



AZALEA RESEARCH COMMITTEE

ANNUAL REPORT

AZALEA SOCIETY OF AMERICA

April 12, 2026

Committee:

Hale Booth Committee Chair

Aaron Cook

J Jackson

John Migas

Dr. Andy Whipple

Ex Officio: Paul Beck - Treasurer

Introduction

The Azalea Research Fund is a wholly owned component of the Azalea Society of America. It is operated by the Azalea Research Fund Committee which accepts grant proposals year-round, evaluates the proposals and approves various proposals for funding. Maximum grants are \$5,000. The “Azalea Research Fund (ARF) is self-sufficient, and its goal has been to incur no expenses other than grants awarded. The total value of the Azalea Research Fund (ARF) was \$114,074 at the end of 2023, \$111,655 at the end of 2024 and \$117,584 at the end of 2025. The ARF Chair coordinates awards closely with the ASA Treasurer.

Recent Grant Awards

In March 2026, ASA through our Azalea Research Fund awarded a grant of \$4,219 to the University of Connecticut. This grant is to assist Dr. Charles Krasnow with his research on *Phytophthora Root Rot of Azalea: Developing Sustainable Management Strategies to Improve Production*.

Previously we reported on two grant applicants that are currently funded by ASA. The first award was for \$5,000 to University of Florida researcher Carolyn Bento Willis. Her research

project is *Diversity and distribution of Exobasidium fungi on rhododendron species of North America*.

The second grant was for \$5,000 and awarded to Samantha Pryor also with the University of Florida. Some of you may have met Samantha at our Annual Meeting in Auburn Alabama. Samantha's research topic is : *Exploring the predictive power of pollination syndromes and the floral traits used to attract effective pollinators in rhododendron species*.

Each of these grantees agree as a condition of the award to write an article about their research project and its conclusions for the *Azalean*. Our grants are small with a maximum award of \$5,000, however they are very attractive to graduate level researchers as our funds can cover the hard costs of research projects while the graduate is contributing extensive amounts of professional time to the project at no additional cost to ASA Research funds.

One of the continuing problems we run into is the overhead rate many universities charge against grants. This rate is calculated to cover a portion of the university fixed costs that may typically be used by any grantee. These established overhead rates can range as high as 25 to 50 percent. While that rate can be absorbed by large grants it can be a "deal killer" to small grants like what ASA provides.

As a result, before disbursing a grant award to a university-based researcher, we request they consult with their faculty advisor to determine the overhead rate that would be applied by the university in these modest awards. If the overhead rate is going to significantly impact the funding of our research award, we offer the option to the researcher of making the award directly to them. This eliminates the overhead issue but creates a potential income tax issue for the grantee. We have had a few past grantees choose this route as students typically do not reach a personal income threshold necessary to pay taxes.

Problems

Death of a research grant recipient- Dr. Vanessa Koelling of Auburn University Montgomery campus was a 2019 grant recipient from ASA for her research into *What is a species? Investigating the Morphological, physiological and genetic differences between closely related Southern Azalea species*. Very shortly after funding Vanessa along with the world was shut down in response to COVID 19. Once University life returned to more normal conditions, she encountered serious health issues which would plague her the rest of her short life. At her request we granted what would become the first of several health-related extension requests for extensions of her time for research completion. In late November of 2024 we granted a final one-year extension request (see Dr. Koelling's attached request at the end of this report.) Before her work was completed, she died in surgery on September 18th, 2025. I suspect what remained of her research died with her. However, Patrick Thompson was listed as a collaborator in her research project, and I will see Patrick at Auburn later this month and will discuss if we should just write this off or if he has other options or suggestions.

One of the few requirements that ARF places on grant recipients is that they submit an article to the *Azalean* Editor at the conclusion of their research. This ensures that our members can learn about research that ASA's research program is funding with member funds.

Presently there is not an organizational link between the Azalea Research Fund and the *Azalean* Editor. There have been a few occasions where an article pops up in our journal, and we basically learn that the project is complete, with or without any credit to ASA for financial support. The Editor presently has no organizational link to know that a research project is underway and that they should be on the watch for a future article regarding the project. I think in the future our ARF chair as a normal step in the grant award process should submit a short one or two paragraph article to the *Azalean* announcing the funding of each grant award. This would queue up the Editor to expect some research article in the coming months or year. This is just one strategy and board members may have better suggestions for operational linkages, which ARF is certainly open to.

With the Editor being aware of the research awards, they can also insure that the author gives proper credit to ASA for investing in the research. It is likely that this publication of an early career article by some of our grantees is their first experience of having their work published. Without a little guidance from our Editor, our average young researcher is likely unfamiliar with typical protocols. As a result, it is easy for these researchers to leave out guidance on crediting ASA for financial support.

Last year we reported on another problem that had recently come to my attention. As I understand it, our web site is set up for online grant applications which have an ASA email address, when applications are submitted to this ASA address, they are then forwarded to the Committee Chair. This had worked well in the past, but something had changed and it was not presently working. (it could be a result of operator -me errors?) With the help of Paul Beck, the issue seems to be resolved, and Paul is taking the extra step of contacting me when an application is received to insure, we had also received the application.

On a final note, I have been involved with ASA's Azalea Research program from the very beginning and have served as the committee chair for the past 15 years. It has been a very good experience for me and has allowed me to use my career skills in a very different type of venue. However, I would like our ASA board to give some thought to identifying and appointing a future chair for this important role. Susan and I expect to become grandparents in late September and there are new exciting future roles ahead of us.

Respectfully submitted,

Hale Booth
Chair,

Koelling Extension Request

ASA Azalea Research Fund Committee

November 20, 2024

To the Research Fund of the Azalea Society of America:

I am writing to give a progress report and request a 1-year extension on the following project, funded in 2019, entitled “What’s in a species? Investigating morphological, physiological, and genetic differences between closely related Southern Azalea species”. In that proposal, I described my plans to investigate morphological, ecophysiological, and genetic differences between *Rhododendron cumberlandense* and *R. prunifolium* in collaboration with Dr. Juliana Medeiros of Holden Forests and Gardens, and Mr. Patrick Thompson of the Donald E. Davis Arboretum of Auburn University.

Unfortunately, I was hospitalized for nearly 6 months in 2023 following complications from a surgery. I returned home in late November 2023, but I have had ongoing health issues and am doing a great deal of physical therapy. I also ended up needing to have another, less major, surgery in late June 2024. I was laid up for approximately 10 weeks after that. In addition, in October my husband informed me that he is divorcing me, and I am still dealing with finalizing that process. I made some progress on data analysis for this research project in the spring, but because of these unforeseen health and personal issues, I have been unable to complete the project and get an article prepared for *The Azalean*. I am asking for one more year-long extension to be finished and be published in *The Azalean*. I will need a letter from you approving this extension in order to spend the remaining approximately \$1,000 from the grant.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vanessa Koelling', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Vanessa Koelling, PhD

Assistant Professor

Department of Biology and Env.

Sci.

Auburn University at Montgomery

P.O. Box 244023

Montgomery, AL 36124-4023

334-244-3144

vkoellin@aum.edu