

Basking in Spring's Passionate Breath: the Aromi Azalea Legacy Garden at the Mobile Botanical Gardens

By Amanda Wilkins—Mobile, Alabama

I am always struck by the prominence of azaleas and Camellias in this part of the world. I came to Mobile, Alabama, in 2015 to begin my new job as curator at the Mobile Botanical Gardens, and one of my early projects was to help with the design of the new Aromi Azalea Garden. Through this project, I was able to meet Maarten van der Giessen; little did I know what lay ahead. I had no idea who Dr. Eugene Aromi was; I was not familiar with his azaleas or his work. (Please see Frank Bryan^{1,2,3} and Maarten van der Giessen⁴, who have told the touching story of how Dr. Aromi became one of the Gulf Coast's most beloved "azaleaphiles.")

As an introduction to Aromi's work, Maarten invited me out to "Aromi World" at one of his nursery sites in Semmes, Alabama, just outside of Mobile. It seemed every other sign on the way to Semmes had something to do with plants. Upon arriving, I climbed into Maarten's SUV and he took me on a drive down memory lane all the way out to a little grove just on the side of the nursery. The morning sunlight filtered through the trees into the clearing and it seemed as if the flowers of the plants within glowed. Aromi's life's work was strategically planted out in rows stretching back into the woods. Here there were incredible yellows, pinks, whites; deciduous azaleas as tall or taller than myself! I had never seen anything like it! I was hooked.

This vision of being surrounded by towering, glowing deciduous azaleas fueled the design of the developing Aromi Garden, and the love of plants inspired the addition of other specimen plants and accentuating masses. The design plan was completed, but I decided to go work on my master's degree in Edinburgh, Scotland, before the installation of the plants began.

While I was in the UK studying I made the obligatory pilgrimage to the Royal Botanic Garden Kew; the timing was perfect for observing the Exbury Hybrids in full flower at Kew. The display beds were arranged in an antiquated style and it looked like they'd be renovating it soon (as of summer 2016). The plants were mature and incredible though; humans hummed around the flowers just as much as the bees, completely enamored by the smells, colors, and the sheer volumes of magnificent blooms that overwhelmed all of their senses. When I saw the diversity of the flowers at Kew, I was reminded of the how special Aromi's work was and the potential for the Aromi Garden in Mobile.

What made Aromi's work with deciduous azaleas so special was his strategy to breed heat tolerance into the large-trussed cultivars of the Exbury Hybrids, which were quite popular in the cooler climes of the US at the time. Using species obtained locally, Aromi and his wife Jane made crosses with the Exbury azaleas, which usually died after a season or two. His first generation was very successful and

heat tolerant, and subsequent generations only improved from there. He attained a rainbow of cultivars with large trusses or floriferous habits over the course of his life.

There was much work to be done when I returned in early 2017. The first step was to inventory the Aromi Garden. It's hard to judge the state of a garden if you don't know what you've got! My job as curator includes plant recording and developing display labels. So, armed with a loose list of what might be present, plus a clipboard and numerous pens, I painstakingly visited each plant, noting its health, habit, and where it was in orientation to the rest of the garden in spring 2017. Maarten van der Giessen and I walked through a few times to verify that hybrids were labeled properly and flagged the ones that weren't. We completed more than 90 percent this year. Just a bit more work to do in 2018.

The importance of written records cannot be overstated. It is easy in the heat of the moment (or the day!) to just get the work done, and consider it done without going back and writing down your results. I am guilty of it; but I am also haunted by memories of trying to go back and remember things and not to be able to recall the name of the plant or the color of its flower or when exactly I saw it blooming. If I cannot remember it, then how can I expect anyone coming after me down the line to?

As of summer 2017, the collections at the Mobile Botanical Gardens contain: 16 of the 31 named Aromi evergreen hybrids, and two of his unnamed hybrids;² 62 of the 104 named deciduous hybrids, as well as some unnamed hybrids; and a few that were named by Maarten after Aromi passed, such as 'Peter van der Giessen' and 'Linda Guy'.⁴ There are more than 200 individuals of Aromi's cultivars in the Aromi Legacy Garden, and many more in the adjoining Millie McConnell Rhododendron Garden.

In 2008, James Thornton made a plea to the members of the Azalea Society of America asking those who were breeding azaleas or knew of those who were or did in the past, to contact the society, so that way their work could be known and recorded.⁵ I was very heartened to hear this echoed at the 2017 ASA conference in Covington, LA.

The society is taking further steps by starting the Legacy Project. (See the ASA website for more information: <https://www.azaleas.org/legacy-project/>). Rick Bauer and Charlie Andrews were adamant about making sure the collection at the Mobile Botanical Gardens was included. Sherrie Randall at Stephen F. Austin State University Gardens in Texas is our Legacy Lead. With van der Giessen's help, we have been working to share cuttings and pictures to make sure the overall collection of Aromi's work is conserved. Thornton mentioned in his article the work done by Dr. Aromi and Maarten van der Giessen to make sure Aromi's life's work continued on. This work now lives on in perpetuity for the

public to enjoy at the Mobile Botanical Gardens.

