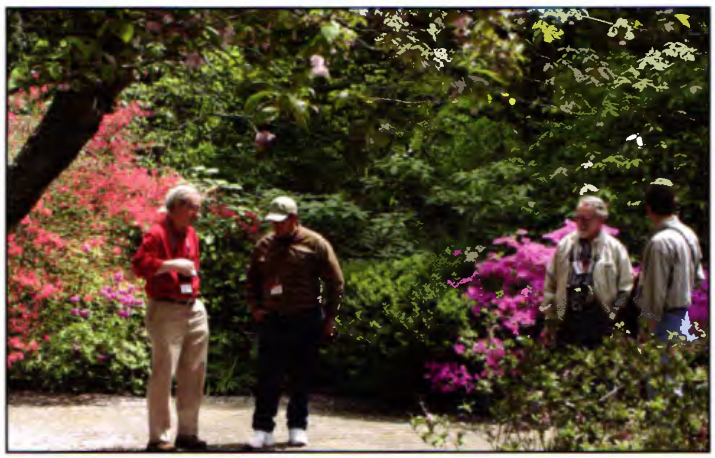
Report on the Azalea Society of America 2005 Annual Convention Holland, Michigan, May 19-22, 2005

Hosted by Lake Michigan Chapter

Joseph E. Schild, Jr. — Hixson, Tennessee

[Thanks to Joe for this report, which appears here courtesy of the Tennessee Valley Chapter (TVC) of the American Rhododendron Society; this article was published in their June 2005 newsletter, Ed.]

For those of us who may have never thought about rhododendrons and azaleas growing in the far northern climate (Zone 6a) of Michigan, this convention was a rare treat. I must say here that I was not only surprised, but was also mesmerized by the wide variety of plant material growing so close to the sandy shores of Lake Michigan.



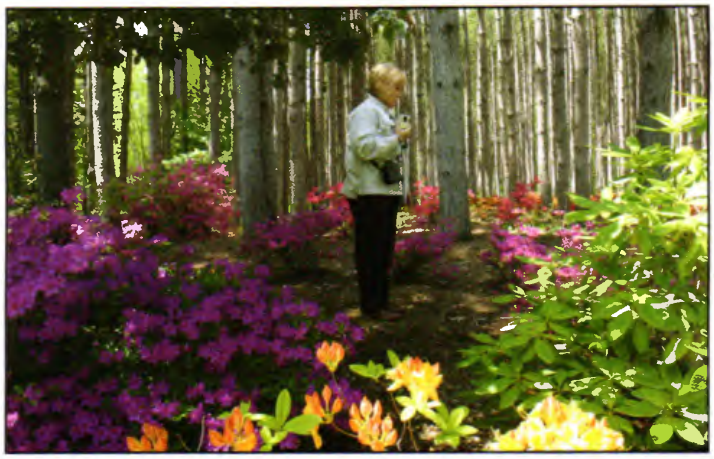
A beautiful sunlit patio strewn with cherry petals, enjoyed by Dan Krabill, Buddy Lee, and Jim Campbell.
(Photo by Barbara Stump)

My journey started a day early so I would arrive in time for a board of directors meeting scheduled for Thursday at 2:00 pm EDT. Yep, they are on Eastern Time, not Central. After spending a night in Fort Wayne, Indiana, I finished my drive in a torrential rain and arrived in time to relax and enjoy the company of many azaleaphiles and old friends at the Holiday Inn, Holland.

From the mission statement of the Lake Michigan Chapter, they, the members, strive to stimulate interest in, and appreciation of, azaleas through the study of azalea culture including selection, growing, hybridization, and propagation. This chapter covers a large geographic area, including Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and other parts of the Midwest.

One of the features of the late Dr. Charles Mann's mature garden was the "tunnel" of azalea bloom we were able to walk through.
(Photo by William C. Miller III)

Like most azalea nuts, I could hardly control my interest in the plants being offered at the plant sale area. A large room was filled with the colorful blooms of many hybrids, varieties, and species of azaleas, and a full, long table of companion plants to further whet the appetite. Though the sale had not yet opened, I did venture inside for a look and noted some plants I wanted to come home with. There were hard-to-find azaleas such as Schroeder hybrids, Stanton hybrids, Northern Lights series,



Vickie Snyder shown in John Migas's "azaleas woods" considering her next photograph. *(Photo by Barbara Stump)*

Cherokee series, along with many of the hardy evergreens and of course our very own TVC member William 'Bill' Pinkerton's new introduction 'Clara Haler'.

