

Azalea Gardens in Finland

By Richard Bauer—Yorktown, Virginia

A number of Azalea Society of America members had the opportunity to visit public and private azalea gardens in Finland as a post-tour after the May 2018 American Rhododendron Society (ARS) Convention in Bremen, Germany. Our tour was organized by Kristian Theqvist from the Finnish Rhododendron Society. He was ably assisted by Peter Tigerstedt, a professor emeritus of the University of Helsinki who also had a personal connection to several of the gardens we visited.

May 27

The tour started with our departure from our hotel in Bremen, and our flight from Hamburg to Helsinki, Finland. Upon arrival we headed to the Espoo district of Tapiola where we would stay for the next two nights. Our hotel was near the Tigerstedt home where we had a welcome reception shortly after our arrival. The evening's weather was perfect for the event held in the Tigerstedt's garden.

May 28

We started our garden visits in the Helsinki area.

Our first stop was the Haaga Rhododendron Park. The park started in 1975 as a research garden for the University of Helsinki plant breeding program. The purpose was to evaluate rhododendron which were suitable to the Finnish climate. The original plants were from a program begun in 1973 by Peter Tigerstedt. The park was later expanded in 1996 with the addition of 1500 azaleas. We were fortunate to have Peter Tigerstedt lead the tour as he had in-depth knowledge of the garden and its creation. [See Photo 1.]

After our visit to Haaga, it was time for a coffee break. Our break was scheduled in the town of Porvoo, 30 miles east of Helsinki, one of six medieval towns in Finland. We went to a quaint coffee shop and were treated to Runeberg Tarts, a local pastry. There, we met up with our tour guide and she gave us a little of the history of Porvoo before we headed out for a tour of the town. While first mentioned in

▼ Photo 1—Azaleas at the Haaga Rhododendron Park, Helsinki.



Photo Susan Bauer



▲ Photo 2—A view of Old Porvoo.

▼ Photo 3—Waterfall in Sapokka Water Garden.

the 14th century, the old section of Porvoo has buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries, and a church dating back to the 15th century. [See Photo 2.]

Our next stop required a bit of travel to the Mustila Arboretum, northeast of Helsinki. This arboretum also had a connection to the Tigerstedt family, since it was founded by Peter's grandfather, A.F. Tigerstedt, in 1902. While originally focused on conifers, the first rhododendrons were well established by 1917, and the Rhododendron Valley was planted there in the 1920's and 30's. Today it consists of a total of 300 acres.

Peter took us to one area which had been setup as a rustic woodland chapel. We were able to pause and enjoy the beauty and tranquility of Mother Nature.

In addition to the arboretum, there is a winery at Mustila. The winery catered a picnic lunch for our group and we even had the opportunity to sample some of their wine.

Our final stop for the day was southeast of Mustila in the town of Kotka where we visited Sapokka Water Garden and Fuksinpuisto Park.

The site of the Sapokka Water Garden was Sapokanlahti Bay, a body of water which, by the 1980s, had become contaminated with sludge, was polluted and had a foul smell. To deal with the problem, the city decided to turn it into a

Photo Richard Bauer



Photo Richard Bauer

garden. Work was started in 1990, and the original garden was completed four years later. While not an azalea garden, per se, azaleas and rhododendrons form an important part of the landscape. One of the most impressive features of the park is the 60-foot-tall waterfall. A staircase leads to the top of the waterfall where you are afforded great views of the park below. [See Photo 3.]

After leaving the Sapokka Water Garden, we went across town to Fuksinpuisto Park. The park was originally established in 1995 as a test planting area for the Finnish azalea hybridizing program of the University of Helsinki (along with the plantings in Haaga and Mustila). The purpose of the program was to establish more-cold-hardy azaleas. [See Photo 4.] The park has since been diversified with other varieties of plants such as peonies, hostas, daylilies, and irises.

Our day ended with dinner at our hotel in Tapiola.

May 29

We checked out of the hotel and boarded the buses for our trip to Ilola Arboretum, in Salo. The arboretum is privately owned and totally maintained by the owner, Ari Laakso. Upon arrival, we were treated to a selection of Finnish baked goods. Afterwards, we were free to wander the garden on our own, or to accompany Ari on a tour. Ari is more of a landscape architect than a horticulturist, so his focus is less on what he has in his garden (i.e., inventory) and more on how it looks. He started with a beautiful 25-acre plot of land with rock formations, which he improved by selected clearing of the underbrush, adding ponds, and planting conifers, azaleas, and other plants. Many of the azaleas were from open pollinated seed from Mustila Arboretum which Ari planted and raised in his private nursery. It is estimated that he has over 2000 cultivars of rhododendrons and azaleas in his arboretum, though only 20 are named varieties. [See Photo 5.]

