

On the Trail of “Stevenson’s Collection” of Kurume Azaleas

An Historical Perspective on the Introduction to Britain of “Wilson’s Fifty” and “Stevenson’s Collection” — Part I

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Introduction

On the cover of a recent issue of *The Azalean* is a close-up of ‘Haru-no-akebono’ that is said to be “a Kurume introduction by the late J.B. Stevenson of England . . . the source is unknown.”(1) While the “unknown” source is not exactly the whole story, it is well worth noting at the outset that there are currently very few records available in Britain regarding the collection of Kurume azaleas introduced by Stevenson. Most azalea enthusiasts will be conversant with the “Wilson’s Fifty” collection of Kurumes, but few will have heard of “Stevenson’s Collection,” or be aware that the history of both collections is inextricably entwined. If you have an interest in superior varieties of evergreen azaleas then you may find this tale somewhat thought provoking.

There is little doubt, compared with the coverage of rhododendrons in the printed media in Britain, that in general terms azaleas are something of a “Cinderella,” as over the years they have received scant coverage in the horticultural press. This situation is something of a paradox as many gardens, both public and private, contain a range of evergreen and deciduous types but their use has been mainly for decorative purposes and many enthusiasts in Britain do not regard them as being part of a rhododendron collection. So, while they provide a spectacular backcloth each spring they tend to receive less TLC than rhododendrons, and they are usually not labelled. Some reports have suggested that many of the Kurume azaleas do not perform very well in Britain, but in the author’s experience this is quite subjective as their performance tends to be directly related to their geographical location and the level of exposure to the sun. While these notes have been compiled from many sources, the threads running through the narrative are intended to provide a perspective from the British side of the Atlantic and, in turn, perhaps they will generate some further discussion, as in this way we all benefit. As these notes have been written primarily for an American audience, some additional elements of historical background have been woven into the story to make the people and places covered by the article more readily identifiable.

“Wilson’s Fifty” Kurume Azaleas

On April 24, 1919, two sets of the 50 varieties chosen by Ernest H. Wilson from 250 varieties in the garden of Mr. Kijiro

Akashi in Kurume, Japan, arrived at the Arnold Arboretum. It was intended that these be propagated and distributed under the names given to them by Mr. Akashi. The origin of the Kurume azalea is attributed to Motozo Sakamoto, and, after his death, Mr. Akashi acquired his collection and then spent 40 years developing this group of hybrids. Little more needs to be said about the origin of “Wilson’s Fifty,” as their background and the process by which they were chosen are well documented by Wilson himself.(2)

Wilson ensured that all the 50 plants were correctly labelled, but later recognised that there was difficulty in pronouncing their Japanese names. In April 1926 he added English names to all but one plant, and this single plant was named in 1927. It is said that the plants were subsequently distributed under numbers only. Two sets of “Wilson’s Fifty” made their way across the Atlantic to two famous private gardens: one set to J.C. Williams at Caerhays Castle in Cornwall, and the other to the Tower Court home of John B. Stevenson. Wilson’s “connections” with J.C. Williams at Caerhays were covered in a recent article in the *Journal ARS*.(11) It is likely that the two sets arrived at Caerhays Castle and Tower Court in the early 1920s. John Barr Stevenson began laying out the rhododendron gardens at Tower Court in 1919, immediately after the First World War, and in the early 1920s married Roza, his beautiful and “green-fingered” wife. Tower Court stood on a small wooded ridge between Ascot and Bagshot, the summit of Tower Hill being a short distance from the house. From the house the ground descended in a series of valleys and the Stevensons created avenues of plants leading downhill from the house. Bordering one of these avenues that contained fastigate cherries, the plants of “Wilson’s Fifty” were established. While Stevenson would later become the editor of *The Species of Rhododendron*, first published in 1930 and for many years the accepted textbook on the genus, his interests ranged well beyond the species.

In July 1946, in the immediate aftermath of WWII, John B. Stevenson and Charles Williams provided cutting material to the Royal Horticultural Society’s (RHS) garden at Wisley with a view to establishing a further set of “Wilson’s Fifty.”

