

U.S. National Arboretum Decision on De-accession of Selected Collections

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Last November, the U.S. National Arboretum (USNA) announced a decision on de-accession of its Glenn Dale Hillside of its azalea collection on Mt. Hamilton and its National Boxwood collection and its Perennial collection on the Bladensburg Road side of the arboretum. This decision was based on the loss of a long-standing financial support for the USNA Asian Valley Collection from a private donor. Losing this financial support will require the USNA Gardens Unit in 2012 to cut two gardener positions, which were funded by that private donor for its Asian Valley collection. As a result of the loss of funding, and the necessity of cutting two gardener positions, the USNA believes that it has insufficient personnel to maintain all of its gardens and collections and must now evaluate the best use of the Garden Unit's financial and personnel resources.

The arboretum has begun this process so that it can be completed before the loss of the two privately funded positions in the Asian Valley collection in 2012. The Gardens Unit staff, under the direction of Scott Aker, analyzed the USNA collections for de-accessioning by considering the scientific value (germplasm) of each collection; its educational and interpretive value; its aesthetic value and appeal to visitors; and, the current level of stakeholder involvement/support for the collection. The collections selected for de-accessioning will be removed. Important germplasm within those collections will be preserved by taking cuttings, or in some cases, transplanting elsewhere on the USNA grounds. The Gardens Unit staff will document identified plants in the selected collections for propagation and, when practicable, shipment to other gardens, nurseries, and collections. The remaining plants will be removed, destroyed and low-maintenance native trees or meadow plants will be planted to restore the de-accessioned areas.

While the Arboretum had long-term plans to remove nearly all of the undocumented azaleas (those plants that cannot be positively identified) on the Glenn Dale Hillside (about 20 to 25 percent, or about 2,000 mature plants, of the total azalea collection) so that they may be replaced with known Glenn Dale azalea introductions massed in large groups for visual impact. Unfortunately, the azaleas to be de-accessioned are the oldest and most majestic plants. The decision to de-accession the collection will expedite those plans. They will now shift to a fast-track removal of azaleas of unknown pedigree so the area is less of a maintenance burden. Most removals are expected to take place in the summer of 2011. The USNA rationale for de-accessioning this part of the Glenn Dale Azalea Collection is that it is for the most part undocumented plant material for which they cannot justify the expense of long-term maintenance. This plan is to cut down the undocumented azaleas on the

Glenn Dale Hillside and apply herbicide so that they cannot return. The plants that are removed will be replaced by new, identified rooted cuttings from their propagation program. However, replacing 60-year-old azaleas with rooted cuttings will leave a barren eyesore, highly subject to erosion, and will also provide favorable growing space for new invasive species in one of the most visible and frequently visited locations in the arboretum.

The plants in National Boxwood collection and its associated Perennial collection will be completely and accurately inventoried. Selected plants on the inventory will be used for cuttings, propagation of plants, and distribution of the resulting plants, or to form the basis for new plantings elsewhere in the Arboretum. Removal of plants would not take place until autumn or winter of 2011-2012. The National Boxwood Collection forms a beautiful green barrier from the heavy traffic on Bladensburg Road and contributes greatly to the tranquil ambiance of the Arboretum. The plan would entail the removal of every plant in this collection, leaving unobstructed views of the highway and allowing the sounds of the highway to intrude. Removing this collection and planting low maintenance trees, which will take years to mature, will do little to maintain the Arboretum's ambiance and attract visitors.

The Perennial Collection represents plants that most gardeners are familiar with and have in their gardens. It provides visitors with a stunning display from the tree peonies in early spring, daffodils and herbaceous peonies, and day lilies somewhat later. The collection provides visitors with obvious and subtle differences in flowers, fragrances, and colors. It should not be removed and replaced by a meadow.

The interim USNA Director responsible for this decision, in a letter to the President, National Capital Area Garden Clubs Inc., dated November 15, 2010, stated that "permanent sustained funding to support the minimum number of staff needed to develop and maintain their collections, but especially the boxwood and perennial collections and the azalea hillside, is the only viable way they can be saved. Should such funding become available, the replacement of undocumented azaleas on the Glenn Dale Hillside with Glenn Dale cultivars could be accomplished gradually, in a way that maintains the spring show while newly planted azaleas become established, and the de-accession of the National Boxwood Collection and Perennial Collections will not be necessary" and, "In the short-term, the Arboretum will continue to examine other possible funding mechanisms." In that letter the Interim USNA Director also stated that "some might argue for the simple abandonment of garden spaces when staff positions are lost, this is not a responsible ap-

proach. Abandonment is environmentally harmful because of the potential for invasive species to become entrenched. It is nearly impossible to recover such collections after just a few years of abandonment without considerable expense.” It should be noted that the USNA Azalea Collection was abandoned in the past and after years of neglect has been brought to its current state of restored beauty and health by the devoted efforts of the curator and a staff of volunteers over the past 20 years. During that time, the curator and her staff of volunteers have been able to positively identify numerous previously undocumented azaleas on the Glenn Dale Hillside. These efforts, if allowed to continue, will provide documentation for many more of the undocumented plants in the collection and preserve these beautiful plants.

