

# The Why and How of Registering Azalea Names

By Michael Martin Mills—Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

A name is a precious thing. Each of us has one, and though there may be some novelty in running into someone with your identical name, deep down there's more likely a sense of disquiet, concern about confusion. *What do mean you're "Michael M. Mills"? I am the real Michael M. Mills, thank you very much, and if you've been getting my mail or coasting by on my good name, I am really annoyed.*

So, imagine the plight of the lovely 'Aurora'. You know, the yellowish pink Knap Hill azalea with the fetching orange blotch. Oh wait, I think I meant the Australian 'Aurora', light pink and double. Or maybe the orange Mollis 'Aurora'?

You see, there are at least six azaleas named 'Aurora', plus five rhododendrons (elepidote or lepidote), and an outlier named 'Aurore'. Talk about confusion.

If only these cultivars had been properly registered with Royal Horticultural Society – there would be only one 'Aurora' and all the others would have their own unique, not-to-be-confused names.

That's what plant name registration is all about – securing a singular name for a cultivar so that it and it alone is (properly) called by that name.

When a new azalea or rhododendron name is approved as being available and then registered with the requisite documentation, the hybridizer knows that only his or her hybrid can bear that name legitimately.

As North American registrar for azalea and rhododendron names, I unabashedly exhort all hybridizers, seed-sowers and the like – from the backyard hobbyist to the big commercial enterprises – to stake your claim, get those cultivar names registered (or at least pre-approved), so that there is no more mass 'Aurora' nonsense.

Some background and clarification are in order.

Most of those 'Aurora' azaleas and rhododendrons predate the formalized registration era, which was developed and adopted by international horticultural bodies in the years following World War II. In 1955, RHS was appointed by the International Society for Horticultural Science to be the International Cultivar Registration Authority (ICRA) for the genus *Rhododendron*. (The RHS is also ICRA for *Dianthus*, *Lilium*, *Narcissus* and several others. Among the numerous other ICRA's are the Polly Hill Arboretum for *Stewartia* and England's International Maple Society for guess what.)

In 1958, RHS published the first International Rhododendron Register, updated in 2004 as the International Rhododendron Register and Checklist (IRRC). The word "checklist" is important, for this compilation includes all the rhododendron and azalea names the RHS could find in publication. Thus, lots of 'Aurora's (and 'Fawn's and 'Juliana's). For future registration purposes, once a name is in IRRC, formally registered or not, it is taken.

Under the international code, nonduplication of names applies across a genus. For instance, since 'Spring Melody' was registered as an Orlando Pride deciduous azalea in 1973, the name cannot be used for a rhododendron. Vice versa,

'Pink Spectacle', an elepidote registered by Weldon Delp, prevents use of that name for an azalea. On the other hand, the existence of 'Yankee Doodle' the evergreen azalea and 'Yankee Doodle' the kalmia is fully legitimate.

In late 2017, a milestone rhododendron-azalea event was the electronic publication of IRRC in pdf format. Now anyone with an internet connection can access the Register, and download it if desired. In recent years, after the two-volume physical IRRC had gone out of print, the only way a hybridizer could determine the availability of a proposed name had been to contact a registrar. Now anyone can check IRRC – and get happily lost reading the thousands of registered and grandfathered names and their histories and descriptions, which are admittedly somewhat arcane.

The whole process is overseen by the international registrar, Sharon McDonald of the Royal Horticultural Society in England. There are four regional registrars, for North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, who do the bulk of the work for cultivars from those regions, leaving Europe and the rest of the world for Ms. McDonald.

If you are a hybridizer with a new cultivar you wish to introduce with a snazzy name, what does it take to register it? Short answer: lots of details and some patience, plus a good photo. (But no money; although some ICRA's for other genera charge a fee, there is none for registering an azalea or rhododendron.)

Fair warning: the registration form is long and asks for seemingly arcane data that you may never have thought to record before. The instructions that accompany the form are essential for success. Two years ago, I revised the application form, with valuable input from Carolyn Beck and Donald W. Hyatt, in part to make it less cryptic and less elepidote-centric.

First, there's the proposed name, which in addition to being unique must conform to the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. The most relevant rules of the code are a maximum of 30 characters, nothing similar enough to an existing name as to cause confusion (since 'Allen Johnson' exists, 'Alan Jonson' is not allowed), and, if named for a living person, permission of him or her. Many registrants check with me in advance to be sure a name is available, and I can give tips on modifying a proposed name that is already taken.

The details include parentage, history (when hybridized and the like), flower form, dimensions and colors, foliage information, and bloom time.

