

The Garden and Hybridizing Program of Bob Stewart

Carolyn Beck—Oak Hill, Virginia

The Stewart garden offers a unique environment for the azalea enthusiast to enjoy. It has an extensive azalea collection representing many hybrids with impressive diversity, most of which will not be found in any garden center. Visiting this garden is also an opportunity to observe an avid hybridizing program in progress, and a chance to gather ideas about innovative plant care techniques.

Bob's gardening at his location in Springfield, Virginia, began nearly 50 years ago, shortly after he finished building a new home for his wife, Betty, and their three children. With the construction of the house complete in 1960, Bob was ready to landscape. Fortunately for us, he had just discovered the world of azaleas, becoming enamored with them after seeing a few commonly known varieties.

There were two major challenges to the site, though. First, the property was situated on a considerable slope. Second, the soil was thin, overlying hardpan, a hard, compacted layer through which roots can't grow. It was not a hospitable environment for our ericaceous friends, or most plants for that matter. However, a nice stand of trees and an underground spring brought the promise of gardening possibilities.

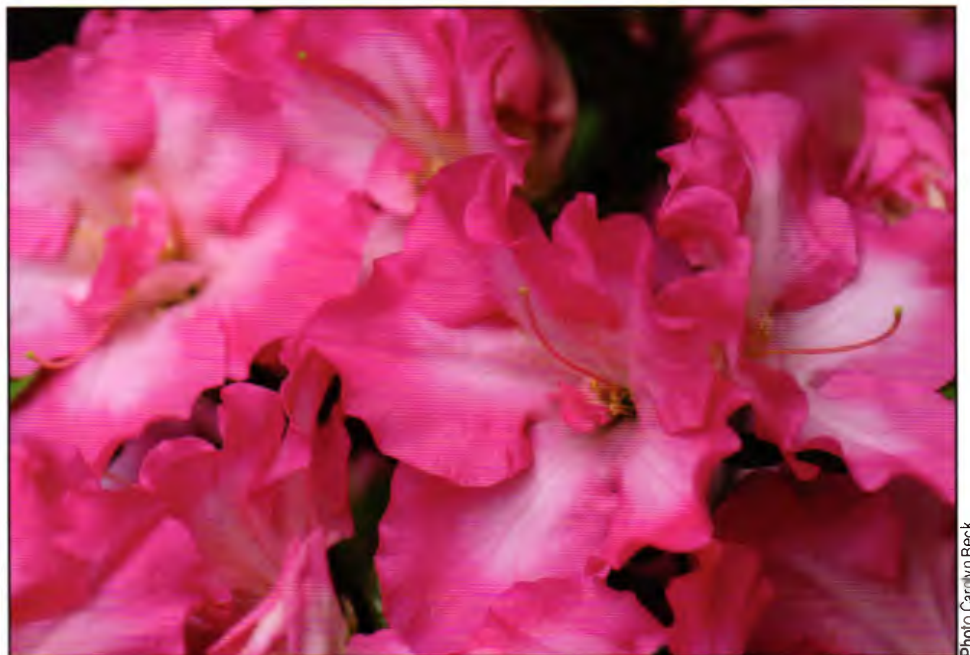
After installing an extensive system of stairs to access the various areas, Bob set out to make a safe haven for his Kurume acquisitions. He covered a hillside near the new house with a generous layer of topsoil and the necessary amendments. Over time, the collection grew as he discovered more and more interesting bloom types. Eventually, the hillside included Back Acres, Satsuki and many other hybrid groups. The results can be seen on the cover of Galle's book, *Azaleas*.

Growing up in Amherst, Massachusetts, Bob had gained experience



▲ Bob Stewart

▼ 'Ashley Ruth'



in the family carpentry business and had been involved in the care of their vegetable garden at home. After time in the Navy, Bob spent many years in the construction business. All these skills, along with his innate curiosity, intuitive nature, and conservationist tendencies, helped him solve the gardening problems he faced in Virginia.

Importing tons of soil for the entire yard did not seem like a viable option



Photo Carolyn Beck

▲ 'Amherst'

▼ 'Jake Frey'



Photo Carolyn Beck

▲ 'Jennifer Nicole'



Photo Carolyn Beck

▼ 'Kaitlin Elizabeth'

to Bob. Plus, root invasion became a problem in the initial plantings, since trees took advantage of the expanded growing medium. Container gardening was the solution. Bob created containers from recycled fifty-five gallon drums. He cut them in half, drilled holes for adequate drainage, and then cleverly disguised them by applying a naturally-aged wood exterior. By propping up the front side, the containers could be placed on the level no matter what the angle of the slope. There were also the added advantages of diminished soil requirements, the avoidance of tree root access, and portability.

