Editor's Note: The following article is the first installment of a two-part story.

The following diary is really a collection of excerpts from email messages sent to friends and family over several months during the winter of 2009-10. Some editing has been done to improve clarity, and to correct spelling and grammar errors. Metric equivalents have been added also.

Friday: December 18, 2009
I have been running around the past two days trying to get ready for the big snowstorm. They are calling for 14 to 20 inches (35 to 51 cm) of snow here, possibly two feet (61 cm) west of Washington, D.C. That’s me! I have been trying to patch some cracked and broken glass in the greenhouse, but I ran out of duct tape. I went by Home Depot, but it was too crowded. There was a line just to get into the parking lot, so I gave up and came home. The local weather stations are calling for a “snowstorm of epic proportions.” I had a feeling we were in for rough winter, but this may be just an appetizer.

We don’t normally get much snow here in the D.C. suburbs. We average about 17 inches (43 cm) of snow all year long. In some years, we have only gotten a trace of snow. I have lived in this house since I was three years old so I do remember some big snows here when I was a child. They are rare, though. We haven’t had a White Christmas for more than 20 years.

Sunday: December 20, 2009
The storm is finally winding down and it looks like I had around 22 inches (56 cm) of snow. It will be a White Christmas this year, guaranteed! When the storm started, the temperature was 27 degrees (-2.7° C) but dropped to 23 degrees (-5° C) overnight. The snow was very dry, so it didn’t stick to the branches. We had a 6-inch (15 cm) heavy wet snow the first week in December and that broke some branches, but this one seems easier on the plants.

I am thankful that the greenhouse roof held. I did raise the thermostat to 80 degrees (27° C), so most of the snow melted on the glass as it fell. There is a big drift on the glass at the far end of the greenhouse. That end was cooler. I may try to get over there tomorrow and knock it off, but I have to be careful. Big chunks of snow and ice can easily break the glass when they shift. I learned that the hard way one winter. My fuel bill is going to be high, but I guess it is better than losing the greenhouse.

Monday: December 28, 2009
I drove about 150 miles (240 km) to the Shenandoah Valley to be with family for Christmas. On the way there, we were getting freezing rain. The major roads were okay and it had warmed up to 40 degrees (4° C) by the time I came back.

With all this snow and cold, I already have a bad case of spring fever. I am
Purple azaleas tower over the well house in May 2009.

February 10, 2010: Don’s front yard during the height of the blizzard.

This past spring I took all those flower pictures last spring. I have some from the ASA convention here in Northern Virginia but I took many more. A few days after our convention, I visited North Carolina to see the Rhododendron vaseyi. I went back in June to photograph the native azaleas on Roan and Gregory balds. I even took some high-definition video this year. I need to get supplies ready, because I always plant native azalea seed to usher in the New Year. It’s a tradition!

Tuesday: January 4, 2010

I got The Azalean in the mail today with details about the 2010 ASA Convention in New Orleans. Looks like a great meeting! I’ll send in my registration this week.

It has still been cold, 12 degrees (-11° C) over the weekend with 40 mph (64 km) winds. What I didn’t realize is that some deer have been living under my deck for the past couple of weeks. Apparently they used that area as a refuge and only had to walk a few feet to dine on my azaleas. My brother gave me a wildlife camera with a motion detector and flash for night pictures. I set it up down there and the flash seems to be scaring the deer away. Another tool in the arsenal!

Thursday: January 14, 2010

The “January Thaw” has arrived and I am seeing grass for this first time in weeks. I noticed broken branches on several azaleas including the main trunk of a big ‘Koromo Shikibu.’ Not sure which storm caused that. I need to spray deer repellent again.

Sunday: January 31, 2010

I guess the thaw is officially over. I got six-and-a-half-inches (16 cm) of fresh snow last night. It was the light and fluffy snow since yesterday’s high temperature was only 17 degrees (-8° C). It dropped to 11 degrees (-11.6° C) last night, but then went up to about 30 degrees (-1° C) today. Most of the snow from the December dump had melted except for one small patch in the shade beside the deck. Now everything is white again.

I have gotten a lot of practice shoveling snow this winter, but it is going to be much harder now. I think I cracked a couple of ribs last night. I was sitting in my easy chair at the computer and lurched to one side to grab something that I dropped. I fell over the arm of my chair and heard my ribs crack and felt shooting pains. It takes real talent to break a rib while sitting in a chair! Now it hurts to cough, it hurts to laugh, and I just discovered it definitely hurts to shovel snow. I can push some of it aside without causing too much pain, but lifting is out of the question. They are still talking about a potential snowstorm on Friday. I hope they are wrong.

Wednesday: February 3, 2010

I had another six inches (15 cm) of snow last night. It was only supposed to be a snow flurry! The problem now is that I have a second “war wound.” This morning, I slipped on the ice in my driveway while getting the newspaper. I was coming down the steep side and one foot held but the other didn’t. I did the splits and really twisted my knee. I saw stars and slid the rest of the way down the drive to the house. I must have torn some ligaments or something. I will try to get an appointment with my doctor. I did manage to...
push most of the snow off my driveway from this storm today, but the weather reports keep saying “the big one” is on its way.

Thursday: February 4, 2010

The weather forecast is for a foot (30 cm) or more of snow tomorrow ... not the dry kind like we had before but heavy, wet snow. One of the weather forecasters said this storm could be comparable to the Blizzard of ‘93. In that storm, my neighbor’s tree fell on my house and took out my entire roof. That was an ordeal! Most of the forecasters say this storm has the potential to be worse than our December snow. I still haven’t fixed that glass in the greenhouse, but I did get more duct tape.

