

# Norfolk's Love Affair with Azaleas

By Brian D. O'Neil—Norfolk Botanic Garden Horticulture Director

From the earliest days of the Norfolk Botanical Garden's (NBG) founding to the present, our garden has been associated with azaleas. In fact NBG was created so that "this city should have an azalea garden to rival those of Charleston, S.C., which even during the depression years of that era drew thousands of tourists annually." While NBG has changed through the years in size, purpose, and even with official name changes, the local populace still refers to NBG as "the Azalea Gardens."

Surrounded by natural beauty and that which was created by many hands working this land over the years, the current staff at NBG is constantly reminded of its fascinating past. The history of our garden is always apparent as much as it is to citizens of any great city. Following are recollections from the NBG's first Director, Fred Heutte, about events surrounding those earliest days.

"Therefore, it was not until June 30, 1938 that the late Representative Norman R. Hamilton announced that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had approved a \$76,278 grant that would enable us to start what we called an Azalea Garden project. Hence, this remains a red letter day in the history of the garden.

"The establishment of the garden was unique. In order to take advantage of Federal grants under a relief program, we had only female labor to draw upon inasmuch as our able bodied male labor was absorbed in other projects. This project was finally accepted on a 90% - 10% ratio of 200 (African-American) women and 20 men. On September 15, 1938, actual work was started clearing the thick underbrush. The city's financial share was also on a like basis (90% - 10% ratio): 10% could be in any form, and, thus, part of my salary and transportation for these women was the city's share.

"By the spring of 1939, sufficient land had been cleared (approximately 25 acres) and one mile of walking



▲ 'Vittatum Fortunei'

trails, flanked by several acres of well-prepared beds. These were planted in March of 1939 with the first 4,000 azaleas, 2,000 rhododendrons, and several thousand miscellaneous shrubs and trees, and 100 bushels of daffodils all bought by WPA for approximately \$6,000."

Among the azaleas planted in those early days and still thriving in the Mirror Lake section of NBG are the Kurume cultivars 'Flame', 'Hinodegiri', and 'Pink Pearl', the Southern Indian 'Formosum' and its progenitor *Rhododendron simsii* (syn. 'Vittatum Fortunei').

Fred Heutte continues:

"In the meanwhile, a propagation area had been developed so that we could become more or less self-sufficient plant-wise in the future development of the garden. But these modest purchases, and the prevailing labor wages of 25 cents per hour, absorbed the original appropriation of \$76,278, which was appropriated for one year's operation.

"Our original funds were fast running out. Only through the timely intervention of Mr. A. B. Schwarzkopf, President of the Norfolk Association of Commerce, who on August 5, 1939\* sent a telegram to the Honorable Colgate W. Darden, Jr., our Representative in Congress, did a portion of the project become approved, and an appropriation of \$138,553 made. This carried us over to the beginning of the war and the dissolution of WPA. Thus August 5, 1939 becomes another red letter day in the history of the garden as most of the development involved in the project was still focused on the azalea gardens. By 1941 it had grown to over 75 acres, with areas spreading to numerous other plantings along some five miles of walking trails. By then the azalea collection had grown to 50,000 plants."

During the War years NBG was almost lost in support of the war effort. Fred Heutte writes,

"Without government support, the gardens nearly met their Waterloo. Mr. Thomas P. Thompson had been replaced as City Manager by Colonel Charles B. Borland, a most efficient manager, but dedicated to the war effort. Therefore a garden ten miles from downtown was not among his favored projects. So it had to get along the best way it could until such time as gas rationing was over. It did and perhaps here we see how gardens, which are properly planned and located, will

Photo Norfolk Botanical Garden

survive the vicissitudes of man. With the help of a small but dedicated staff the garden survived.

"On the morning of November 17, 1942, the late Captain Daniel Harrison, a retired seafaring man, who was then in charge of the garden, called me at my Park Office. He informed me that the Army Engineers were moving in to demolish the gardens for barrack sites as the Army Air Force had taken over the airport and all adjacent property. My immediate reaction was to report to my superiors, who, politely but firmly, told me that a war was on and little could be done about it. I could only see five years of hard work and some quarter of a million dollars all in vain.

"It proved to be fortunate that our main City Park (Lafayette Park) was also occupied by the Army as a military police headquarters most fortuitously headed by Colonel Mahoney, an understanding man whom I had learned to admire. Not knowing what to do following the futile appeal to City Hall, I turned to the Colonel and by the next morning, November 18th, through the efforts of Colonel W. W. Lapsley, Army District Engineer, the barracks, which were to displace the azalea beds, were relocated. A general order was given to respect as much as possible the existing plantings and the operation of the gardens.

"By 1946, the garden, which had survived these early struggles, came to the attention of another Norfolk man, Major Frank Turin: Manager, Norfolk Advertising Board. He believed that the garden could play an important part as a tourist attraction. It was through his efforts that Mr. B. Anthony Stewart, of the *National Geographic*, came to Norfolk in early April 1946 to analyze its potential as a feature article. The following month saw a photographic staff record a garden which was destined to rival those of Charleston, which, incidentally, had been featured by the same magazine in March 1939, at a time when ours was struggling from the underbrush stage.

"In the May 1947 issue of that magazine, the Norfolk azalea gardens made front page, less than nine years after its hurried beginning."