Bob enjoyed the outdoors and the sense of accomplishment gardening gave him. It made for a great diversion from the workplace. The Azalea Society provided both the information and the inspiration to continue his collection. One day he found himself wondering what would happen if he were to cross azalea plants that had more exciting flower



Photo Carolyn Beck

▼ 'Allison Ann'

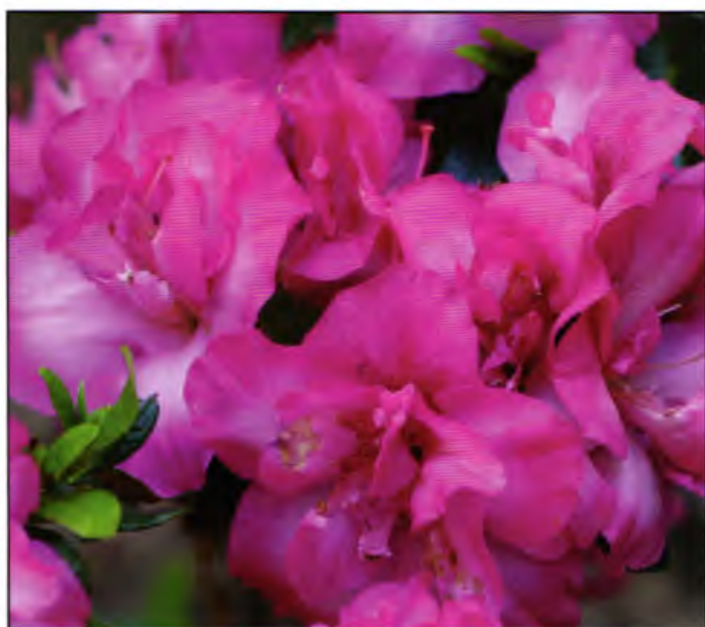


Photo Carolyn Beck



▲ 'Sheri Ann'



▲ 'Sarah Jessica'

▼ 'James Stewart'

types but might be on the more tender side, with those of a hardy and reliable nature. Starting with a few crosses in 1990, Bob increased the number each year, and soon had thousands of seedlings to evaluate.

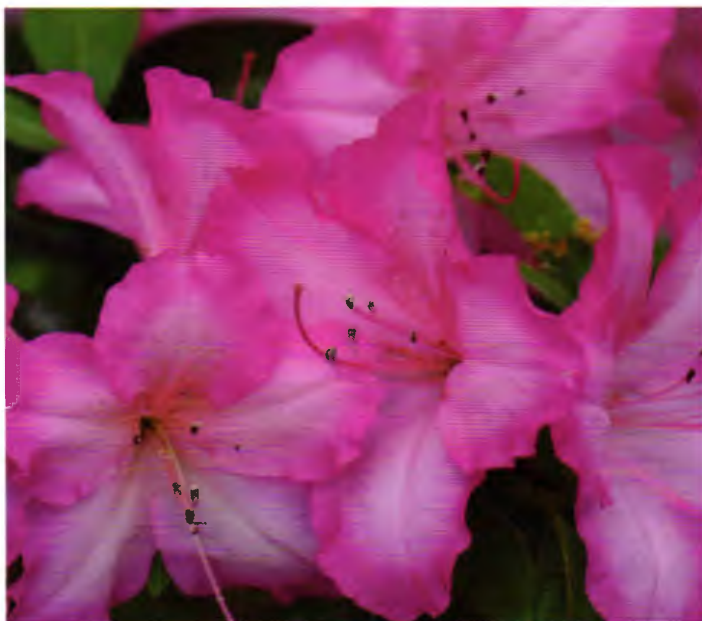
To provide winter protection for the young plants, Bob designed and constructed a series of modular cold frames that could be adjusted to accommodate plants of various sizes. He came up with innovative ways of labeling and kept meticulous records. An avid reader, he combed the literature for better ways to care for azaleas and then experimented with different types of soils, fertilizers, sprays, pruning, and propagation techniques to determine what worked best. With his spirit of generosity, Bob shared this information, as well as plants and cuttings, with those who were interested.