Once I was registered and received my official badge, my gift tote bag was stuffed with goodies and ample brochures about the convention schedule and local attractions. A handful of sweet treats would allow me to snack as we rode the tour bus.

One of the penalties of serving on a board is that the plant sale opens while we are making decisions about the future of the ASA, so by the time we adjourned, many of the plants I wanted were being taken to rooms or vehicles

Group photo taken by one of our very brave bus drivers from the roof of John Migas's house. *(Photo by Barbara Bullock)*

of very happy members. I saw several gleeful members loping across the parking lot with plants in hand. One borrowed a hotel luggage cart to handle the load. Oh well, I do now know the growers of those azaleas and will contact them directly for plants.

After an evening meal in the well-managed hotel restaurant, I arrived at the meeting room for the first round of excellent speakers and welcoming statements by the Lake Michigan Chapter president, John Migas. His attention to detail really made this convention a wonderful experience and one I will not soon forget.

Our first speaker was Carol Hop, who with her husband Bruce, owns and operates Wavecrest Nursery. Carol's program on Michigan Plants was fascinating and highly informative, because she has gained a vast knowledge of the plants that do so well in her state. She followed in her father's footsteps and opened the Garden Center and Barn Owl Gift Shop at the nursery in 1972. Using her skills in art and landscape design, she has also developed a thriving garden design service that complements the fine selection of plants being produced through the nursery.

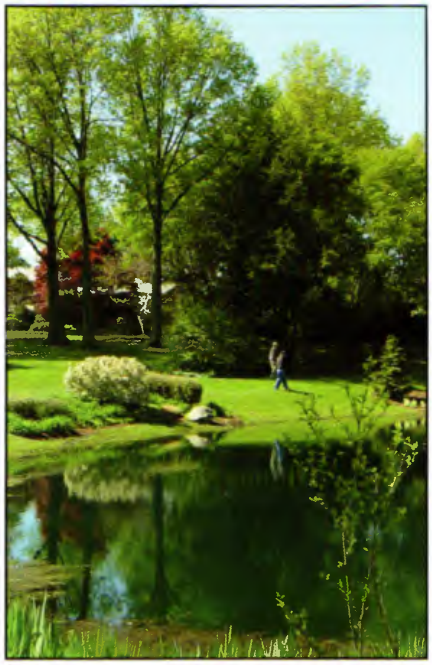
Lake Michigan Chapter president John Migas was tireless in his attention to details during the convention. Here he gives a thumbs up to Barbara Bullock, photographer.

Bill Miller and Dave Nanney on the shore of Lake Michigan after lunch at the Hop's. *(Photo by Barbara Bullock)*

Our second speaker of the evening was Robert 'Buddy' Lee, current president of the ASA and developer of the Encore™ Azaleas now marketed through Flowerwood Nursery in Loxley, Alabama. "What's New in Plant Breeding" was his topic, and he gave a great program on the subject with many digital slides of the colorful azaleas he is working on.

I guess the only negative note worthy of mention was the digital projection system. The hotel's projector did not render the slides in the true vibrant colors of the original digital photographs or the actual plants, so we had to use some imagination to visualize the slides.

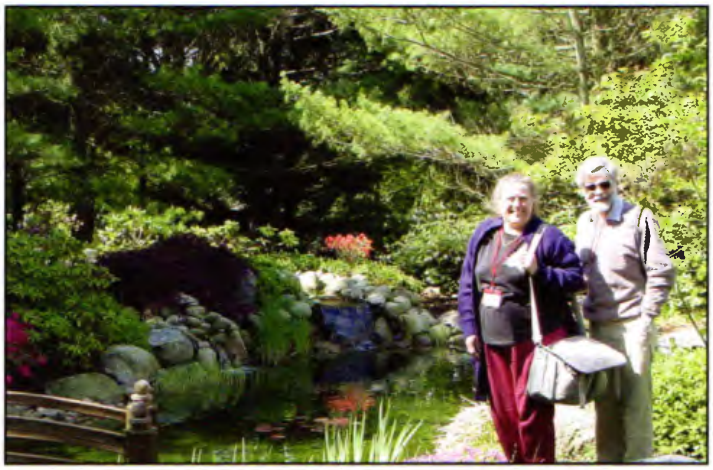
The tall pines and evergreen azaleas at John Migas's were a wonderful, cooling way to see his nursery's stock blocks. *(Photo by Barbara Bullock)*



Hutchinson Garden with pool in foreground. *(Photo by Vickie Snyder)*

The first evening of speakers was adjourned with much anticipation of the next day's garden tours. As with most conventions, much socialization at the bar and in the various rooms provided ample opportunities to exchange ideas and reunite old friends.

