

# The Hanners of Azalea Trace

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Many of us in the Washington, D.C., area have a pleasant memory of a trip to Azalea Trace nursery, where great plants that couldn't be found at the garden centers were in abundance. Even better, Charles and Wanda Hanners, the proprietors, were knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and could easily be prodded to take us on a tour of their greenhouse. Every shopper was asked about their soil type and shade situation while the Hanners walked around looking for the perfect plant.

An easy drive out Pennsylvania Avenue to Huntingtown, Maryland, takes you to their semi-rural setting of 5,000 azaleas of 1,700 varieties planted in a naturalized setting. Filling up a moving van with their offerings would only put a slight dent in their stock!

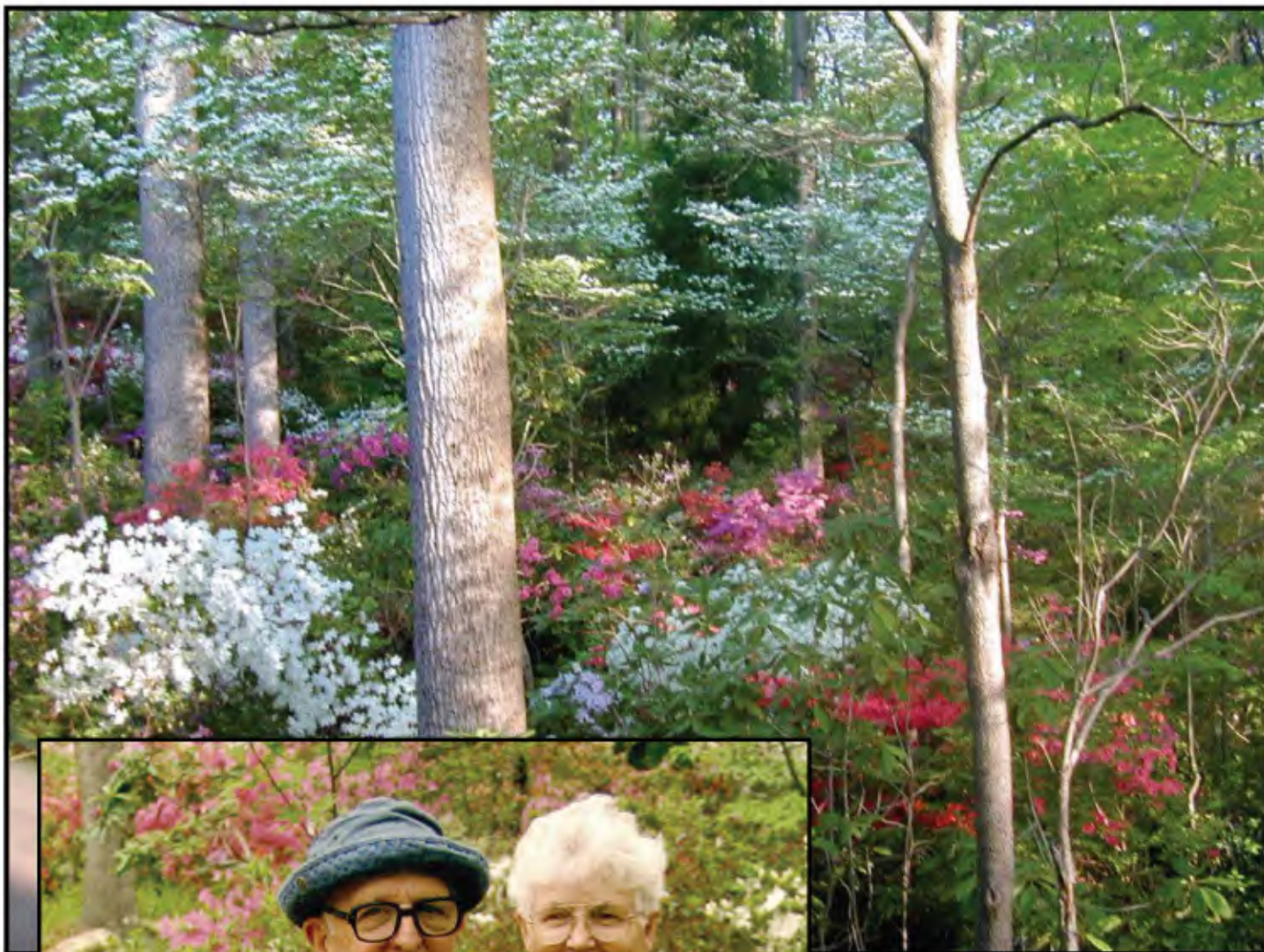
Sadly, time passes for us all and the Hanners decided to let the business go in 2007, 20 years after moving the operation from Bowie, Maryland. Wanda still has trouble restraining her desire to take cuttings!

I spoke with Wanda in March 2014 and she reminisced about the years with the growing body of plants and the work she shared with Charles.

Charles' grandfather from England, Charles Read, was the head gardener at Hammel Estate in Bexley, Ohio. Hanners began weeding, mowing and learning the other essentials that every gardener must understand by age six. He went into the Air Force and then the NSA, always keeping gardens where they lived.

A nursery that was closing in Howard County gave them truckloads of plant materials, including azaleas. Then they contacted Frank White, who helped them identify plants, as many tags were missing or undecipherable. Gordon Severe, from the Eastern Shore of Maryland, also helped. White and Severe had provided the Hanners with 4" pots of Glenn Dale and Back Acre azaleas when they were located in Bowie, filling the one acre





they maintained and teaching them how to take cuttings. Bea and Bob Hobbs introduced them to the young ASA, which they joined in the early 1980s.

Though they sold a few plants from their home in Bowie, Azalea Trace, the commercial operation, was started once they moved to Huntingtown in Calvert County and Charles and Wanda, a special education teacher, retired. "Trace" was used in the older sense of a "path."

Cuttings and open pollinated seeds provided much of the available material, along with some cross-breeding that they did themselves. Recording the plants on maps, they lined up the babies behind each parent. Wanda notes that it was amazing to see the differences in the children. The plantings were on 3-½ foot centers on terraced hillsides and



were neither fertilized nor watered once they matured. Benches, crafted by their son Charles, were scattered around the shady property for everyone's enjoyment.

Favorites? Charles leans toward the bold red and white 'Janet Rhea' while Wanda prefers the more subtle Satsuki 'Haisei'. In general, they favor the Glenn Dales and all of the Pete Vines productions.

Auburn University requested many Glenn Dale and Robin Hill azaleas, which they provided. The U.S. National Arboretum would send people down for specific plants, not wasting a worker's time looking elsewhere if they couldn't find them at Azalea Trace. After an ice storm Barbara Bullock came down to replenish the Arboretum's stock. Other requests came in from all over the world after Adrian Higgins wrote an article about them in the Washington Post (also picked up by the Los Angeles Times).

They still get requests for plants, though the business has closed, and people in area stores often call Wanda "Mrs. Trace" (Charles was called "Mr. Azalea")! Every spring they continue to enjoy the 45 beds of 300-500 plants each (though Wanda says that bed #19 has 1,900).

While most of us have a great-looking back yard as a final goal, the Hanners went beyond that to make their mark on the azalea community and widen the horizons for all of us!

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