(Note: The orthography of several of the names from the International Rhododendron Register and Checklist (2nd Edition)—IRRC is indicated in brackets after some of the quoted material, with thanks to Don Voss and William C. Miller III, Ed.)

The rooted cuttings were planted on the North side of Battleston Hill at Wisley in 1947, and their hardiness was monitored.(3) This collection was open to the full blast of the northeast wind, but sheltered from the north and west; more on the subject of hardiness later. The plants at Wisley generally performed well and were used to stage a large display at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show of 1958 where they created a great deal of interest.

In 1958 it was thought that the complete collections of “Wilson’s Fifty” were restricted to the three sets mentioned above; however, it seems likely that three others existed at this time. At Exbury Gardens a set was planted around one of the ponds to provide a kaleidoscope of colour reflections in the water in early May. It is known from the recollections of Mrs. Lionel de Rothschild that the azaleas were *in situ* in the spring of 1923 when some distinguished visitors were visibly impressed while being shown around the newly completed gardens. This suggests that Lionel de Rothschild also received an early shipment of Kurumes from Wilson.

The remnants of what appear to be two further sets can be found, one at Lingholm Gardens, near Keswick, Cumbria, and the other at Colonsay House Garden at Kiloran on the Isle of Colonsay. There are probably others, and we will return to this aspect shortly.



May 1991. Part of the remnants of a “Wilson’s Fifty” collection at Lingholm in the English Lake District. Note how these Kurumes are far more open and leggy when grown in partial shade. A second group can be found on the north end of the terrace, and these are low and compact due to their location in full sun.

(All photos by John Hammond)

John B. Stevenson and the Kurume Azaleas from Yokohama Nurseries

On the highest part of Tower Hill was planted a large collection of Kurume azaleas, which in flower mingled together like a Persian carpet, and this area became known as the “Kurume Carpet.” These were the 80 Kurume azaleas that Stevenson introduced direct from Yokohama

Nurseries in 1927-29. For many years there had been suggestions that some of plants in the “Wilson’s Fifty” collection were not good performers, at least not in the British climate, and visitors to Japan had returned with suggestions that with hindsight a better selection was practicable. So, Koichiro Wada made a selection of Kurumes on behalf of Stevenson, who did not give English names to the collection. By the mid-1930s Tower Court had probably the most complete collection of rhododendron species in the world, but what was really special about this garden was the rhododendron species were arranged in their series so the plants raised from seed brought back by the great plant collectors could be directly compared. And, in the same way, the Kurume azaleas could be directly compared. Roza always maintained that those from Yokohama Nurseries were better performers than “Wilson’s Fifty,” a perspective that was not wasted on many of her visitors each spring.(5)

Over the years John B. Stevenson had taken more than a passing interest in the rhododendron plantings in the Woodland and Valley Gardens in the Royal Park at Windsor. In 1946, when consideration was being given to developing a vast semi-circular amphitheatre area in the Great Park, he was shown the site by Eric Savill, the Deputy Ranger and Deputy Surveyor. Stevenson’s first comment was, “What a wonderful site to grow Kurume azaleas.” So it was that the plans quickly took shape, Stevenson then and there agreeing to provide the stock plants of “Wilson’s Fifty” for propagation purposes. Of the original “Wilson’s Fifty” around twelve were discarded, as possibly being liable to frost damage when planted in a bowl, and it is clear from later reports that these varieties were replaced by some of “Stevenson’s Collection.” The garden staff at Windsor rated Wilson’s ‘Kure no Yuki’ [‘Kure-no-yuki’] and Stevenson’s ‘Haru no Kyokii’ [‘Haru-no-kyokii’] amongst the best performers and exhibited these at the RHS Rhododendron Shows in London. The “mixture” of Kurumes used to create the “Bowl” at Windsor would later cause some confusion as to the varieties that actually made up a full set of “Wilson’s Fifty.” Nevertheless, when planting was completed in 1950 over 50,000 plants had been used in creating the “Kurume Punch Bowl.”(4) If you are visiting London in late April or early May, this is a location you should definitely consider including in your itinerary!