Friday morning dawned bright and sunny, a perfect day for touring. I was eager to see the gardens on the full schedule. Our first stop was a short drive on the tour buses to **Windmill Island,** a 36-acre island of manicured gardens, dikes, canals, and picnic areas, that is visited by guests from all over the world. This garden is the highlight of the Holland, Michigan, Tulip Festival in May each year, and is well worth the time spent strolling the manicured gardens, pathways, and seeing the authentic windmill.



Bob and Bee Hobbs at the Alexander Garden. *(Photo by William C. Miller III)*

Stop two was the **Alexander** and **Hutchinson Gardens,** in Fennville, Michigan. These two gardens are located across the street from each other. I chose to first tour the Ross Alexander property that featured many azaleas and rhododendrons, along with dogwoods and Japanese maples, sitting amongst eastern white pines planted over 20 years ago. This garden has many delights to please the eye.

The Hutchinson garden is in four acres on a property of over 30 acres. It is bucolic, with wide-open spaces that highlight a stunning pond and gazebo set amongst white dogwoods. The Japanese maples near the house truly enhance the setting. My regret is not having enough experience with my digital camera to get it working properly at this garden, so I only have two pictures of it to record the actual beauty.

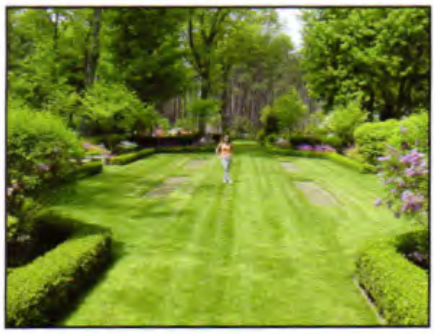
The camera problems carried over to the next garden, the **Hartsuiker Garden,** located on the east side of town and owned by Pete and Trevah Hartsuiker. Though a

Lunch line at the Hop's. Yes, that blue line in the background is Lake Michigan. *(Photo by William C. Miller III)*

small garden compared with many others we saw or will see, they created a masterpiece with the assistance of long-time friend Ross Alexander, their friend, pharmacist, and landscape designer. With mature oaks as canopy, the garden features many azaleas, rhododendrons, ornamental trees, shrubs and perennials. A large pond with fountain is the centerpiece, and around the property are ample structural features that make this a popular spot for social functions and family gatherings. The influence of purple colors is perhaps the strongest of any garden we saw.

By this time, most of us were hungry for food for the belly and willing to postpone the eye candy for a while. We arrived at the **Hop Garden,** home of Bruce and Carol Hop, which is located on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Did I just say postpone the eye candy? To get to the home and excellent meal of roast pig and all the trimmings, we had to stroll a long

Leslie Nanney helped get the Holiday Inn's digital projector to work so we could enjoy the full effect of Dr. Stan Hokanson's presentation on the Northern Lights azaleas. *(Photo by William C. Miller III)*



Barbara Bullock in the formal garden at John Migas's, which is a tribute to the Ben Morrison Garden. *(Photo by William C. Miller III)*

driveway lined with 40-year-old rhododendrons, abundant wildflowers, and exquisite azaleas. This driveway led to an open expanse of manicured lawn under aged trees, set with tables and chairs. Further, the back of the property was a high bluff overlooking Lake Michigan. It is no wonder it is called a great lake, because it looked more like an ocean.

To my relief, I was able to get my camera to work properly again and took many photographs to capture this exquisite garden. Once we were stuffed with down-home barbeque, we gathered for a short stroll across the street to **Wavecrest Nursery,** owned by Carol and Bruce.

It did not take me long to see this nursery was high end and offered visitors and clients an opportunity to see thousands of plants in landscape settings. They specialize in rare and unusual plants and grow over 1,400 different varieties of hardy trees, shrubs, and many of their own hybrid selections. The nursery offered golf cart rides to a few folks with leg problems, making the visit more enjoyable for them. The garden center held many unique plants and was tempting, as was the gift center with the unusual floating stones for water gardens.

