

# The Linwood Hardy Azalea ‘Theodore S. Stecki’ Finds Its Way Home

By Carolyn Beck—Oak Hill, Virginia

‘Theodore S. Stecki’ is a gorgeous evergreen azalea with many fine characteristics. The medium to large double hose-in-hose flowers, with wavy edges and a wide funnel shape, are a vivid purplish-pink. There are three-six per bud, making it very full flowered. [Photo 1] It blooms abundantly during early midseason and continues over an extended period. In bud it looks like a large bouquet of tea roses. The foliage is a rich, dark, glossy green, retained well in winter. It has a compact, densely-branched plant habit and is hardy to Zone 6 (0° F).<sup>1</sup>

As I understand from many sources, the man this azalea was named for was even more amazing than the plant. [Photo 2.] Ted Stecki was a longtime member of both the Azalea Society of America (ASA) and the American Rhododendron Society (ARS). In the latter, he filled a wide variety of roles, at several levels, over a span of many years. Ted was a member of the Greater Philadelphia Chapter, and later, of the Pine Barrens Chapter. In the former he served as Director, Treasurer, and Corresponding Secretary. In the latter he served as President. During his affiliation with both chapters, he presented workshops at meetings, and propagated azaleas and rhododendrons for members and for chapter plant sales, helping to introduce many new cultivars. Ted also wrote articles for both *The Azalean* and *The Journal of the American Rhododendron Society*. In recognition of his many contributions, the Greater Philadelphia Chapter awarded Ted the ARS Bronze Medal.

At the national level, Ted served as Chairman of the ARS Budget and Finance Committee for almost two decades. He became Eastern Vice President, and, subsequently, President. Ted is perhaps best known for his involvement with the Philadelphia Flower Show (PFS). Norman and Jean Beaudry, of the Potomac Valley Chapter of the ARS, recall Ted as being the driving force behind the ARS exhibit at this event. Over a 25-year period, as Co-chair, and then Chair, of

▼ Photo 1—‘Theodore S. Stecki.’



Photo Carolyn Beck

the District 8 Flower Show Committee, Ted acted as liaison with PFS show staff, assisted with the exhibit design and implementation, helped in the acquisition of plants, and managed the forcing process that brought them into bloom much earlier than was their norm. Ted viewed this exhibit

as a way of promoting azaleas and rhododendrons, and educating the public about their horticultural needs.

Karel Bernady, a member of the Greater Philadelphia Chapter, also saw the PFS as Ted’s crowning glory. He remembers how dedicated Ted was to this project: the time involved in creating the azalea and rhododendron displays, the interactions with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, sponsor of the PFS, and the after-action care that the plants required. Karel also notes that Ted was a strong advocate for plant society exhibitors.

Ted obtained engineering degrees from both Clemson and Rutgers Universities. He spent his career working in various managerial positions for Lockheed Martin, but his outside-of-work passion was for plants. He expressed this interest in his wonderful garden, located in Voorhees, New Jersey. There the soil was just the right acidity to allow ericaceous plants to thrive. This hobby eventually blossomed into a part-time family business called Hill House Nursery, where azaleas and rhododendrons were featured. Somewhere along the way, Ted met Albert (Al) Reid, also of New Jersey, the primary developer of the Linwood Hardy Azaleas. Their mutual interest drew them together and grew into a lasting friendship. Ted often worked with Al, helping to evaluate new crosses and compile his data. All of Al’s selected cultivars were brought to Hill House Nursery for propagation and distribution. It was Ted’s stated goal to see that these impressive forms be given the acclaim that they deserved. It was only natural that Al would name one of his best hybrids for Ted.

During a long illness in his later years, Ted’s garden and nursery went into decline and many of the plants did not survive. Among those was ‘Theodore S. Stecki’. So, how did the lost ‘Theodore S. Stecki’ make its way back to its place of origin? Here is the story:

It is not often that the planets align in such a way that an optimum outcome is attained. But life is full of surprises,



Photo Stecki Family

▲ Photo 2—Ted Stecki with his daughter Sue Stecki-LaPaoma.

and a marvelous sequence of events led ‘Theodore S. Stecki’ full circle, back to its roots.

First we have the paths of two kindred spirits intersecting in New Jersey; one was an avid hybridizer of azaleas (Al) and the other a horticulture enthusiast with a nursery (Ted).