John Barr Stevenson died suddenly in 1950 leaving Roza virtually penniless, with a substantial mortgage outstanding, a financial nightmare. That she rose to the occasion and gradually disposed of a large portion of the rhododendron species collection, a major portion finding its way to Windsor as the foundation of the Valley Garden, is well documented.(4)

The Establishment of Other Collections of Kurumes Post-WWII

In 1949-50, James Fisher, Superintendent of Hampton Court Gardens, initiated work on the creation of a woodland garden at the Isabella Plantation, an area within

Richmond Park that formed part of an ancient deer park. After three years of quiet transformation, from a bracken-covered impenetrable wilderness beneath a 19th Century canopy of mature oaks, beech, and chestnut, the gardens were opened without ceremony one morning in March 1953. At this date the gardens contained a new collection of rhododendrons, azaleas, magnolias, and camellias. Isabella has become well-known for its stunning display of ever-green azaleas that transform the garden each spring, many of which are Kurume azaleas, and this led to a decision in 1991 to establish a collection of "Wilson's Fifty" there. To add to those already growing at Isabella, many varieties were acquired from Arthur George at Hydon's Nursery, while John Bond, Director of Gardens at the Savill and Valley Gardens at Windsor, provided cutting material of others. So, through the generosity of others, who have themselves been helped in times gone by, the wheel has come full circle and another complete collection has been born. This set of "Wilson's Fifty" has subsequently been given National Plant Collection status by the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (NCCPG).

It was inevitable that the development of the "Kurume Punch Bowl" at Windsor would create a great deal of interest in the Kurume azaleas, particularly amongst the key rhododendron enthusiasts of the era. But there was a problem; the Kurume collections were not readily available in the trade. Harry White, one of the great rhododendron growers, had been manager of Sunningdale Nurseries since 1898, and he had needed to cope with the vast inflow of species from China, Tibet, and Burma. The work involved in raising, classifying, and labelling collectors' seed would have brought White into regular contact with the Stevensons, who resided close by at Ascot. Sunningdale was a beautiful stylish nursery in the Victorian/Edwardian tradition. By the time of Harry White's death in 1936 some outlying areas of the nurseries had become overgrown and were no longer in use, while other areas had become run-down and neglected. Sir Hubert Longman, the publisher, had bought Sunningdale as an investment, but when he passed away in 1939, at the outset of WWII, most of the staff were sacked. Major Herbert Russell and his cousin, Neil Hamilton Smith, purchased the nurseries, but without any staff were unable to tackle its restoration until after the cessation of hostilities. However, Major Russell's son, James Russell, who became a highly regarded plantsman and garden designer, was invalided out of the Herefordshire Yeomanry in 1942 and resumed civilian life. Following a period of convalescence he was given the task of managing the nurseries. James Russell set about restoring the nurseries as and when staff could be secured, and he also sought to maintain the friendly relationship with Tower Court, as he had visited the gardens on a number of occasions prior to the onset of WWII.

In the early 1950s James Russell obtained plant material of Stevenson's Yokohama introductions and in an article written in 1984, he confirmed that he had also obtained plant material of "Wilson's Fifty" from Roza Stevenson.(7)

Roza used the firm of Strathern & Blair, solicitors, of Edinburgh, to handle her affairs following the death of her husband. An invoice dated August 1951, with a covering letter dated 3 October 1951, was forwarded to James Russell seeking payment for items that Sunningdale Nurseries had been supplied with from Tower Court. Included in this listing is an item for an unspecified quantity of scions taken on 2 August 1951 for which the charge was £47-15-00; the plants involved are not identified. This appears to be the first transaction that Russell had with Tower Court. In regard to the transactions that took place sometime later, the plants involved are all rhododendrons, and these are identified. The timing of this first transaction suggests that this was with respect to "Stevenson's Collection" and "Wilson's Fifty." Looking at the later transactions, Roza charged an average price of one shilling each for scions, so the original transaction probably represented a total of around 1000 scions.(12)

