

# Eugene Aromi, Hybridizer

Frank Bryan — Lithonia, Georgia

[Adapted from Winter 2002 Oconee Chapter Newsletter by permission of Frank Bryan and Eugene Aromi, Ed.]

During recent ASA conventions, a few Aromi evergreen and deciduous cultivars have been available for sale. All have been grabbed up by the first azaleaphiles to reach them. This scene was repeated at the most recent convention in Chattanooga. Slides of some of the Aromi cultivars shown during talks by Dr. Eugene Aromi and Maarten van der Giessen at conventions have impressed all present. Despite this, published information on all of the Aromi cultivars has been incomplete.

Dr. Aromi was an education professor at the University of Southern Alabama. His interest in azaleas did not start with courses he took while in college and while seeking advanced degrees. It started at his home when the azaleas that the contractor had used to landscape his lot became sickly. During his search for a solution, he began reading about azaleas and developed an interest in hybridizing. Dr. Aromi, working closely with his wife Jane, started with evergreens in 1969. Their objectives were to develop cultivars with large flower size, early bloom time,



'Hallie'—2-3/4" across—exhibits the large flower trait Aromi began hybridizing for in his work with evergreen azaleas. (Photo by Maarten van der Giessen)

improved bud hardiness, compact habit, an array of flower forms, and rich colors. After several years, many beautiful cultivars resulted from their efforts, but nurseries of that time had little interest in adding new cultivars to the traditional varieties that they sold. Because of space limitations in his yard, he gave many of these to his friend Dr. John Giordano, who is credited with preserving them for the past 40 years. Some of his early successes were *Rhododendron* 'Red Ribbons', 'Michaele Lux', and 'Pink Petticoat'. He has named 31 evergreen azalea cultivars, but there

are many others that are identified only by numbers (see sidebar). Maarten van der Giessen, manager of van der Giessen Nursery in Semmes, Alabama, and Linda Guy of Carolina Nurseries are presently working with Aromi and Giordano to introduce some of these evergreen azaleas to the trade.

Later in his work with azaleas, Dr. Aromi searched texts and catalogs and became intrigued with Exbury hybrids. Those that he ordered bloomed and then died, due to the high summer temperatures in Mobile, Alabama. He decided to hybridize, using native azaleas that grew in Alabama as one parent and Exbury or other deciduous cultivars as the other. He has made more than 1,000 crosses: over 4,000 have bloomed and been typed; more than 100 have been named; and to date, at least eight have been registered. The results of his work are strong, free-blooming, fragrant flowers with large buds and trusses. They have survived the heat and humidity of the South, which the Exbury hybrids did not; and, after 30 years, some are 15 feet tall. Aromi's deciduous azaleas have found broad acceptance by the nursery trade. Some of the more popular cultivars include: 'Aromi Sunstruck', 'Aromi Sunrise', 'Hightide', 'Topsy Tangerine', and 'Red Pepper', all of which were introduced by the late Dr. John Allen Smith's Magnolia Nursery. Nurseries that stock some of Aromi's newer creations include van der Giessen, Carolina Nurseries, Fairweather Gardens, and Lazy K.

To date, the names of eight of Aromi's deciduous azaleas have been

## Note about Aromi's Cultivar Numbers

The alphanumeric notations in the table (p. 38) reflect Aromi's control numbers for each cross. Dr. Aromi labeled his azaleas in the order in which they were hybridized. He began labeling his first seedling of his first cross with A-1, the second cross with B-1, and so on. Thus the code AAY-3 would represent the third seedling selected from his 727th—26+(26\*26)+25—cross. As with any hybridizer's work, many of the numbered seedlings were released without a name for evaluation by others. Maarten van der Giessen sent numbered Aromi evergreens to Freida Hill some years ago. Dr. Aromi has since named some of these numbered hybrids. These numbers have been shown in this complete table of Aromi hybrids to preserve the number designations for those crosses, which are important for tracing a named hybrid back to its original parentage and correlating a numbered hybrid to its name.



registered by Magnolia Nursery (in *Journal ARS*. 1996. 50 (2):116-118 and 50(3):177-178): 'Aromi Sunny-side-up', 'Aromi Sunrise', 'Aromi Sunstruck', 'Frontier Gold', 'Liz Colbert', 'Pathfinder', 'Pink Carousel', and 'Red Pepper'.

The Aromi hybrids charts beginning on page 38 list names, descriptions, and RHS Colour Chart numbers for his hybrids that were supplied by Dr. Aromi. Modifications by Frank Bryan included adding measurements in inches.

## References

Finch, Bill. 2002. "The Aromi Azaleas." *Journal American Rhododendron Society*. 56 (1): 22-23.

Aromi, Gene. 1999. "Aromi Hybrids." *The Azalean*. 21(3): 47.

## Acknowledgments

Maarten van der Giessen, of the Louisiana Chapter, reviewed the hybrid list with Dr. Aromi and added information about the hybrid identifications and their subsequent introductions.

Jay Murray, the American Rhododendron Society Plant Names Registrar—also a Brookside Gardens Chapter ASA member—provided the registration information.

'Glory Be' (top right) and 'Pathfinder' (below) show the brilliance and large flower size of the deciduous Aromi hybrids that used Exbury hybrids in the breeding stock. 'Glory Be' is a cross of Aromi's own 'June Jubilee'—(*R. prunifolium* x *R. serrulatum*) x *R. arborescens*—crossed with 'Rufus', an Ilam hybrid developed in New Zealand with Exbury parentage. For 'Pathfinder', Aromi crossed the deep yellow-orange heat-tolerant *R. austrinum* with 'Rothschild Orange', of Exbury heritage.

(Photos by Eugene Aromi)



Frank Bryan joined the ASA Oconee Chapter in 1993. He became editor of its newsletter in September 1995. He says he had little background with azaleas or horticulture before becoming a member, but he is a scientist (bacteriologist, Ph.D.) with an extensive career in biology. He served as the scientist director, Foodborne Disease Activity, Training Program, Centers for Disease Control, Public Health Service, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Atlanta (1956-1985); principal activities: foodborne diseases epidemiology and control, enteric diseases, environmental health, training. He is the author of over 260 publications, including

the books *Foodborne Infections and Intoxications, Diseases Transmitted by Foods, and Microbial Ecology of Foods*, and has presented papers at more than 225 professional meetings. He received the Public Health Service's Meritorious Service Medal for "Significant Contributions to Prevention and Control of Foodborne Diseases Through Applied Research and Through the Training of Health Professionals Around the World."



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