Then the late Donald (Don) Hager of Hager Nursery in Fredericksburg, VA (and this is an educated guess) acquired the Linwoods from Hill House Nursery. From there, the Linwoods made their way into local gardens.

The Cosbys purchased a great many azaleas from the Hager Nursery. Roy and Elizabeth Cosby live in Rockville, Virginia, and have been avid collectors of azaleas for decades. The Cosby Garden, now called the Lewis-Ginter Nature Reserve, covers over 15 acres, and is predominantly planted with azaleas. The number of different cultivars in their collection registers in the thousands and represents many dozens of hybrid groups, as well as species. Through the years, the Cosbys have welcomed hundreds of visitors and have graciously offered propagation material to those who inquired.

In the fall of 2013, I had an opportunity to obtain a large number of cuttings from the Cosby Garden. My main focus was to expand our Northern Virginia Chapter inventory. I started with a wish list, but as I wandered through the beds, other azaleas would catch my eye because of their attractive foliage. ‘Theodore S. Stecki’ was one of these.

After her father’s death in November of 2016, Suzanne (Sue) felt a need to find the azalea that was named for him. She reached out to Ann Mangels, President of the ARS, to see if a source could be found. I happened to be one of the recipients of Ann’s request for information.

As luck would have it, our chapter inventory showed we had five copies of this azalea. I corresponded with both Ann and Sue to let them know that I was cautiously optimistic that we had several plants of ‘Theodore S. Stecki’, but, since I had not seen the plants in bloom, I wanted to wait until spring to confirm that they were true to type.

When our plants bloomed, I compared them to the description in Galle’s book, *Azaleas*.<sup>2</sup> Most everything corresponded, but to my disappointment, the color seemed to be in question. Galle stated it was a vivid purplish-red and these azaleas were definitely pink. But then I thought to look up the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Colour Chart number that Galle had noted (61D), and “voila” – a perfect match. Hooray!

I sent photos of these azaleas to Sue in April for final verification and was excited and touched to receive her reply: “Yes that is it! Oh, my goodness; happy tears on Easter morning.”

In May, Sue and her husband made the trip from New Jersey to our place in Virginia to pick up copies of her dad’s namesake. [Photo 3.] During their very pleasant visit, Sue shared some stories about her dad. One of particular interest related to the preparation needed in the forcing of azaleas and rhododendrons for the Philadelphia Flower Show. Since the show usually took place in March, those azaleas and rhodos had to spend the winter in their Hill House Nursery greenhouses. Snowfall was often an issue as it blocked the essential light from the plants. So Ted and all the children

would get up on the roof and sweep the snow off with brooms. Who would have guessed at the level of detail required to make these plants ready for early public viewing?

Sue also told us where they planned to locate

their new azaleas—one would go in her Mom’s garden, and the other would be placed under their redbud tree, which Ted and his granddaughter had planted many years ago. Now the Linwood ‘Theodore S. Stecki’ is home to stay.

I am delighted to have acquired the azalea ‘Theodore S. Stecki’, and very much wish that, somewhere along his remarkable journey through life, I had known the man it was named for.

Author’s note: cuttings have been shared with ASA member nurserymen so that this azalea will, in the future, again be available to those who knew, loved, and respected Theodore (Ted) S. Stecki, as well as all those who enjoy beautiful azaleas. Plants should be available in 2019 from:

Ronnie Palmer of Azalea Hill Gardens and Nursery in White Hall, Arkansas, <http://www.azaleahillgardens-arkansas.com/>

Mike White of White’s Nursery in Germantown, Maryland, <http://www.whites-nursery.com/>



▲ Photo 3—Sue Stecki-LaPamoa (l) receives her own ‘Theodore S. Stecki’ plant from well-known successful azalea propagator Carolyn Beck.

## References and Sources

<sup>1</sup> “American Rhododendron Society Plant Registry.” 1984. *The Journal of the American Rhododendron Society*. 38(2): 94.

<sup>2</sup> Galle, Fred C. *Azaleas*. Timber Press. 1987. p. 202-203.

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Carolyn Beck is a retired Registered Nurse. She is an active member of the Northern Virginia Chapter and is currently in charge of fund-raising. Carolyn and her husband, Paul, are concentrating their efforts on the chapter’s Legacy Hybrids (see [NV-ASA.org](http://NV-ASA.org) for more information on their Legacy Project).