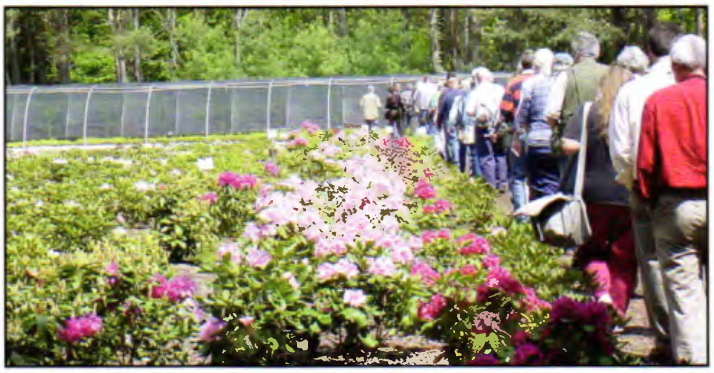
The **Button Art Gallery,** the home of Arthur Frederick in Douglas, was our next stop. Though the building was under remodeling, we were treated to a beautiful English style garden with many design features made 38 years ago by Saugatuck horticulturist and landscape architect Charles Mann. Commissioned by the Gallery's founder, Russell Button, to create a natural garden, Mann used accents of rhododendrons, azaleas, flowering trees and a multitude of natural plantings. The stone walls and paths added structure and form to an exquisite sunken garden with a boundary of fern, holly, heather, mountain laurel, birch, dogwood, and lilies.

Exbury 'Golden Oriole' really lit up the side of the garage at John Migas's. *(Photo by Vickie Snyder)*

It was not until we re-boarded the buses that I realized the trouble with my camera was the tight-fitting carrying case and me. The camera fit so snugly that putting it in and taking it out of the case moved the settings knob and changed how the camera functioned. I got no pictures of this garden and will most likely rely on others who did for any photos.

Rosebay Nursery was our next and last stop on this very full day of touring. It was founded in 1977 by Linda Charvat and Frank Pluta on 14 acres and has 24 polyhouses and 27 sunken propagation frames. As a wholesale nursery, they grow rhododendrons, azaleas, and *Pieris* for varied growing conditions. Test gardens around the house attest to the growing and landscape skills of its owners.

They propagate nearly all of the plant stock in the sunken poly-covered frames. The plants are then field-grown under different shade conditions according to their needs. This information is passed on to their customers to help them in designing and recommending different varieties. I learned that they are blessed with sandy loam that is 30 feet deep, deposited by the glaciers from the ice age. As we toured the nursery, a worker was spreading pine bark with a manure spreader that he would later till into the deep soil. One field of about three acres is covered with weed block fabric and is used to store 60 varieties of rhododendron and 15 varieties of deciduous azaleas that are field-potted. They sell around 100,000 plants a year, mostly as balled and burlapped plants.



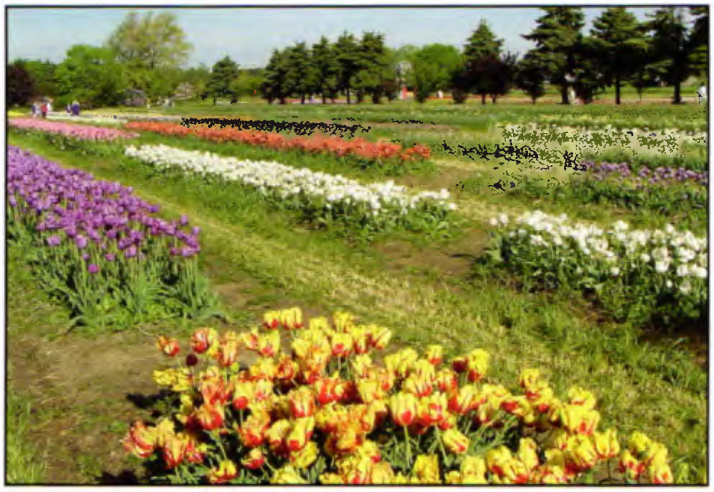
We were quite a crowd at Rosebay Nursery. —Note the azaleas field-grown and the hoop house propagation frames in the background. *(Photo by William C. Miller III)*

Dave Hinde and Dr. Stan Hokanson enjoy the view of Rosebay Nursery. *(Photo by Barbara Bullock)*

The bus ride back to the hotel was short, and though we had toured five gardens I was not tired. I had gained a new respect for the 'Michiganders' and their gardening skills, and this was only the first day of tours. Dinner was enjoyed by many new and old friends followed by the evening session of speakers Lee and Kay Ver Schure on "Companion Plants" and Bill Pinkerton on "Landscaping with Glenn Dale Azaleas."

