Sciadopitys verticillata*
- 4 | *Agapanthus praecox* subsp. *orientalis* 'Storm Cloud'
- 5 | *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* 'Moonlight'
- 6 | *Rhododendron yakushimanum* x *bureauvii*
- 7 | Carol Yee with George and Little Bit
- 8 | *Eryngium planum* 'Big Blue'
- 9 | *Heuchera* 'Plum Pudding'



Moving DAY

When Carol Yee moved across states, she could not leave her plants behind

by JANE ROY BROWN ~ photographs by WILLIAM REGAN

When Carol Yee was a student at the University of Connecticut, she read about a man who made \$50 a week digging bloodworms. Prized as bait, the worms thrive in tidal mudflats—in this case, near Wiscasset, Maine. “That was good money in the ’60s, so I thought I’d give it a try,” says Yee, the owner of Carol’s Collectibles nursery. She chuckles. “Besides, I’d spent part of the summer on some Maine islands for a few years as a kid”—her father, a minister, used to fill vacancies in these remote islands’ churches—“and I wanted to go back.”

It speaks worlds about Yee’s persuasive powers that she convinced five female friends to join her. Bloodworms resemble slimy red millipedes with pronounced jaws, and a “good one” can be up to a foot long. By the time the young women rented a place, bought their gear and asked locals where to start digging, they had attracted widespread attention. “The first day at the mudflats, the whole town turned out to watch,” Yee recalls. “Our boots got stuck in the muck, we kept falling down and all these people were clapping and laughing. Only one girl stuck it out for a month. When she left, the old-timers took me under their wing. I had worm bites all over my hands that summer,

and I never did make \$50 a week, but I got to know some wonderful Maine characters. I knew that I had to move here someday.”

Nearly 50 years and a few careers later—she worked as a skilled cabinet-maker before learning to propagate rhododendrons in the mid-1990s—Yee made that move. Moreover, she relocated Carol’s Collectibles, including most of her plant stock, from northeastern Connecticut to Swanville, a rural community in mid-coastal Maine. On a summer afternoon, this energetic self-described “plant nut” takes a rare break in the shade of the house she shares with her friend, Juliane Dow, on seven and a half acres of former farmland. A tidy greenhouse stands next to two hoop houses near the parking area. An intriguing assortment of unusual rhododendrons, conifers and woodland plants are clustered outside the structures. “I’ve always been drawn to the weird things,” Yee says. Hundreds of other specimens dot the surrounding landscape. Then there are two dogs, a small flock of chickens and Yee’s one-legged Bantam rooster, George. She has offered to share the tale of her wild journey on a shoestring budget.

Between June and December in 2009, Yee made 11 round-trips of 600 miles in a 1989 Ford Econoline Extend-





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1 | The butterfly-like flowers of an *Oncidium* orchid.

2 | *Begonia* 'Little Brother Montgomery', a tender cane begonia.

3 | *Abutilon* 'Voodoo' above *Pelargonium* 'Vancouver Centennial'.

4 | A view of the shrub section at Carol's Collectibles.

5 | An air plant (*Tillandsia* sp.) has found a home with the greenhouse orchids.



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ed Cab van purchased for \$500, plus three trips in rented trucks. “Actually,” Yee admits, “I didn’t really think it through. It’s like childbirth—if you knew what it was going to feel like, you might decide not to do it.”

Yee began her specialty nursery in 1996, chiefly by propagating plants from cuttings; meanwhile she also worked in the propagation department at a large commercial nursery, Prides Corner Farms. When she moved to Maine, she hired co-workers and friends for a weekend to disassemble her greenhouse and hoop houses, truck them to Maine and rebuild them. “We pulled the plastic over the frames in the rain and worked in the dark on a Sunday night,” she says. “They all drove back to Connecticut to start work at six a.m.”

Next Yee brought the plants in the van, sometimes with animal companions. Recalling her last trip, Yee runs both hands through her hair and moans. “George had just had his leg amputated, and I didn’t want to leave him alone, so I put him in a bag on the floor of the front seat, but he was rolling around in the bag and one of the dogs kept jumping on him,” she says.

“Finally, I just plunked him in my lap. That was a long drive.”

Moving the nursery stock plants was also “a nightmare. Come mid-summer, I was desperate to get the stock plants into the ground in time for them to survive the winter. This is when you didn’t want to show up at my place with an empty car and time on your hands.” Though several friends and family members filled their cars and headed to Maine, the bulk of this precious cargo made the trip in three trucks “one size smaller than a tractor-trailer,” stacked three layers high by a crew of Prides co-workers. More harrowing was the Maine end of the trip, where she recruited some of her new neighbors to help unload. “I went up and down the road, knocking on doors and offering \$30 to anyone with hands,” Yee says. The wage did not guarantee expertise. Shuddering, she recounts watching someone “grabbing the rhododendrons by their heads and yanking them out of the pots.”

The weather was more beneficent. Because she had to return to Connecticut immediately after each trip, Yee could not water the new plantings during the week. She piled mulch

around them and hoped for the best. “It seemed like every time I pulled out of the yard it started to rain,” she says. “Everything survived.”

By mid-August, the move seemed never-ending. “I was overwhelmed,” she says. “Then a regular customer stopped by one day, saw my distress and offered to help. So did another friend—and she was going through chemotherapy! These two gave me the courage to keep going, and then more friends came. They even showed up in pouring rain to help load the truck.”

The shade is deepening now along the side of the house, where rhododendrons grow full and glossy. Yee smiles into the yard. She turned 68 this year, and even in a tough economy, she is connecting with Maine customers who fancy the unusual plants she grows. “Getting back to the childbirth analogy, the pain fades with the joy of holding the baby,” Yee says. “For me there is peace and satisfaction in just being here.” Then she laughs. “And in knowing that I’ll never, ever have to do this again.” ❧

JANE ROY BROWN is a writer based in Massachusetts.

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