

A Winter to Forget: “Snowmageddon 2.0”—Part II

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

The following diary is really a collection of excerpts from e-mail 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.

Tuesday: February 9, 2010

I did get a better view of the garden in the back yard from the deck today. It is a total disaster. Almost all of the azaleas and rhododendrons have been flattened. My big pale yellow Exbury azalea ‘Marina’ that was featured on the cover of last winter’s *The Azalean* has only one branch visible above the snow. The rest of the bush is prostrate. The snow is too deep for me to get anywhere near them. I had some large ‘Glacier’ azaleas off the deck, and I can already see damage there. The broken ends of large branches are poking out above the snow.

It is 4 p.m. now and the temperature has risen to 33 degrees (0.5° C). This is the first time it has been above freezing since the snow started falling last weekend. There were a few flurries awhile ago but they stopped and the sky is brighter. The news reports warn that this is just a temporary lull since a coastal storm is forming to the south and will be here later this evening. We are supposed to have ferocious winds with this storm—20 to 40 mph (32 to 64 km) with higher gusts.

I did finish shoveling the deck. I must admit that I tried to throw the last few shovels on the very top of my largest pile to get it above the deck. I made it! That pile is well over eight feet (2.4 m) tall and looks exactly like the Matterhorn. There weren’t many places I

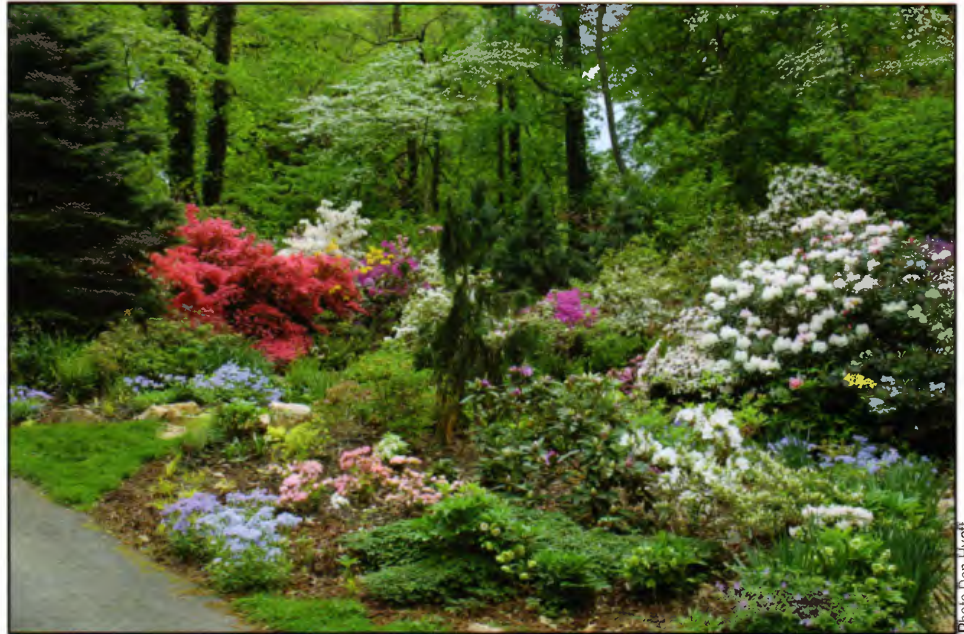


Photo Don Hyatt

▲ Don Hyatt’s yard in bloom prior to “Snowmageddon 2.0”

▼ The same area on February 23, 2010.



Photo Don Hyatt

could put the snow from the deck because I have so many good plants down there. My best Gregory Bald azalea selections are below the deck and I have that huge pink Glenn Dale ‘Dream’ at the corner. That monster measures eight feet (2.4 m) tall by 25 feet (7.6 m) wide and I can’t put snow on it, either. I finally decided I could sacrifice a three feet (0.9m) tall ‘My Mary.’ She is a tough girl, but I have others in the garden. Of course, she may not thaw out until June.



▲ Hyatt's greenhouse surrounded by snow in February 2010.



▲ Snow piled in Hyatt's back yard. Finding places to put the snow was problematic.

Wednesday: February 10, 2010

Snow, snow, snow! It is 9:30 a.m. and they have upgraded our expected storm totals again. We are under a blizzard warning now with 10 to 15 inches (25 to 38 cm) of snow expected by nightfall, possibly more. The winds are fierce! I already have about six inches (15 cm) of new snow, but it will be very hard to measure totals this time due to extreme drifting. We did have a period of sleet overnight after about the first three inches (7 cm) of snow. That packed things down and will at least limit the drifting to the top layer.

