

**Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi**

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Don't Squash the Rhodes!

Last week, we had a guest at home. A friend, who spends his time equally between Delhi and San Francisco, decided to pay us a visit. As is par for the course with all visitors, a drive to Mussoorie followed. The winding road from Mussoorie to Dhanaulti threw up some enjoyable sights. My friend greeted all pleasing sights with an enthusiastic “*sahi!*” (right!)! Even the 3 Idiots catch phrase “All is well” faded into oblivion in the face of enthusiastic “*sahi's!*” throughout our journey!

Midway to Dhanaulti, we stopped at Bata Ghat on the way to Suwakholi, and trekked down to the village below. As we walked, the breeze whistled through the swaying conifer branches. Tranquility and calm prevailed. Breathing in the fresh, cool air invigorated us. As was expected, a “*sahi!*” followed!

The sight that produced the loudest and most enthusiastic “*sahi!*” was the sight of flowering Rhododendrons! This short, stumpy tree with gnarled, scaly bark was silhouetted daintily against the deep blue



sky. Its blood red flowers seen against a green background were like a spectacular painter's canvas.

Closer up, I observed that the Rhododendron's red flowers sit jauntily on a cluster of leaves that point downwards. Its smaller buds look like a cream-and-red *seethaphal*! Below the tree, the forest floor was littered with red flowers amidst dried bronze-brown leaves of the tree. Above, flocks of squealing Black Bulbuls fed on the Rhododendron flowers, joined occasionally by petite, yellow coloured birds called White-eyes. Each time the White-eyes descended on the tree, the bulbuls complained loudly with wailing calls of “*chaaeya, chaaeya*”. “These are our trees. You cannot feed on them!”

The pretty red “Rhodes” (as I like to call them) were the species *Rhododendron arboreum*, which is the commonest Rhododendron throughout the Himalayas. The tree is aptly named-in Greek, “*rodo*” means rose and “*dendro*” means tree. Often the flowers of this tree are not red, but pink or even white. It is the national flower of Nepal, where it blooms profusely. It is also the State tree of Uttarakhand.

“Rhode” flowers are often used as offerings in temples. The flowers are also used to prepare jams and squashes, despite a little known fact-its young leaves are poisonous! Occasionally, people fall ill after consuming honey made by bees feeding on Rhododendron flowers. Don't worry-its safe to drink the squash, even though I don't like to “squash the rhodes”!

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Making a difference: Products made from forest produce, such as Rhododendron provide healthy food options and an alternate livelihood to the local community. BUT, its important to ensure that the harvest is done sustainably. If you pluck ALL the Rhododendron flowers, there will be no seeds left for dispersal, and this will eventually lead to a decline of the tree!