Due to a minor stomach affliction, I missed most of Kay's presentation, but was able to catch Bill's. He presented a slide show with descriptions of his beautiful azaleas and rhododendrons in the landscape. A lively Q & A session followed and Bill ably handled all the queries about his high-elevation growing conditions that are not far removed from those of Michigan with its low winter temperatures. The evening session adjourned, and I decided to seek the sanctuary of my hotel room for the night and rest.

On Saturday morning, after a restful night, we started our second day of tours. The first stop of the day was **Veldheer's Tulip Farm,** Holland's only tulip farm and perennial garden. Established in 1945 by Verne Veldheer,



We arrived in Holland, Michigan, just after the annual Tulip Festival, but the fields were still incredible lines of color.
(Photo by William C. Miller III)

it started as a hobby and evolved into a business with plantings of over four million bulbs each year with 400 kinds of tulips, 120 kinds of daffodils, 200 kinds of accent bulbs, and 400 kinds of perennials. The nearby outlet store offers packages of all their bulbs. Row upon row of bedded tulips presented an irresistible opportunity for vivid photographs and the cutout Dutch figures offered many fun headshots. Complimentary bags of bulbs were given to all the tour members.

Our second stop was at the **Willis Garden,** owned by Eric and Deona Willis, who became owners of the home built in the mid-1940s. The moment I stepped from the bus, I knew this garden was special. I also realized shortly that the memory card in my camera was out of memory and that my spare was buried in my daypack still on the bus, which was pulling away for a turnaround. My old Kodak Brownie Hawkeye was never this much trouble.

Brilliant red deciduous azalea seen in display plantings at Rosebay Nursery; alas, unlabeled.
(Photo by Barbara Stump)

Without photos, you will need to rely upon my description, so do not trip on the many adjectives I may choose to use. The Willises bought the property in 1997 and realized they had a jewel. With the help of former owners, they developed the original landscape with its boxwoods, yews, junipers, viburnum, dogwoods, and an abundance of wildflowers, azaleas and rhododendron. A water feature was added and the garden area tripled in size to include most of the five acres now planted with *Stewartia,* bamboo, ornamental grasses, new azaleas, rhododendrons, and Japanese maples. This garden is an excellent example of modern landscaping.

Back on the bus and with my new memory card inserted, we drove to the next stop, the **Flower Basket.** This garden created by Charles and Lorna Mann surrounds their home of over 60 years. They were the first in Saugatuck, Michigan, to successfully grow rhododendrons, azaleas, and hollies, and it is well established that it was the most beautiful garden in the Midwest.

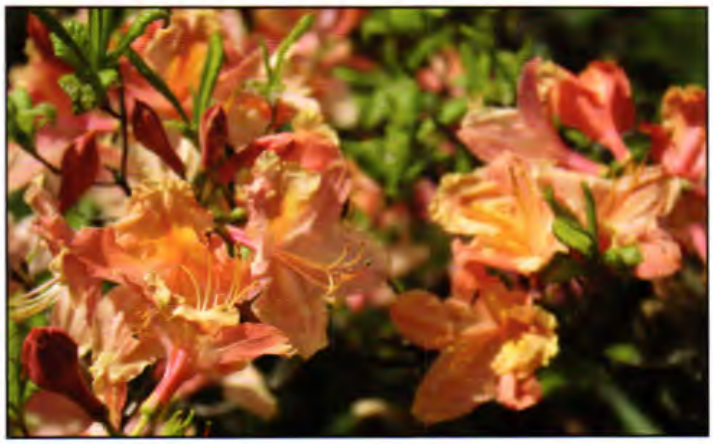
Situated on a high bluff overlooking the Kalamazoo River, the one-acre formal garden is divided into rooms and outdoor living areas. The vistas change as one strolls the garden, and one gains new perspectives through elevation and landscape changes. Across the street are the six acres that were the Mann's nursery. John Migas explained to us that he and two more investors bought the property to preserve its beauty and historic nature. Some members chose to stroll the distance across the open meadow to John's home and nursery, our next stop for lunch and garden tour. I stayed with the bus and rode the short distance.