Colors are the most difficult measurement a registrant must take. The preferred standard is an RHS Colour Chart (and absolutely nothing from a computer, since monitors are quite variable). I regret to report that RHS charts are both expensive and hard to find on a lending basis. Potential sources for borrowing a color chart are ASA and ARS members who have been at the registration game for a while, plus arboretums and college horticultural programs

and institutions. A new RHS Colour Chart (Sixth Edition), which is actually four fans that look just like paint chips, can be purchased at <http://www.rhsshop.co.uk> for about \$265. (Perhaps your ASA chapter could be persuaded to buy one for all members to use.) If you use the newest RHS chart, it has both a number and a name for each color; the number is more important than the name, because many chips have the same name, such as “moderate olive green.” Older RHS editions, with numbers only, are perfectly acceptable for registration and once in a while may be found on Amazon or eBay. The Munsell color system is also acceptable, but it is rarely used in azalea and rhododendron registration.

Working with a color chart is an acquired skill, and must be done under optimal daylight conditions. The RHS charts have “how-to” guides. Be aware that you may need to identify several colors – the unopened bud, the outside of the flower, the main inside color, plus the blotch and picotee, as well as the calyx and leaf colors. Here’s a tip that the RHS instructions doesn’t include: when you’ve narrowed a section of the flower down to two or three chips in the chart, take off your glasses or squint to blur your vision; by blurring out the edge between the chart and the petal, matching the color is easier.

So, indeed, patience is required. Obviously the only time to record flower details is when a plant is in bloom. Better make arrangements for a color chart well in advance – and then practice on some early bloomers. And what if you get all backed up in May with other obligations and cannot get around to recording data until the flowers are “going by”? Aargh, wait 11 months. What if the registrar tells you in July that something is wrong with the measurements? Again, wait till the next bloom cycle. (You must work with actual flowers, not photos.)

Plus, you’ll need patience just to fill out the long registration form. This is another case where first-timers are strongly encouraged to practice on an early bloomer before the new cultivar in question comes into bloom.

I worry that all the data points on the application form may discourage someone from seeking registration; rest assured that many an application has been approved with missing information in a couple of spots.

Are you hoping to register ‘Piranha Pirouette’ this spring? (At last check, that name is still available.) Go to [www.rhododendron.org](http://www.rhododendron.org) now; under the “Resources” tab, click

on “Plant Registration.” There you will find the registration form and instructions. You should definitely print out the instructions, which you’ll probably want to have on hand in the garden. Registrants have a choice of submitting the application electronically or on paper via U.S. mail. Electronic registration is preferred, but not required, but all novices should print out the paper version of the registration form to use for compiling data. Have it at hand when you fill out the electronic application. Experienced registrants know how frustrating it is to realize, midway through filling the electronic form, that they have to go out and measure a leaf or some such.

When your new cultivar is at its peak, take some good photos, especially close-ups of the truss or terminal cluster. Not only does the RHS include an image as part of the permanent record, the photos are very helpful as I compare them with the data in the application. Digital photos (not prints) should be sent to me via email ([ARSRegistrar@gmail.com](mailto:ARSRegistrar@gmail.com)) at the same time you submit an application. Be sure to change the file name of each photo to the proposed name you are registering. The registration form includes a photo-rights section so that RHS and ARS may publish the image.

Fortunately, there is an excellent primer available on registration, which should clarify many of the steps involved. The Power Point presentation (also a simple document) was created by ASA/ARS stalwarts Don Hyatt and Donald H. Voss. The registration form has changed since they made the primer, but the critical points of how to measure flowers and identify colors are expertly covered. Find it, for free or a small donation, by going to <http://arsstore.org/programs.php> and clicking on “downloads.” Do this well before your baby is in bloom. This primer is highly recommended.

The combination of reading through the registration form and its instructions and viewing the Hyatt-Voss primer in advance – plus practicing on something that blooms early – will put you in the best position to succeed when your new hybrid is in bloom. And don’t forget to make arrangements for a color chart.

Feel free to contact me as regional registrar. My email address is [ARSRegistrar@gmail.com](mailto:ARSRegistrar@gmail.com). I know the process can feel daunting; everyone has questions. Ask them early!

And by and by your delightful new hybrid, perhaps named with the love of your life in mind, will be published in the International Register with exclusive rights to its name.



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Michael Martin Mills has been North American Registrar for the Genus *Rhododendron* since 2012. He has long been active in the American Rhododendron Society, including three years as president of the ARS Greater Philadelphia Chapter. He and his late partner, Randy Dalton, got their start in the genus from Mr. Dalton's cousin, Caroline Gable, daughter of azalea and rhododendron hybridizer Joseph B. Gable. Michael maintains a two-acre garden in Philadelphia. His career was in newspapers, including 27 years in several editing positions at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.