The Quest for the Yellow Evergreen Azalea
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Editor’s Note: This is the first in a series of articles based on Don Hyatt’s presentation at the 2009 ASA Convention.

One unrealized goal in hybridizing is the quest for a yellow evergreen azalea. There are a number of evergreen azaleas with flowers of light cream to greenish yellow. Some are arguably as deep as the dwarf yellow Rhododendron keiskei but nothing has approached the yellows found in the deciduous azaleas.

Some yellowish evergreen azaleas include the Kurume ‘Mizu-no-yamabuki’, the Glenn Dale ‘Puck’, and Robin Hill azaleas ‘Olga Niblett’ and ‘Bob White’. All of those except ‘Puck’ have hose-in-hose flowers so they are female sterile and do not set seed. Sadly, one often runs into sterility in hybridizing. I once paid dearly at an auction for a small plant of a light yellow evergreen azalea raised from seed of R. kaempferi f. album by Dr. Sandra McDonald. I wanted to use it in hybridizing but discovered that it is sterile in both directions. It is difficult to root, too.

The evergreen azalea with probably the strongest yellow color to date is ‘Melba’s Dream.’ It is a most unusual plant. Reported to be a cross of an evergreen azalea called ‘Lois’ with a yellow Exbury azalea, it has small flowers of an unmistakable yellow hue. It is not an easy plant to grow, though. I am not aware of it being used in other crosses, so its use as a parent may be questionable. Perhaps it is sterile, too.

A very interesting side note about ‘Melba’s Dream’ is that it seems to be immune to petal blight! Those small petals are unique in that they have obvious hairs on the margins, reminding one of a calyx or a leaf rather than a typical petal. Since petal blight does not attack the foliage of azaleas, perhaps these strange petals have some property akin to leaf tissue that makes them immune to the disease. Another azalea that seems to be immune to petal blight is the Satsuki variety, ‘Chojuho.’ It has small, long lasting flowers of a coral red color and its petals have hairs on the edge, too. I am not aware of any other azaleas or rhododendrons immune to pet-
al blight, but this might be an interesting feature to explore.

Dr. August Kehr ("Augie") was convinced it was possible to produce an evergreen azalea with strong yellow color. [1][5] Although he pursued that goal for many years, he passed away before achieving it. He has, however, left us a rich legacy. Not only do we have the remnants of his hybridizing program but also the knowledge he gained in his research that he willingly shared.

Among Augie Kehr's notable introductions was 'Cream Ruffles', which is a rather nice cream-colored hybrid in its own right. 'Kehr's Moonbeam', that came from the cross (578-8A x 'Green Glow'), was his last, and probably best, greenish yellow. Interestingly, the pollen parent in that cross, 'Green Glow', is a double greenish white introduced by Roslyn Nursery from seed I sent to the ARS Seed Exchange. The cross was (('Eri' x 'Glacier') x 'Anna Kehr').

Augie noted that the only yellowish pigments found in evergreen azaleas are pale ivory-colored compounds called flavonols. Hybrids that merely concentrate those pigments can never produce a flower deep enough to be called yellow. He felt it necessary to introduce the much stronger yellow pigments found in other flowers like marigolds, daffodils, and other promising parents to produce additional generations. [9] They did find evidence of carotenes in several of the "yellow" seedlings, but they noted that the heaviest concentrations were in the blotch regions. This made me think that azaleas with expanded blotch areas might be extremely useful in this project. With a larger blotch region, it might be easier to concentrate the stronger yellow pigments. Carotenoids are not dissolved in the sap, but must be carried in plastid bodies found in the blotch areas.

I am now looking for azaleas that have large blotches since they might be useful in this breeding project. Naturally, white-flowered varieties would be preferable but one plant that caught my eye is Marshy Point's 'Pam Corkran.' It has a blotch that can extend to at least 75% of the corolla. Unfortunately, this plant is probably not useful in its present form, but it could be valuable in the future. The first problem is that it is not white, so it carries an anthocyanin pigment that will complicate the yellow color expression in its seedlings. At least it is not purple! Second, the fact that the flowers have a colored border implies that the azalea is a diploid. Azaleas with bordered flowers have been shown to be diploid plants except for the colored flower edge, which is actually tetraploid tissue. To use the plant in breeding, it will be necessary to convert the whole plant to tetraploid in order to cross successfully with a deciduous azalea.

It is clear that the quest for a yellow evergreen azalea is not going to be easy, but it is an admirable goal. Now that I am beginning to understand Augie Kehr's approach, I see a possible path to success, but it will take several stages. First, it will be helpful to convert other evergreen azaleas to tetraploid forms, selecting for creamy whites with no evidence of purple pigment. It would also be great if they have large, heavy blotch regions and superb foliage. The next stage will be to cross yellow deciduous azaleas onto those plants to produce an F1 generation. It is not likely that those will have the persistent foliage and deep yellow flower color we desire, so it will then be necessary to cross those with siblings and other promising parents to produce additional generations. Hopefully, we can concentrate that yellow color while

Continued on Page 64.
from the Royal Horticultural Society of London, England, for one of her tropical day bloomers ‘Helen Nash’. Today, she is semi-retired and lives at Cedar Mountain, NC.

Other works from Connelly include a series of hybrid water iris called ‘Fallen Heroes’. Each iris in this series is named for a police officer killed in the line of duty. Photos of her *Nymphaea* ‘Blue Anemone’, *N.* ‘Joseph Baynard Shearouse’, and *N.* ‘Stormy Weather’ are available online at www.internationalwaterlilycollection.com.

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References


Quest for the Yellow Evergreen Azalea

Continued from Page 57.

selecting for vigor and superior evergreen foliage.

I call on all azalea hybridizers in the ASA to join in the hunt for the yellow evergreen azalea. It will take time, experimentation, collaboration, and plenty of luck, but I am certain we can do it! Of course, when we eventually get that race of perfect yellow evergreen azaleas, rock-hardy plants with glossy dark green foliage and strongly fragrant, large ruffled flowers in shades of light lemon to deep gold that also resist petal blight, then we can start working on our next goal, a blue azalea. Hey... we can dream, can’t we?

Don Hyatt has been an avid hybridizer of azaleas and rhododendrons for more than 30 years, with a particular interest in deciduous azaleas.