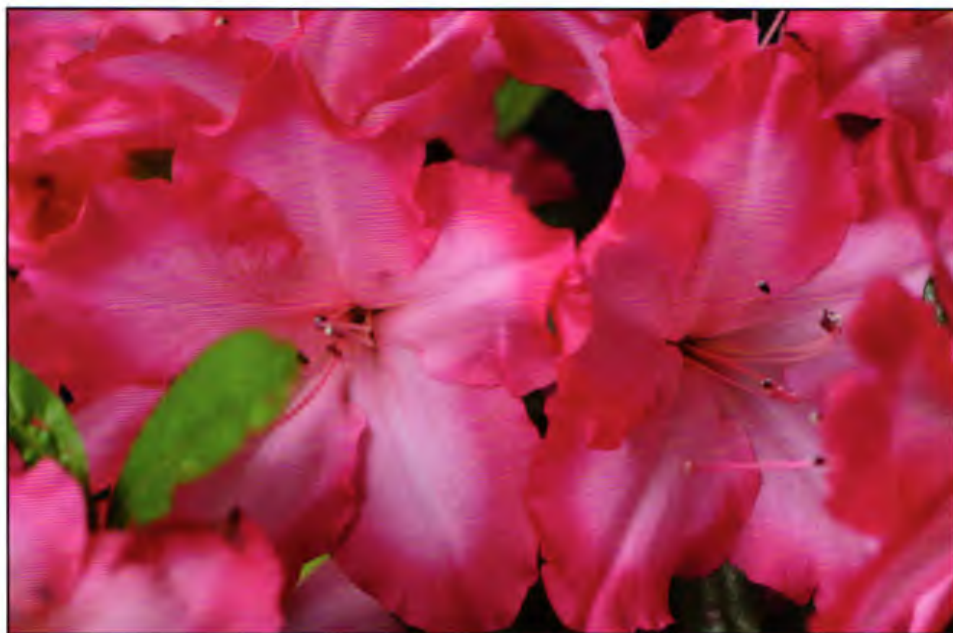
Many of the seedlings from Bob's crosses can take your breath away; wonderfully exciting blooms and outstanding



▼ 'Debra Lee'

▼ 'Betty Ellen'





▲ 'Grace Katherine'

▼ 'Briana Murin'



foliage on plants with great form and improved hardiness. He has named and registered quite a few hybrids, and there are many others under number that are still being evaluated.

The first group of introductions from his hybridizing program was named mostly for family, since this is the core of his life. One of his favorite azalea creations, a pale shell-pink single with a lighter center identified as RBS-27, he named 'Betty Ellen' for his wife of 60 years. The azalea 'Rob Bruce' (RBS-15), with very large, variegated single flowers of white striped with purple, is named for their son. 'Debra Lee' (RBS-49), a ruffled pink and white bicolor, and 'Karee Lynn' (RBS-66), a full double of coral-pink, are named for their two daughters.

The Stewarts have nine grandchildren, and Bob has named an azalea for each of them. The popular 'Ashley Ruth' (RBS-1) is a semi-double bicolor of white

with deep bright pink edges. 'Jake Frey' (RBS-5) is a hose-in-hose white with occasional pink markings and solids. 'Sarah Jessica' (RBS-6) is quite variable, having very large single, pale lavender blossoms with lighter centers and a chartreuse blotch, although some flowers have deeper lavender flecks, sectors, and some solids, too. 'James Stewart' (RBS-7) is a striking single bicolor of white bordered in deep bright pink. 'Kaitlin Elizabeth' (RBS-14) is semi-double and quite variable, having white blossoms with light pink stripes and sectors and a chartreuse blotch or pink blossoms with irregular white edges and a dark rose blotch. 'Jennifer Nicole' (RBS-33) has pale pink, semi-double blossoms with irregular white petal edges, occasional deeper pink sectors, and solid colors, all with a dark rose blotch. 'Allison Ann' (RBS-47) is a semi-double of dark pink with a lighter center. 'Grace Katherine' (RBS-60) is a large single bright pink bicolor with a soft pink center and 'Briana Murin' (RBS-63) has semi-double pale lavender-pink flowers with lighter centers that remind one of an orchid.

'Sheri Ann' (RBS-37), namesake of their daughter-in-law, is a large pink single with white centers and contrasting deep pink blotch. The only plant to date not named for a family member is a striking pure white single 'Amherst' (RBS-4), named for the town where Bob grew up. Many more fantastic selections from Bob Stewart's hybridizing program are yet to be named and await their "coming out party." We are grateful for Bob's legacy and for the many other contributions he has made to members of the azalea community.

Carolyn Beck and her husband, Paul, live in Oak Hill, Virginia. They are members of the Northern Virginia Chapter. They attribute much of their enthusiasm for and knowledge of azaleas to the mentoring of people like Bob Stewart.