It makes sense that Roza Stevenson would not have wanted to be involved in propagating these plants for wider distribution. So, Sunningdale Nurseries propagated the Kurumes, listed them in their catalogue, and supplied them to the key gentlemen enthusiasts of the era with gardens large enough to accommodate them, either as groups of plants or as part of one of James Russell's many garden design projects that increasingly occupied his time in the years after 1950.(9) There were five of "Stevenson's Collection" that Russell did not list in the catalogue, and it is assumed that these were not considered suitable for distribution. This included the oddly named 'Shjuchuke'. However, it would be pertinent to note that while the "Wilson's Fifty" collection has become synonymous with



Tremeer, a Cornish 14th Century country house constructed of local granite, has weathered well across the centuries. Running along the base of the terrace is a large collection of Kurumes from Yokohama Nurseries that was introduced by John B. Stevenson (seen in April 2002).

the “Kurume Punch Bowl” at Windsor and has thus enjoyed wide media coverage, the converse is true with regard to “Stevenson’s Collection,” which thus remains relatively little known.

The Kurumes Find a New Home

Roza’s many friends rejoiced when it became known in 1960 that she was moving to Cornwall and her engagement to Major-General Eric Harrison, of Tremeer, was unexpectedly announced. Not only was this “green fingered” lady an expert at raising plants from seed and cuttings, she could classify and document all the material that passed through her hands. So, Tower Court was sold, and many of the remaining plants found their way to her new home, an historic 14th Century property near St. Tudy, Cornwall. Roza takes up the story in 1965 (see photo on page 54):

When I arrived in Cornwall in 1961 to my new abode Tremeer, I brought some of my favourite rhododendrons and plants from my late home Tower Court, Ascot, Berks. My husband and I wanted some colour on the lawn beneath the terrace wall, but whatever we chose had to be ultimately of moderate height.

I suggested Kurume azaleas for they love the sun, flower abundantly each year and possess an added glory, namely variation of foliage not only in shape but when shedding their secondary foliage. They also have most beautiful autumn tints from yellow, gold, bronze, red, etc.

I also felt these plants in the Cornish climate would stand full exposure, as compared with the Berkshire climate where it is essential to have dappled shade; there the atmosphere is very different. It can be extremely hot and the sunrays can scorch the delicate shades, in particular the salmon and flame colours.

We made two beds each to contain twenty-five plants of the Yokohama lot these Kurumes are the original ones which my late husband imported from Yokohama Nurseries from 1927 to 1929, so we can say that are around forty years old and now measure 5 to 7 feet across.

To come to a quite different climate as fully mature plants **s**peaks well for their constitution; they have behaved remarkably well during these last four years; only one thing worries me, the climate here being more humid, particularly during winter months, their sap never goes down, consequently, flowers burst forth at odd times! I always fear some appalling frost will appear during February, then bark split is likely to ensue.

However they withstood the drastic 1963 winter, when nearly everyone all over the British Isles suffered burst pipes! And many other calamities and upon thinking back, I recollect we had a superb October (Indian



The long terrace at Tremeer provides an ideal sunny location for the colorful “Stevenson’s Collection” of the fifty varieties planted by Roza Stevenson in 1961 (shown in April 2002). The deep red is ‘Hinode-no-kumo’, that Roza rated as a better color than Wilson’s #42, ‘Hinodegiri’ (syn. ‘Red Hussar’).

Summer) which ripened their wood and young growths, followed by a normal very cold November which sent down their sap, consequently they withstood that very severe period. I may say I crowed a little for they had done what I hoped they would do, and they did not let me down!(6)

So, 50 of the original large plants of the Yokohama Nursery introductions found a new home at Tremeer, and all survived the move (see photo above). Roza had made a selection from the original 80 varieties that had been imported, but at the time of writing there is not a list available of the plants at Tremeer. In 1969, Patrick M. Synge, reporting on a visit to Tremeer, noted :

In the two main beds were planted Kurumes amongst the finest I noted were :

‘Shino Miyagino’ [‘Shino-miyagino’], deep pink, slightly deeper than ‘Hinomayo’ and very floriferous.

‘Senjo’, apple blossom pink, very lovely.

‘Fude Tsukata’ [‘Fude-tsukasa’], pretty pale pink, late flowering.

‘Hino Tsukasa’ [‘Hino-tsukasa’], deep scarlet red.

‘Gyokuko’, apricot-red with small flowers.

