

In Memory

Mary Beasley

By J.O. Thornton

Mary Beasley of Lavonia, Georgia, passed away August 26, 2010. Mary, a long-time member of the ASA and ARS, started Transplant Nursery with her husband, George. The nursery is currently operated by their son, Jeff, and his wife, Lisa.

Sam Gibson

By J.O. Thornton

Sam Gibson, owner and operator of Riverside Nursery in Bethlehem, Georgia, passed away August 4, 2010. Sam was a founding member of the Oconee Chapter of the ASA and was always ready to provide plant material to the chapter. His nursery was well known for high quality plants.

Riverside Nursery is carrying on Sam's high standards under the leadership of his daughter, Sherri. Like Sam, she generously supports the Oconee Chapter.

James O. Harris

By Ken Gohring

James Ottis Harris, developer of a significant number of select hybrid evergreen azaleas, passed away on June 13, 2010. His wife of 52 years, Ella Ruth, and two sons, Jim and Bryan, survive him. These three survivors played significant roles in supporting James' work. He served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, working on motorcycles used by the military. After service in the Army, he worked as a mechanic in his father's car business.

He first became interested in azaleas in the 1970s. He developed a working relationship with Georgians Ralph Pennington and Bruce Hancock, both accomplished hybridizers. His early efforts concentrated on developing evergreen azaleas with hanging growth habit and large blooms. The work also included goals of heat tolerant plants that would survive in the warm climate of the southeastern states.

Perhaps the most outstanding plant of this early work is a "hanging basket" azalea named 'Pink Cascade'. It features 2-inch blooms and a cascading growth habit not unlike English ivy. This plant was patented in Europe and it received significant success with one nursery group, selling more than a quarter of a million plants.

Other early Harris work included an azaleodendron, the cross of the azalea 'White Gumpo' x *R. keiskei*, named 'Bruce Hancock' after Harris' associate. 'Harris Fascination', 'Gloria Still', and 'Joan Garrett' are other early successes. 'Joan Garrett' has large salmon pink blooms that reach 6 inches in diameter at times.

A second period, commencing in the mid-80s, included significant work in developing red cultivars. These plants include 'Midnight Flare', 'Coronado Red', 'Rainfire' and 'Jay Valentine'. 'Jay Valentine', named for Harris' grandchild was his favorite. It features large blooms and good plant habit and



▲ 'Vivation'

Photo Bill McDavit

foliage. 'Midnight Flare' was named a rhododendron of the year for 2010 for the Southeast. It is widely planted and admired in many southern gardens. 'Rainfire' is a late bloomer and is quite heat tolerant. 'Coronado Red' is a fine red, not as dark as 'Midnight Flare', that has superior plant form.

In his most recent work, James developed several bi-colors, primarily with purple and white coloration. Like many hybridizers, he worked on developing extended bloom season and the elusive yellow evergreen. His work resulted in plants with dual bloom seasons. Four of these plants will be introduced to the public in the spring of 2011 as part of McCorkle Nursery's Bloom 'N Again series. An additional 16 more of his plants, including a wide range of colors and flower forms, will be introduced in coming years as part of this series. The colors include reds, dark reds, red bi-colors, lavenders, pinks, peach-salmons and oranges. McCorkle plans to introduce additional Harris azaleas. These selections will include selections developed in recent years as well as some of his earlier cultivars. One new plant named 'Electra' is an attractive white with a deep pink halo.

Harris was a long-time member of the Azalea Chapter of ARS and the Oconee Chapter of ASA. He did not make significant efforts to register his plants until recently. In 2008, 22 of his cultivars, which span a large period of his work, were registered.

Harris was a diligent student of plant hybridization. Most of his knowledge came from extensive hands-on working experience. Through his study of various plant features, he was able to select the proper parents for his crosses. Although having only limited formal educational opportunities, he achieved a significant notch in azalea hybridization, which has been recognized by the popularity of his plants. One prominent rhododendron authority has stated "... his azaleas will live long and say much about a great man. He left a heritage that will live on."