

Aromi Hybrids

Dr. Gene Aromi — Mobile, Alabama

To begin, I would like to give credit to those who have helped with our project. I say ours because the Aromi Hybrids are as much a product of my wife Jane's efforts as they are of my own. First on our thank you list is Dr. John Giordano, who for a long time has been a partner in this enterprise. His enthusiasm and his knowledge of plants have been invaluable. I would also like to recognize Dr. John Allen Smith of Magnolia Nursery, the late James Thompson of Orchard Nursery, and Linda Erdman of Carolina Nurseries for their assistance.

I cannot leave this subject without giving credit to our creator who provided all of the plant material whose beauty is a reflection of His glory. Hybridizers are perhaps a step or two above the bees, and like the bees are hardly responsible for the hybrid's beauty.

Jane and I cannot claim technical expertise, since neither of us elected a course in botany during the many years we spent as university students. We stumbled into this hobby when we built a house here in Mobile in 1966. We ordered some Exbury Hybrids from the old Wayside Gardens of Mentor, Ohio. These plants bloomed and died shortly thereafter. We wondered why. In researching the Exburys we discovered that their parentage reflected the native azaleas of the north and west of the United States as well as *R. molle* and *R. japonicum* of the Orient. We questioned if these Exburys were crossed with the natives of the southern part of our country would the resulting hybrids thrive here in the Gulf Coast region? We started with *R. austrinum*, *R. canescens* and *R. viscosum* var. *serrulatum* found in Mobile County. Later we included *R. alabamense*, *R.*

arborescens, *R. viscosum*, *R. atlanticum*, *R. bakeri*, *R. prunifolium* and *R. oblongifolium*. After 30 years and 1096 crosses later, we feel the answer to our question is yes.

Breeding and selecting what became the Aromi Hybrids began in 1969 with evergreen azaleas and in 1971 with deciduous azaleas. After seven years the first selections were made. The first deciduous cross was a Rothschild Supreme Hybrid seedling, obtained from Wayside Gardens of Mentor, Ohio, with a pure yellow *R. austrinum*. Fifty plants were raised from this cross. Four were named: 'Pathfinder', 'Frontier Gold', 'Forty-niner', and 'Fool's Folly'. All of these were red-orange variations with large trusses and excellent fragrance. 'Fool's Folly' was then crossed with a Gus Elmer Hybrid of 'George Reynolds' and *R. austrinum*. One plant from the resulting batch was named: 'Centerpiece', a large white with a strong yellow blotch.

Other favorites include 'Red Chameleon', a red fading to damask rose; 'Red Pepper' [featured at the plant sale and blooming in full glory at the Van der Giessen Nursery]; 'Topsy Tangerine'; 'Jane's Gold'; and 'Peach Glow'. 'King's Treasure' features big flowers, while 'Lacecap' has very flat trusses. 'Sunrise' is a very rich yellow and orange with outstanding fragrance. 'Summer Snowflake' is a cross of *R. oblongifolium*, *R. prunifolium*, *R. viscosum* var. *serrulatum* and *R. arborescens*.

In the evergreen category, 'Red Ribbons' is a hose-in-hose semi-double developed from a cross of 'Giant Ruffles' and 'Pride of Prichard'. 'Michael Lux', a large pink hose-in-hose, is a cross of 'Red Ribbons' and 'Elsie Lee'. 'Pink Petticoat', a hose-in-

hose double, is a cross of 'Elsie Lee' and 'Pride of Prichard'.

Some of the Exburys used as parents were 'Golden Sunset', 'George Reynolds', 'White Swan', 'Gallipoli', 'Oxydol' and 'Knighthood'. Ilams used were 'Rufus', 'Primrose', 'Tintoretto', and 'Red Letter'.

To develop red blooms, 'Forty-niner' was crossed with 'Tintoretto' and produced 'Frontier Red'. 'Rufus', obtained from Wells in North Carolina, was crossed with a hybrid of *R. viscosum* var. *serrulatum*, *R. prunifolium*, and *R. arborescens* to produce a pink, but the result was a billowy yellow, 'Glory Be'. One truss of this early bloomer had 54 flowers in it. A similar result occurred when 'Frontier Red' was crossed with a hybrid of 'Cecile' and 'Balls of Fire', producing a shimmering gold 'Pirate's Booty'.

Most of the Aromi Hybrids are suitable for specimen plants. The original 50 deciduous plants are now well-rounded bushes 15 feet in height and still blooming after 28 years in Gulf Coast heat and humidity.

As for availability of these hybrids, there are several sources. Van der Giessen Nursery carries some of the Aromi Hybrids. Carolina Nurseries and Magnolia Nursery have the largest number. Fairweather Gardens has a large selection, including 'Pink Carousel' and 'High Tide'. So does Lazy K in the Atlanta area. Strange to say, Aromi Hybrids are not available at retail nurseries in Mobile.

Dr. Eugene Aromi is a retired Professor of Education from the University of South Alabama. Marilyn Jane Aromi is a retired elementary school teacher from the Mobile Public Schools.