

# Azalea Research Committee Funds Two New Projects

By Hale Booth, Azalea Research Committee Chair—Signal Mountain, Tennessee

ASA's Azalea Research Committee has recently funded two new important azalea research projects. An important mission of your Azalea Research Committee is to stimulate new research into azaleas by making strategic small investments of seed money to leverage new azalea research. Like several other research projects funded through your research contributions, both of these new projects are aimed at developing improved azaleas for the future.

## **Project #1—Leaf hydraulic conductance of deciduous, evergreen and semi-evergreen Rhododendrons: diverse solutions to the problems presented by evaporative demand**

The first grant was awarded to Dr. Juliana Medeiros, a research scientist with the Holden Arboretum in Ohio. She will be investigating differences in how deciduous, evergreen and semi-evergreen azalea leaves conduct water. This will help all of us understand how azaleas adapt to climate situations. The research will compare these leaf hydraulic functions across a number of species to provide insight into the contributions of climate adaptation and evolutionary history to leaf function. A key objective is to provide understanding of climatic hardiness and reveal variations that may be used in breeding for increased heat- and drought-tolerance.

As we all know, adequate water is an important factor in stimulating growth in azaleas, and water is becoming an increasingly limited or expensive resource in many areas. Therefore, research that can lead to a better understanding of this process and identify species with increased heat- and drought-tolerance can help guide the breeding of new azaleas that are better adapted for these climate extremes.

This research project will build upon and thus advance current research at the Holden Arboretum. The Azalea Research Committee committee awarded \$4,988 to purchase equipment, and supplies for this research project. This commitment by the ASA will also help leverage \$36,318 in other funding for the project. The project is expected to take several years to complete and once the research project is completed Dr. Medeiros will report on the results of the project in a future edition of *The Azalean*.

## **Project #2—Piedmont azalea collection for breeding compact plants**

The second research grant was awarded to the Horticultural Department of The University of Georgia in Athens. Under the leadership of Dr. Dayton Wilde, two researchers, Lingjuan Du and Jim Gegogaine will be collecting a large amount of plant material of the Piedmont azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*). This plant material will be used to find variations in genes controlling plant architecture. The objective is to breed compact plants. The *canescens* azalea can reach up to 15 feet in height and width and has an open

form. It has attractive, fragrant, and showy flowers and is important to pollinators and native insects. The horticulture program at the University of Georgia has been a leader in working with the nursery industry to bring new plants to the marketplace. University horticulturists have determined that a smaller and more compact form of *R. canescens* would be of great interest for landscaping in urban areas with increasingly smaller gardens.

The research methodology has already proved successful at the University of Georgia with blueberries, and the research addresses ASA's interest in hybridization to improve plant habit. Azalea Research Committee funding will be used to help with travel expenses to collecting sites across Georgia, some student labor, and fund the purchase of supplies such as DNA extraction kits. Funds from the Vincent J. Dooley Endowment will also be used to help with research project expenses. The project is expected to be completed around December of 2016 and Dr. Wilde will report on the results after that time in *The Azalean*.

These two projects represent an investment of approximately \$6,800 by the Azalea Research Committee, and these along with other research projects under way hold out the promise of developing better azaleas for the future that can even be enjoyed in areas that are traditionally not known as azalea friendly. In order to continue to leverage valuable new research on azaleas, it is critical that we continue to support the building of our Azalea Research Committee Fund over time. Small donations, remembrances and planned gifts from estates have all been essential to building and funding this important program of the Azalea Society of America. Tax deductible donations can be made to the ASA's Azalea Research Committee, C/O Hale Booth, 7085 Sawyer Road, Signal Mountain, TN 37377, or donations may be made directly to the ASA Treasurer with a designation of the Azalea Research Committee as the intended use of the funds.

## **In Memory—Rosalie Nachman**

It is with great sadness that we report the death of Rosalie Nachman on 4 October in Richmond, Virginia. Rosalie was a long time resident of Richmond and member of the Azalea Society of America (having joined in 1981 as a founding member of the Richmond Chapter) and the American Rhododendron Society. She was also a speaker at the 2009 ASA Convention in Herndon, Virginia. Rosalie was an interesting and energetic woman who loved plants and loved to travel. Her home was filled with wonderful artifacts and pieces of art she collected during her trips abroad. She had a beautiful garden, which many of us had the pleasure of enjoying. Rosalie was a very gracious gardener who gladly shared her knowledge and her plants with others. A more in-depth remembrance of Rosalie will be in the Spring issue of *The Azalean*.