Now that we finally knew what we had, the next step was to keep the plants healthy and make sure they were being displayed in a pleasing manner. The summer was spent planning an overhaul in the garden, under the watchful eye of Maarten van der Giessen and Linda Guy: studying the bones, observing how the garden flows for visitors, and identifying where azaleas would be replanted. This past fall has been a mad scramble of staff and volunteers moving, planting, and replanting azaleas, and adding other shrubs and herbaceous perennials in the mix. There is always more to be done!

Deciduous azaleas are grouped in triads or stand as specimens throughout the Legacy Garden. Many of the single specimens are one-of-a-kind or unnamed hybrids. The paths sweep down the hillside and make it seem like an amphitheater full of azaleas. Looking down into the garden you can hardly see the forest for all the azaleas, their plump buds full of promise for the Spring.

Some of our deciduous favorites are:

- ▶ ‘Dr. John Giordano’- Red flowers in deciduous azaleas are really exciting. *Rhododendron flammeum* is a special species, and this cultivar named for the infamous Dr. Giordano shows it off in the undertones of the curved petals. The longer you look at the flower the more dimensions you see. It is a stand-out from a long distance.
- ▶ ‘Glory Be’- This is what Dr. Giordano exclaimed when he saw this growing in the woods at John Allen Smith’s place.
- ▶ ‘Mauvilla Gold’- Speaking of standouts, this deciduous azalea combines the best of pink, orange, and yellow. It is a strong bloomer with a very unique color combination in the truss.
- ▶ ‘Appalachian Gold’- While the strong golden yellow of the flower is outstanding, the comparatively robust foliage of this cultivar makes it easily recognizable even out of flower. The dark green leaves have a two-toned look and provide good texture, compared to other cultivars.
- ▶ ‘Fantastique’- An incredible yellow for sure! When Tom Johnson of Magnolia Gardens brought their French interns down to visit van der Giessen, one of them exclaimed this when she saw this cultivar. From then on it was ‘fantastique’!

The evergreen section of the Aromi Legacy Garden features several rare evergreen cultivars. ‘Pride of Prichard’, a Southern Indica Hybrid made by a local woman (Prichard is a town near Mobile), was used by Dr. Aromi to make some of his favorite evergreen azaleas, like ‘Red Ribbons’ and ‘Pink Petticoat’. There are also a couple of unnamed *Rhododendron oldhamii* Aromi crosses that bloom just as long, or longer, than the species.

Some of our evergreen favorites are:

- ▶ ‘Michaele Lux’- Large, frilled petals on a compact, dense plant. Even out of flower you can tell who this is.

- ▶ ‘Amelia Rose’- This is one of the most rose-like azaleas you can get, and it is a strong, prolific bloomer when in season. The shrub is covered in mauve-magenta double rose flowers that really make a statement in the garden. I really fell in love with azaleas when I saw this cultivar.

After listening to all the stories, I have come to understand that I am joining this project incredibly late. I read Dr. Aromi’s article in *The Azalean* from 1999⁶ and was saddened to realize many of the people who were involved in helping continue Aromi’s legacy passed long before I was even out of high school. They now exist only in the stories told by others and the rainbow of azaleas that grow in our gardens. The fragilities of the human effort and memory are humbling, and make the work done by plant recorders and curators in botanical gardens that much more important. I am honored to have been able to be a part of the project at all.

Dr. Eugene Aromi and his wife wrote into the Winter 2003 edition of *The Azalean* to thank van der Giessen and Frank Bryan for their efforts compiling a list of his hybrids.⁷ He said: “It’s been a mountain of labor, but also a mountain of joy.” It was just the next summer that Dr. Aromi would pass away. Even in the face of all the impending work, I dream of the day when I can walk down through the gardens, drawn by the sweet scent of hundreds of Aromi’s azaleas, and come face to face with the glorious, glowing choir of Spring’s majesty.

References Cited

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- 6 Aromi, Gene. “Aromi Hybrids.” *The Azalean*. Sept. 1999. 21(3): 47.
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Author’s Notes

I am excited to mention that the Mobile Botanical Gardens continues to honor Dr. John Giordano through the deciduous azalea named for him and Dr. John Allen Smith with the Japanese Maple Garden named after him.

I would also like to thank Maarten van der Giessen and the Horticulture Advisory Committee at the Mobile Botanical Gardens for their guidance and support as this project grows and develops.



Photo Amanda Wilkins

▲ *Rhododendron* 'Clear Creek'

▼ *R.* 'Pink Carousel'



Photo Amanda Wilkins

▼ *R.* 'Radiant Red'



Photo Amanda Wilkins



Photo Amanda Wilkins

▲ *R.* 'Mauvilla Gold'

▼ *R.* 'Queen's Rose'



Photo Amanda Wilkins

▼ Maarten van der Giessen and Aromi's Azaleas



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