It is 2 p.m. now, and we are having white-out conditions all across the region. I guess we should call this "Snowmageddon 2.0." I can barely make out the house across the street but I can see a poor holly tree in my yard that is sideways from those strong winds. I can't believe I still have power. The temperatures here have been continuing to fall. It started out at 30 degrees (-1° C) and is now down to 17 degrees (-8° C). We have had gusts to nearly 50 mph (80 km). It is just brutal out there!

I am getting a lot of ice buildup on the greenhouse now because the outside temperature is so low that ice has formed on the glass inside the greenhouse. The snow doesn't melt as it falls. The furnace is running constantly and I bet it is still only 55 degrees (12° C) in there. There is snow buildup on the storm windows in the house, too. Some have large ice crystals on the glass, and others are completely frosted over. I can't see out.

It is 6 p.m. and the snow does seem to be letting up. I have noticed some amazing and artistic snow drifts outside. There is a large four feet (1.2 m) drift at the edge of the garage that completely engulfs an old 'Hino Crimson'. The patio between the house and the deck has filled up with snow; it must be at least five feet (1.5 m) deep. As best as I can tell, I think I got 14 inches (35 cm) with this storm so that makes at least 54 inches (137 cm) of snow in only 10 days, and more than 80 inches (203 cm) for the season.

Friday: February 12, 2010

It has taken me two days but I finally cleared the lower driveway to the street edge again. Then the plow came by,

so that means I have an extra three feet (0.9 m) of ice to break through to gain access to the street. I'll do that tomorrow since I am not going anywhere. There is only a single lane down the center of the road, but I did get mail and a newspaper today. The temperatures got above freezing for a while, so maybe things will get back to normal soon. Fat chance!

Sunday: February 14, 2010

Shoveling snow is a never-ending task, but the biggest problem continues to be where to put it. I will have to consider that the next time I design a garden. Finding places to put snow is a problem for everyone. The parking lot at RFK Stadium in D.C. has become a dumping ground for snow. Piles are more than 30 feet (9 m) high. It didn't get above freezing here yesterday, so not much melting is going on.

The snow texture is rather firm right now, more like Styrofoam. Instead of shoveling, I cut off sections about the size of a cinder block and try to toss those somewhere. Once a pile is over my head, I start looking for another spot. That's not easy to do. I have had to sacrifice some rare plants but maybe I can root cuttings after this stuff melts.

Monday: February 15, 2010

It is President's Day, and apparently some monster snow plow or road grader came through the neighborhood last night to plow our street. We now have two lanes, so cars have room to pass and it is much safer. I guess they expect us to go out and hit the sales today. Naturally, it closed off my driveway so I have been out much of the morning trying to dig though that. I haven't even finished shoveling the steep side.

The grader was obviously having problems finding places to put snow and apparently dumped much of it on top of what used to be my azalea planting at the street edge. I guess the operator didn't realize that the white expanse wasn't a snow drift. It was my beautiful wall of azaleas including 'Rose Greely,' 'Dayspring,' 'Corsage', and scattered rhododendrons. I wonder what will be left when that stuff melts.

The temperatures were very cold overnight but they have



▲ A forty-year-old *R. makinoi* hidden beneath two feet of snow.



▲ After carefully brushing away the snow, the *R. makinoi* "popped" back into place with minimal damage.

risen up above freezing now. The weathermen say we should get a mix of snow and rain in today's storm—probably no more than one to three inches (3 to 7 cm) in my area. The long range forecast is for maybe "something" on the weekend. Give me a break!

It is 8 p.m., and we did get some fairly heavy snow for a while this afternoon. We only got 1/2 inch (1.2 cm) of new snow, but a "dry spot" has developed over us and they think the snow is almost over. Hallelujah!

Tuesday: February 16, 2010

I am getting a closer look at some of the plants in the garden, and I am beginning to see so much breakage. The problem is that the damage isn't over yet. As the snow melts from below, the top layer settles and more branches are going to break. There is not much I can do about it. I will have to do a lot of heavy pruning this spring. In a few years, things might look decent again, maybe even better in some cases since many of those big plants were really getting out of bounds. I have watched Barbara Bullock's wonderful renovation of the old Glenn Dales at the U.S. National Arboretum over the years. The trick is to prune early in the season before the plants break dormancy (Mother Nature did that), and never take out more than 1/3 of the big branches at any one time. I will try to restore my garden in the same way.