The **John Migas Garden** and **Nursery** was our next stop for the day, and it was a fine example of combining a garden with business. This property covers 15 acres with the garden in six. This property is set apart with borders of boxwood hedges, rhododendrons, azaleas, many more native and exotic shrubs, and wide expanses of lawn. Here, John has been growing and testing azaleas and rhododendrons since 1985. At the 1997 ASA Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, he became enthusiastic about

hybridization and continues in that effort.

Tall, straight red pines planted in rows over 60 years ago create a cathedral-like effect and shelter the azaleas and rhododendrons from the Lake Michigan winds. In the woodlands behind the open area, John has planted many of his rhodos for landscape sales. His attention to detail also included raking the pathways to make it look better, if that is possible. Our lunch of barbeque with hot dogs and hamburgers was devoured with hunger after another grand morning.

The **Alexander Garden** was our last stop of the day and was well worth the wait. The home and garden of David Alexander and his family is set upon two acres with the house centered and the gardens surrounding it along the perimeter. Raised beds show off his azaleas, rhododendrons, and numerous other shrubs and specimen trees to best advantage.



Deciduous azalea at Rosebay Nursery. *(Photo by Barbara Stump)*

David is the son of Ross and Edna Alexander whose garden we also toured, and he learned much from his parents about landscape design. The garden provides ample area in which their two young children can play and have fun, even in the midst of wonderful plants.

It being late in the day, our tours were finished, and we returned to the hotel for the evening session, banquet, and national meeting. After a brief rest and change of clothes, but not into a tie and suit by choice, I located a chair in the main room for our evening session. As the members entered, the room was buzzing with anticipation over the keynote speaker's program and the national meeting.

The Lake Michigan Chapter, through the hotel, provided a wonderful repast of excellent food, which was consumed with ample conversation along the way. John Migas introduced our speaker, Stan C. Hokanson, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Horticulture Science at the University of Minnesota.

Dr. Hokanson's program was on the Northern Lights series azaleas and was wonderfully accompanied by a Power Point presentation. I learned more about the Northern Lights series than I thought possible and will consider adding them to my own garden if I can find the room. By the way, those azaleas were the first to be sold at the plant sale and were quickly gone.

The national meeting was disposed of quickly, and Bob Stelloh was awarded the ASA Outstanding Service Award, along with a new mega-memory PC to aid him with his work on the ASA Web site. Next came the long awaited plant auction, and I came away with two outstanding azaleas, even though I protested that I was only scratching my nose. John Brown, the ASA secretary, is one heck of an auctioneer. We soon adjourned after the lively auction that raised needed funds for the chapter.

Though I wanted to stay over on Sunday morning for the board meeting and Propagator's Roundtable, I knew I had a long drive ahead of me to reach home before dark, so I left Holland with many fond memories to carry me home. Though my adventure is over, I will look back on it and remember the many great people of the Lake Michigan Chapter who made it all happen.

Following are many links to the attractions of the Holland, Michigan, area. I am making a computer slide show on CD-RW that may be played on a computer or through most DVD players to view on your television. If you want a copy, please let me know. The price of $10 will cover the expense of the copy and postage, with a little left over for the Tennessee Valley Chapter treasury. There are about 155 color slides in the show. My telephone number is (423) 842-9686 or send the check or cash to Joe Schild, 1705 Longview St., Hixson, TN 37342.

The City of Holland, Tulip Time: http://www.tuliptime.com

The Holland Chamber of Commerce: http://www.holland-chamber.org

The Saugatuck-Douglas area: http://saugatuck.com

Artist, Eddie Mitchell: http://www.eddiemitchellart.com

Windmill Island: http://www.ci.holland.mi.us/windmill or http://www.hometownvalue.windmillisland.htm

Wavecrest Nursery: http://www.wavecrestnursery.com

Veldheer's Tulip Farm: http://www.veldheer.com

***Joe Schild** has been an avid grower, propagator, and breeder of azaleas for nearly 35 years. He has owned and operated a niche nursery specializing in the species for over 14 years. Joe is the current president of the Tennessee Valley Chapter-ARS, past president of the ASA, and a member of the Tennessee Nursery & Landscape Association. He says he is better known as an azalea nut and chases the natives' bloom each year with many fellow enthusiasts. He is a frequent contributor to* **The Azalean.**