

# Two Nurseries and a Garden

*By Barry Spelling—Alexandria, Virginia*

What's the opposite of the garden section of a big-box store which has only a few varieties of azaleas and a staff uncertain what an azalea is? It's the dedicated nursery run by enthusiasts who look on expanding their selections with plant collecting trips that are closer to a vacation than a chore. The Hanners, covered in the last issue of the ASA Northern Virginia Chapter's "The Azalea Clipper," newsletter fit that enthusiast mold exactly, and now we have two more such nurseries to tell you about: George Harding's "Copper Beech" and Mike and Debra White's "White's Nursery," which are inextricably linked.

George Harding moved to Gaithersburg, Maryland in 1931 and founded "Copper Beech" Nursery on 20 acres. He enjoyed going on collecting trips and took along his grandson, Mike White.

The Office of Public Buildings and Parks of Washington, DC, known today as the National Park Service, hired George in 1933. Later he was made their head of horticulture and often worked on the White House grounds, Jefferson Memorial, and other such venues. He worked for several presidents and was responsible for choosing the national Christmas tree in the early 1950s.

Harding retired in 1959 at the age of 55 having earned the Distinguished Service Award from the Dept. of the Interior. He took this retirement opportunity to move to Germantown, Maryland, where he continued his nursery on 80 acres.

As one of the founding members of the ASA, Harding was involved with azaleas and azalea people throughout its formative years. Harding collected over 1500 varieties of azaleas and rhododendrons and continued collecting with Mike White all through the east enjoying the company of fellow collectors and meeting others who shared his passion. This continued until his passing at 86 in 1990. Harding also received the ASA's highest award, the Distinguished Service Award in 1986.

Three plants that are immediately associated with Harding are: a Robin Hill named after him, a Kurume that George liked that he named 'Harding's Pride', and an R. K. Beattie plant that, the story goes, George named 'Oh My'.

After all the collecting experiences that he had had, Mike decided to start his own "White's Nursery," next door to George's in 1980. That has continued despite that fact that he and Debra, married 22 years now, have maintained full time jobs at the Post Office and Lockheed-Martin respectively, only retiring recently. Debra haunted area plant sales and was surprised to find that she was treated as a celebrity due to her association with Harding.

To honor George Harding's memory Mike has obtained property in Laytonsville, Maryland, to create a garden, continuing the one started in Virginia at the American Horticultural Society, and hopes to have it completed this coming spring. This will be a great destination as it matures through the years.

White's Nursery was started with a 10' x 4' cold frame,



▲ Debra and Mike White and dogs in hoop house

▼ Cuttings in hoop house







Photo Barry Sperling

then a 10' x 30' greenhouse and lean-tos. Now there are six greenhouses: a 22' x 48' propagating greenhouse and five 30' x 96' ones for growing and sales. These are currently augmented by six cinderblock cold frames, each 6' x 40' with four in-ground and two above-ground. They have a reliable well-water source to maintain the plants.

A trip to White's allows one to see their 250 varieties of evergreen azaleas and 50 deciduous varieties. The rhododendron collection is growing rapidly as many are collected each year and seed is grown, including that provided by the ASA and ARS seed exchanges.

White's has one of the largest collections of deciduous azaleas, and he particularly likes 'Appalachian Gold', Weston's 'Framingham', 'Country Cousins', 'Head's Up' and 'Don's Variegated'. On the evergreen side, he prefers Robin Hill 'Whitehead', Linwood 'Hardy Gardenia', Glenn Dale 'Dream', and Aromi 'Amelia Rose'.

Debra enjoys 'Nancy of Robinhill' paired with 'Hardy Gardenia'. She's fond of the Satsuki azaleas and, even later in the season, in late July she enjoys the fine fragrance of the deciduous 'Pennsylvania'.

The nursery has also been a primary outlet for the hybrids of "Buck" Clagett, who, from his home in Olney, Maryland, produced many fine plants under the "Bowie Mill" designation.

Several members of the Northern Virginia ASA made a special trip in May to enjoy a tour of the nursery and a picnic there, a highlight of the spring!

Check out their Web-site at: [www.whites-nursery.com](http://www.whites-nursery.com). I appreciate the time that Debra and Mike White spent providing the information above!

**Barry Sperling** was an intermediate and high school math teacher for 31 years and then retired, and went into industry as a programmer for 13 years, after which he really retired. He's been involved with the ASA since about 1996, serving as a VP and president in of the NVA Chapter. Currently he's the corresponding secretary publishing the "Azalea Clipper" and is list owner of the azalea email list.

▲ View of White's Nursery 2013

▼ White's Nursery crop at Friends of the National Arboretum



Photo Barry Sperling