‘Harumiji’, white.

‘Yozakura’, deep pink.

‘Shintsune’, a good white.

‘Haru no Akebono’ [‘Haru-no-akebono’], pink, late flowering.

‘Iwato Kagami’ [‘Iwatokagami’], pale pink.

These are comparatively little known but are all good plants, capable of spectacular effect.(8)

We know from the above report that Roza took 'Haru no Akebono' ['Haru-no-akebono'], with her to Tremeer and there is little doubt that she would have been thrilled to see one of her favourite azaleas on the cover of *The Azalean*.

This leaves us to speculate what happened to the other 30 original plants of "Stevenson's Collection." In 1960, faced with the disposal of the Tower Court property, Roza decided to have a sale of the remaining plants. When James Russell became aware of the pending sale he wrote to Roza on 14th September and indicated he was interested in acquiring some of the rare plants left in the garden as he felt it was important they should be kept together as a group and he suggested a date for a visit. He also indicated he was interested in the evergreen azaleas as Tower Court was possibly the only source. Roza replied on 28th September in a positive way, but there is no record of the plants that James Russell subsequently acquired.(12) Shortly before Roza sold Tower Court, Arthur George of Hydon Nurseries was also given the opportunity of acquiring the remaining rhododendrons and azaleas in the garden that were surplus to Roza Stevenson's needs at Tremeer. This offer was enthusiastically accepted; and, along with a large number of rhododendrons, around half of a full set of "Wilson's Fifty" found their way to Hydon's Nurseries, near Godalming, Surrey. Roza had taken the other half of "Wilson's Fifty" with her to Tremeer and planted these in a separate bed.(6)

The Distribution of "Stevenson's Collection" in Later Years

Sadly, Roza Harrison passed away in 1968 after a long illness that she fought with tremendous spirit. General Eric Harrison stayed on at Tremeer for another 10 years until maintaining the garden became too much for him.

In 1978 the Haslam-Hopwood Family acquired the property, and they continued to look after the garden, adding new plantings that helped the garden survive in a reasonable condition. In 2001 the property was purchased by Lord and Lady Edward George, who immediately commenced renovating the house interior and intended to restore the garden at a later date.

The George Family value their privacy and, in the Spring of 2002, by means of a "one-time" special arrangement with Lady Vanessa George, the author took a group from the Scottish Chapter-ARS to Tremeer for a conducted tour with the Head Gardener. In many ways it was just as though time had stood still; the two beds of Kurumes that originated from Yokohama Nurseries were still very much in evidence beneath the terrace, as were many of Roza's rhododendron hybrids. Unfortunately, there was not time during the visit to search for labels on the azaleas, although by chance several original labels were located on the rhododendrons.(10)

When Russell sold the Sunningdale Nurseries in 1968, as a result of a disagreement with his cousin, and went to live

at Castle Howard near York, he took 21 varieties of "Wilson's Fifty" with him and 21 of "Stevenson's Collection." What is interesting is that three of the latter were mature plants. For example, 'Mikaera Zakura' ['Mkaera-zakura'] is noted as being 4' x 3', and this suggests that Russell did acquire the remaining 30 plants from Tower Court. Also, Russell chose to take with him six plants raised from cuttings of the oddly named 'Shjuchuke,' so this plant must have intrigued him in some way.(7) Some of the Kurumes were planted in Ray Wood and others around his home, but many of the plants at Castle Howard were relocated during Russell's lifetime; an exercise is currently in hand to reassess the whole of the Russell Rhododendron Collection and to identify all the extant plants. It would appear that the availability in the trade of Stevenson's introductions ceased at the time Russell sold Sunningdale.