Thursday: February 18, 2010

I spent most of my time after breakfast digging my way to the street edge on the steep side of my circular driveway. I'm done! It is such a feeling of accomplishment. Now I can start working my way around to other parts of the garden.

Sunday: February 21, 2010

I have been digging paths all over the garden today. I quit shoveling late this afternoon, and I am done for the day. Everything hurts, not just my broken body parts, but every single fiber of my being. I was able to dig some trenches through the snow for drainage should we get the heavy rains forecast for tomorrow. I have been most concerned about my special plants.

I finally worked my way over to the edge of the greenhouse because I didn't see any signs of my 40-year-old *R. makinoi*. That narrow leaved rhododendron is one of my favorite specimens in the entire garden. I raised it from seed. The plant used to be four feet (1.2 m) tall but all I could see was a two feet (0.6 m) pile of snow next to some benches. I decided my *R. makinoi* must be flat on the ground with all that snow on top of it. I approached the task like an archaeology dig, carefully removing snow around the plant, a handful at a time. I exposed each branch starting at the main trunk and working to the tip. When I finally got the plant clear, it popped right back into place and seems to be fine. It only has a couple of small broken branches.

In general, the rhododendrons in the garden have come through okay. I lost some branches, but I wondered if the way their leaves curl up when they are cold and straighten out in warmer weather has helped them shed the snow. The huge 'Caroline' that dominates my backyard wasn't even fazed by this mess. It is tough as nails! Their branches do seem flexible.

The more I see the azaleas, though, the more I realize they have taken a very serious hit. My purple azaleas in the front yard beside my well house have been completely crushed, especially in the center. Those were well over six feet (1.8 m) tall but as the melting continues, I can see that many of the trunks in the center of that planting seem to be twisted, splintered, or broken off. The side branches were able to rest on the lawn as the snow piled up so the view from the house should be okay. I have a hybrid white pine I don't know where to plant, so I may put it in the center of that planting. A vertical accent might be nice while the azaleas are filling back in.

Monday: February 22, 2010

It has been above freezing for several days and I noticed that one branch of my witch hazel 'Arnold Promise' that is above the snow has actually opened overnight. Those yellow flowers are a real treat to see. It gives me hope that spring will eventually come. Soon the snow will be just a memory and my azaleas will be in bloom. I expect spring to be late



▲ As the snow melted, significant plant damage was revealed.



▲ Broken limbs of an azalea as snow melts away.
▼ Pruned azaleas making a come back in August 2010.

this year. No matter what the flowers look like, they will be appreciated more than ever after Snowmageddon.

I am certainly looking forward to New Orleans and the ASA Convention. It has been cold along the south, so spring might be late for them. I don't care if there isn't a single azalea in bloom as long as they don't have any snow.

Postmortem:

In late March, I pruned out the most severely broken branches in the azaleas, but tried not to remove more than 1/3 of the branches on any individual plant. By mid-summer, strong new shoots had regenerated from below those cuts. I will need to do additional shaping over a period of several years to restore some plantings, but after the initial shaping most plants look fine.

After such a long and cold winter, the spring was not late but very early. The weather shifted from below normal to way above and most flowers bloomed two weeks ahead of schedule.

The saga of the 'My Mary' under the giant snow pile was interesting. The first twig was visible by March 8, and by March 18, the pile was only 3 ft (0.9 m) tall and a few more branches were showing. After several days with temperatures near 80 degrees (27° C) followed by some heavy rains, the snow pile was only 4 ft (1.2 m) wide and 10 inches (25 cm) high on March 20. By March 25, every bit of snow was gone, but four days later a late freeze caught most of the very early spring bloom, but it was not cold enough to ruin the mid-season garden which was lovely. The plant of 'My Mary' was more like a ground cover after the snows melted and it did lose a major branch. It bloomed two weeks later than the others in the garden.

It seems like we moved from Snowmageddon straight into Dante's Inferno. June and July were the hottest on record with many days well above 100 degrees (38° C). After many weeks of severe drought, rains returned in late July. By August, most plants looked very healthy and were setting buds for next season. The garden seems to be healing, and so am I.



Don Hyatt has been an avid hybridizer of azaleas and rhododendrons for more than 30 years, with a particular interest in deciduous azaleas. He taught mathematics and computer science for more than 35 years. His exceptional web pages at <http://www.tjhsst.edu/~dhyatt/gardencenter.html> demonstrate his ability to combine his work and avocation. Don is a former district director of the ARS, and a past director of the ASA and past president of the Potomac Valley ARS chapter.