It is difficult to understand how the future loss of those private funds for Asian Valley maintenance can justify such a drastic decision. Several questions come to mind concerning the USNA decision.

If the availability of funding is the only issue, why take such drastic, irrevocable action which once done cannot be reversed should funding become available?

How does the loss of funding for two positions in the Asian Valley Collection, which by the terms of that funding required those positions be used only to supplement the regular work and not to supplant government funds, or the two other full time Federal gardeners who regularly maintain that garden, justify the de-accessioning of three completely unrelated collections? With regard to the azalea collection, it is currently maintained by one full time position (the curator) and a volunteer staff.

Were the stakeholders, such as the Azalea Society of America, American Daffodil Society, American Hemerocallis Society, American Peony Society, American Rhododendron Society, American Boxwood Society, Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA) and National Capitol Area Garden Clubs Inc., who have a long-established relationship with and an interest in the Arboretum and its collections, contacted to obtain their input prior to this decision being made?

It should be noted that these stakeholders have provided significant financial and volunteer support to the USNA over many years. In the past, the Arboretum’s Advisory Board consisting of its stakeholders, would be consulted prior to taking action that would substantially alter its collections. The Arboretum needs to restore its Advisory Board so that future decisions will have input from its stakeholders.

If the criteria for evaluating potential collections for de-accessing were: “its aesthetic value; appeal to visitors; and, the current level of stakeholder involvement/support for the collection”, why were the Glenn Dale Hillside azaleas on Mt. Hamilton selected? The Azalea Collection, especially the Glenn Dale Hillside azaleas on Mt. Hamilton which are one of the prime floral attractions in our Nation’s Capital, serves as the premier draw for the general public to visit the Arboretum in the spring, attracting thousands of visitors each year. The lovely mature azaleas, many of which are over 60 years old, occupy perhaps three to six acres of the

446-acre arboretum. Those azaleas are not overgrown or in decline and there is no space issue. The arboretum’s Glenn Dale azaleas are among the oldest and most spectacular specimens in the country. The Glenn Dale Hillside azaleas have considerable historical value as well and are of particular importance to the U.S. National Arboretum. They were developed by its first director, Benjamin Y. Morrison, and represent the top 454 selections of the 75,000 seedlings he raised during the development of Glenn Dale azaleas. Morrison’s colossal breeding project has had no equal. It produced the first large-flowered azaleas created for the climatic conditions of the Mid-Atlantic region, particularly the Washington Metropolitan area. They have proven hardy in the Mid-Atlantic region and many of them are found in Mid-Atlantic gardens. It was the magic of the spring azalea displays on the Glenn Dale Hillside of Mt. Hamilton that first prompted the Arboretum to open its doors to the public in 1954. They are indeed a national treasure that should be preserved.

Those of us who would like to see the decision to de-accession the Glenn Dale Hillside of the Azalea Collection on Mt. Hamilton, the National Boxwood Collection and the Perennial Collection at the Arboretum reversed, or at least reconsidered, are encouraged to express their concerns by contacting:

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*Editor’s Note: In February, the U.S. National Arboretum suspended actions to remove the Glenn Dale azaleas. This is attributed in part to a \$1 million donation to Friends of the National Arboretum to establish an endowment to preserve the azalea, boxwood, and perennial collections at the arboretum. FONA will launch a fund raising campaign this spring to raise an additional \$1 million for the endowment. Watch for more information in future issues of **The Azalean**.*

Harold Belcher began his appreciation of azaleas while working at Dr. Wilbur Engleman’s azalea nursery in Lanham, Maryland, during his high school years (1961 -1964). He graduated from the University of Maryland with a business degree in 1970. Harold worked for the Navy Department and the Department of Justice and retired from Federal government service in January 2009. He is a past four-term president of the Ben Morrison Chapter of the ASA and former ASA board member. Harold has been a resident of Cheverly, Maryland, all his life and has enjoyed visiting the U.S. National Arboretum since 1960.