James Russell visited Fred C. Galle at Callaway Gardens, Georgia, on 28-29th October, 1980, and he returned to Castle Howard with a listing of 33 Kurume azaleas that Galle was looking to obtain. This listing included 19 of "Stevenson's Collection," but as Russell had only taken 21 of the collection with him to Castle Howard he was only able to supply Galle with 12 of those on the list. In a letter dated 10th November, 1980 Russell wrote:

I also enclose a photocopy of the colour descriptions of the Azaleas I used to grow at Sunningdale. These were pretty carefully recorded. The evergreen azaleas had, some of them, been at the nursery since around 1910, *Macrantha* (and *Amoenum*) had been introduced by the nursery through Fortune in the 19th Century. A great bulk of the collection came from Tower Court and a certain number from my old cousin Hamilton Smith, who also did a lot of importing from Japan. It is sad to think that the source of all this has now been destroyed.(12)

Galle then wrote to Russell indicating he was heavily involved in taking forward an update of *The Azalea Book* by Frederic Lee and sent Russell a specimen data sheet to be completed for each of the azaleas in the Sunningdale listings, previously supplied. This information was collated and returned with a letter dated 30 September, 1981. A batch of Kurume cuttings was sent to Galle by Russell on 29 September, 1981, and was received in good condition. Unfortunately, while nearly all the cuttings rooted, there were other problems, as Galle explains in a letter dated February 28, 1983:

I made a visit to Japan for azaleas and plants and asked that your azaleas be re-labeled and moved to the lath house. The plants were moved. In fact I found out twice before getting to the lath house, and when I found them last fall, only one plant of each had a label nearby, instead of wired on. I am not sure I can straighten them out this spring. Frankly, I was sick, mad and damned disgusted but we have had considerable changes here and I guess it's par.

In his reply Russell offered to root a further batch of cuttings to straighten out the labelling, but Galle did not take up the offer in his later letters; neither is there any indication that Galle was able to correct the labelling himself. Russell also invited Galle to come over to visit the gardens and see the azaleas, but Galle's response indicated that while he would have loved to take up the offer he was unable to do so due to other commitments.⁽¹²⁾ No other records have been found to date that indicate other shipments of plants were sent to the US of "Stevenson's Collection" of Kurumes.

Conclusion

This tale has taken us on a journey across the latter 80 years of the last century and has been a means of bringing together a diverse number of reference sources to enable a more cohesive perspective to be written on the Stevenson introductions. In this journey some thought-provoking items, including the letters and documents connected with Roza Stevenson, Fred Galle, and Jim Russell, have played an important role in the tale, and provide us with a fascinating glimpse of times gone by.

Undoubtedly, plants of "Stevenson's Collection" will exist in old gardens in Britain and Ireland, some of which Jim Russell will have been commissioned to landscape, whereas owners of other estates will have purchased plants direct from Sunningdale Nursery. At the time of writing only four of "Stevenson's Collection" introductions are available "in the trade" in Britain; however, some nurseries may well have stock plants available to them that are not being propagated. While it is now around 40 years since the collections of Stevenson's introductions were broken up at both Tower Court and Sunningdale Nurseries, it should still be practicable to re-establish a significant collection of these plants and gain NCCPG status for what is an historically significant group of Kurumes.

Perhaps the last word belongs to Jim Russell, who played the role of facilitator in this story for the better part of 40 years. In 1992, towards the end of his life, when reminiscing about his visits to the gardens at Tower Court at the invitation of John and Roza Stevenson, to compare the performance of various forms of rhododendrons and azaleas, he recalled:

During the great influx of collected seed between the wars there were many large gardens able to grow very large numbers of seedlings and to select the best form with the largest and most brightly coloured flowers. The inevitable neglect caused by the war destroyed or damaged these collections and the only one to survive more or less intact was the late J.B. Stevenson's at Tower Court. Here, in dry, sandy, acid soil at 300' (91m) above sea level, some 80 acres (32ha) were planted in expeditions, with anything up to 50 plants from a single collection [number]. Your host was apt to ask, "Shall we go for a walk in Kingdon-Ward 1926 this afternoon?"

It would be wonderful to be able to say that again today.

John Hammond's interests in propagating and cultivating azaleas and rhododendrons stretch back over 30 years, although he has been involved with gardens for considerably longer. He is particularly interested in the history of old azalea and rhododendron gardens and encouraging their restoration. He is Vice-President of the Scottish Rhododendron Society, ARS Alternate Director at Large, and a frequent contributor to the Journal, ARS.

[The continuation of this article will be published in the Winter 2006 issue of The Azalean, Ed.]

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