I saw my doctor today. He said I likely tore some ligaments in my knee but they still seem attached. It shouldn’t require surgery, so his advice was to take something for pain and check back in a week. He told me they don’t do anything for broken ribs, either. He did say to not shovel any snow. I smirked and reminded him I had to shovel my driveway just to get here. He repeated his orders: “Don’t shovel any snow!” I guess I’ll have to hunker down and wait for the thaw. He told me ligaments heal slowly, and that it would take at least 6 months or more. I need to be careful not to make things worse.

Friday: February 5, 2010

It is 11 a.m. and the snow hasn’t started here yet, but it is snowing west of town. Traffic is horrendous everywhere; the parking lots are full with people trying to pick up last minute necessities. I did that on Monday. The newscasters are now referring to this storm as “Snowmageddon.” If the weather models are right, we could really get dumped on... two feet (61 cm) of wet snow with winds from 30 to 40 mph (48 to 64 km)

It is almost midnight, and I have about eight inches (20 cm) of snow already. It seems to be coming in waves with gusty winds, thunder, and lightning. Yes, Snowmageddon has arrived!

Saturday: February 6, 2010

So far, I have about 20 inches (51 cm) of new snow on top of about eight inches (20 cm) that was left from the last two storms. They are talking about another foot (30 cm) possible by nightfall. What is worse, there is talk of another storm due next Tuesday. Whatever happened to global warming?

The first 10 to 15 inches (25 to 38 cm) of snow was that heavy wet kind and weighed down trees and branches. The strong winds are gusting to 40 mph (64 km) and final snow totals could be 30 to 40 inches (76 to 101 cm) in some local areas. I hope that is not me!

The newscasters are using other terms for this blizzard, like “Snowpocalypse” or “Snowbliteration.” “Snowmageddon” still seems to be the preference. Temperatures are not supposed to get above freezing all next week.

It is 6 p.m. The snow has finally stopped here and the setting sun is beginning to add some golden tones to the clouds above. My total was somewhere between 26 to 28 inches (66 to 71 cm) of new snow in this storm, so that makes well over 3 feet (91 cm) this week alone. I am so thankful to have power since they say some people may not get power back for several days. I lost electricity during Hurricane Isabel.
and it was out for eight days. That was rough because I have a well and that meant no water, too.

The news is filled with reports of roof collapses all around the region. I dug a path from the front door to my car in case I need “temporary housing” when my roof gives way. The snow is incredibly heavy and dense. It is like digging into a bale of compressed peat moss. I can only shovel for about 15 minutes and then I have to quit.

Sunday: February 7, 2010

I just finished digging a trench all the way to the street so I can get out of here in an emergency. The snow is up to my waist. It is impossible to go anywhere unless there is a path. The temperature was 14 degrees (-10° C) last night but rose to a high of 26 degrees (-3° C).

This afternoon, two rather seedy looking characters came down my path to the door. They spoke very broken English and I had second thoughts about even opening the door. They offered to finish shoveling my driveway for $500. I tried to explain that I am a retired teacher and I have no money. I didn’t even try to haggle. I was just happy that I wasn’t robbed.

Monday: February 8, 2010

Defying my doctor, I continue to shovel snow, carefully. My knee and ribs are sore but they don’t seem to be any worse off than before. The weathermen say that we have another winter storm due tomorrow... at least six to 12 inches (15 to 30 cm), and as much as two feet (61 cm) north of D.C. Oh, please be wrong!

I was looking at pictures of my garden taken during the 2009 ASA Convention, and tried to get some of the same shots in the snow today. What was most apparent was that my older azaleas, some of which were more than six feet (1.8 m) tall, have all been flattened by the heavy snow. They must be crushed under that mess since those areas are only about four feet (1.2 m) high now, and that is with three feet (0.9 m) of snow on top of the plants. At least the deer can’t browse on my azaleas right now. They can’t even get near my yard, except along that path I dug to the front door.

It still hurts to laugh, but I couldn’t help myself when I read John Perkins’ link on the Yahoo Azalea group today. Political pundits had been discussing the special election to replace the late Senator Ted Kennedy. The general consensus was, “It would be a cold day in Hell before Massachusetts ever sends a Republican Senator to Washington, D.C.” Of course, a Republican won. Their new Senator Scott Brown arrived last Thursday, and by the weekend, Hell hath indeed frozen over! The city is closed until further notice because of this monumental storm.

Tuesday: February 9, 2010

The weather report is so depressing. They are now talking about another heavy snowstorm here starting about noon and continuing all day tomorrow with 40 mph (64 km) winds again. I decided to start shoveling the deck today. I need alternative escape routes if my roof collapses. The news is full of stories about collapsed buildings and the next storm hasn’t even arrived yet. Add more two more feet (60 cm) of heavy snow on top of this and we have a potential disaster!

The big problem with so much snow is there is absolutely no place to put it, at least for people with azalea gardens. I have planted many favorite azaleas along my driveway where I can see them daily. I have planted double whites like ‘Sandra’s Green Ice’ and ‘Secret Wish’ as well as the petaloid ‘Wagner’s White Spider’ along one side. I have an old favorite ‘Pink Pearl’ over there, two pale yellow azaleas, Sandra McDonald’s form of R. kaempferi album and ‘Mizuno-yamabuki.’ To complete the color scheme, I also have the deep red ‘Karafune’ and a red Acer japonicum dissectum, ‘Garnet.’ On the other side are two more McDonald hybrids, ‘Springtime Blush’ and ‘David’s Choice,’ and Joe Klimavicz’s buff colored azalea ‘Sandy Dandy.’ I can’t see any of them right now, but I know where they are. I surely can’t pile more snow on top of those.

Don Hyatt has been an avid hybridizer of azaleas and rhododendrons for more than 30 years, with a particular interest in deciduous azaleas, and has been teaching mathematics and computer science for more than 35 years.