Undoubtedly there were successive, smaller azalea plantings through the



▲ 'Coral Bells', a Kurume Hybrid

▼ 'Blushing Angel', a McDonald Hybrid



years until the early seventies when, during another airport expansion, more NBG acreage was annexed. At that time a local landscape contractor, Winn Nursery, was tasked with transplanting a large quantity of azaleas and rhododendrons from future airport property to a relatively less developed area in the Garden called the Enchanted Forest. Today, this area is a favorite springtime destination for many garden visitors where such Kurume cultivars as 'Salmon Queen' and 'Kirin' (syn. 'Coral Bells'), the Rutherford Hybrid 'Orange Queen', the Glenn Dale Hybrid 'Tango', and the Southern Indian 'George L. Taber' prosper to this day.

In the past three to five years garden staff set a goal to build upon our historic foundation by increasing our azalea accessions, especially with cultivars that perform well in Southern heat and humidity. Another of our goals was to extend the April azalea season into early summer by acquiring as many late blooming azalea cultivars as possible. April has traditionally been one of the most heavily visited months of the year for the NBG. When the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. announced plans to eliminate the azaleas on Mount Hamilton at the





Photo Norfolk Botanical Garden

▲ 'Dream Sherbert', a McDonald Hybrid

Arboretum, our then Curator of Woody Plants received an invitation from **Miles Beach** and **Tom Johnson** at Magnolia Plantation to make a trip to the Arboretum to collect cuttings from those azaleas before they were destroyed. Due to some confusion with quarantine issues, permitting and other difficulties NBG never received any cuttings from those plants. As luck would have it, however, members of the Northern Virginia Chapter Azalea Society of America (ASA), especially **Carolyn Beck** and **Phil** and **Frances Louer** supplied us with a great many cuttings of mainly Satsuki, Back Acres, and some Glenn Dale Hybrids.

After rooting these cuttings and growing them on to a plantable size, our number of new azalea accessions is impressive. Thanks to the generosity of the Northern Virginia Chapter of the ASA members, NBG has increased our accessions of Satsuki cultivars by a whopping 52 new cultivars! Among the Satsuki Hybrids, 'Chidori', 'Gyokushin', and 'Shunpo' are now thriving here. Our Back Acres numbers increased by an additional 40 cultivars! Cultivars such as 'Habanera', 'Rejoice', and 'Spring Bonnet' represent this class of mainly later blooming azaleas well. All totaled, among all the various types of evergreen azaleas we have added approximately 150 new cultivars to our 175 acres—an impressive achievement!

A year or two after we acquired the Satsuki and Back Acres cuttings ASA members asked to see our inventory for Glenn Dale azalea cultivars. ASA member **Dan Krabill**, who has an almost complete collection of Glenn Dale cultivars, put together a slide show of cultivars by bloom time and color from which ASA members voted on their top 100 favorites. From that reduced list of favorites ASA member **Rick Bauer** delivered an additional 22 Glenn Dale cultivars to NBG.

In the fall of 2014, NBG staff planted a mixture, totaling 300 of these newest acquisitions on the large earthen berm separating the Garden from our neighbor airport. This was a banner day when many staff from other departments answered the call to help plant these one-gallon-sized shrubs, massed for color and height, from the bottom of the berm to the top—in one hour! As of this writing we have started the process to find homes and plant most of the remaining balance (350+) of all these newly acquired azalea cultivars. Even after this two-year planting process, we still have a few cultivars whose total numbers are too small to plant for any effective display. We are taking cuttings of these to bulk up their numbers so we can finish the planting in a couple of years' time.

NBG is also very lucky to know **Dr. Sandra MacDonald**, a prestigious breeder of azaleas who lives in nearby Hampton, Virginia.

We have a section of our Glade Garden dedicated to the beautiful cultivars she has bred that includes interpretive signage to inform the public of their special

pedigree. We are very close to having a comprehensive collection of McDonald Hybrid Azaleas, including the attractive cultivars 'Dainty Angel', 'Hampton Classic', and 'Sandra's Green Ice'. Nearby we also have a section of the garden dedicated to the Glenn Dale Hybrids and another sign extolling their virtues.

Our work is never done and no garden vignette is ever completely finished. As we strive for sometimes fleeting perfection, there are still many possibilities for additional azalea plantings in our sheltered places, especially so with deciduous species and hybrids. NBG is gratefully indebted to the dedicated members of ASA for their help in acquiring new azalea cultivars. With their help we hope to build on our collection as we pursue an accreditation for azaleas from the North American Plant Collection Consortium (NAPCC), a program of the American Public Gardens Association. If achieved, this would add a fourth to the three NAPCC accreditations we currently hold for our Camellia, Hydrangea, and Crapemyrtle collections. We pledge to be good stewards of the plants, to maintain the trust of the ASA, and to build on our relationship, just as we have built on the garden's foundations, laid those many years ago.

**Brian O'Neil** graduated from Virginia Tech in 1980 with a BS Degree in Horticulture and worked for five years as a landscape designer for Smithfield Gardens in Suffolk. In 1985 he started his own landscape design, installation, and maintenance business working for residential clients and kept that going for 18 years. In 1996 he earned a MS Degree in Horticulture from Virginia Tech. He then worked for another company (Maxwell Landscape Service in Chesapeake) for five years before starting at the NBG in November 2007. He has a strong background in landscape design, plants, plant identification, and plant utilization in the landscape. He was born and raised in Norfolk. He has served on the Garden's Board of Directors and Landscape Committees and used to write a monthly "Tidewater Tips" column for the Garden newsletter as well as "My Favorite Plant." He teaches design and plant related courses at the NBG. He is an at-large member of the ASA.