After visiting the Ilola Arboretum we went to lunch at Wiurila Manor. The manor dates back to the 15th century and has been in the Armfelt family since 1787. The unique architecture is the work of the famous German architect Carl Ludvig Engel who designed other famous structures in Finland such as the Helsinki Cathedral. The massive white columns are thanks to the one of the previous owners, Magnus Reinhold Armfelt, who thought the design of the original columns was too insubstantial, so he directed that they be enlarged.

We were greeted by a member of the Armfelt family who gave us a history of the manor. We had a delicious lunch in a dining room ringed by oil portraits of Armfelt family members over the generations. [See Photo 6.]

The final destination for the day was a visit to Arboretum Apaskeri, a private arboretum owned by Osmo Jussila, a founding member of the Finnish Rhododendron Society. To get to the arboretum required the use of one of the ferries which comprise the Finnish highway system and are used where it is uneconomical to build bridges. The ferries are free and on a first-come first-served basis, though emergency vehicles and busses have priority.

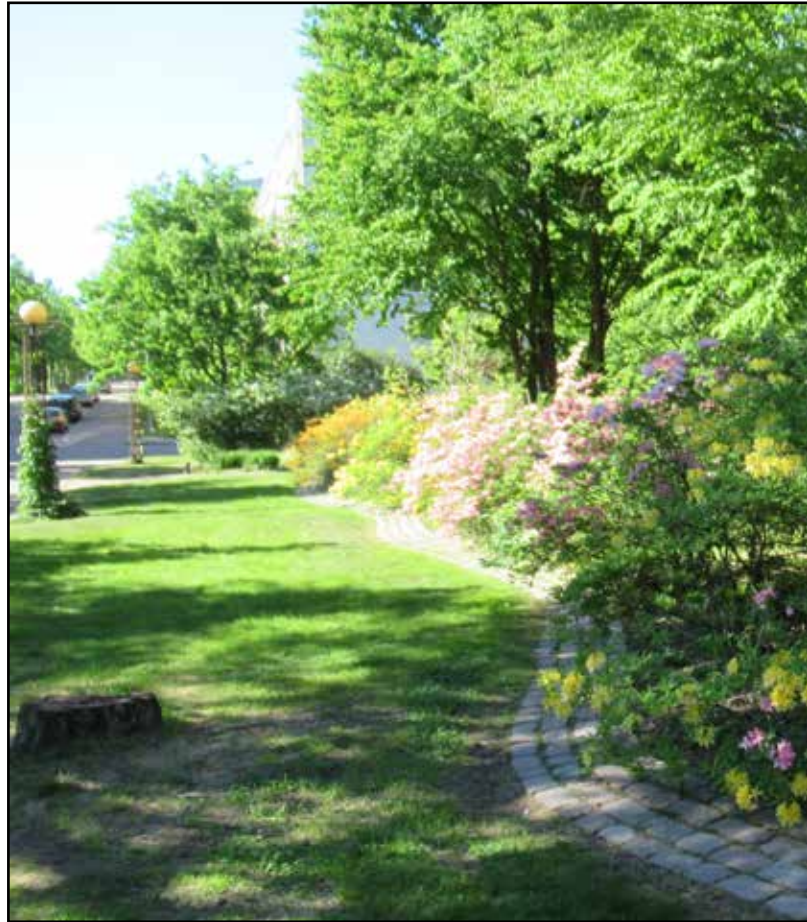




Photo Richard Bauer

◀ Photo 4—Azaleas in Fuksinpuisto Park. Note the rock mowing strip.

The arboretum in Kustavi started out as a weekend home after Osmo gained a part interest in the property in 2003. He began transferring plants from his home garden to the new arboretum. It currently encompasses 25 acres including rhododendrons that he hybridized. The arboretum is on one of more than 2000 islands in the municipality of Kustavi.

We traveled on to the city of Turku where we stayed in the Radisson Blu Marina Palace hotel situated alongside the Aurajoki River. Fortunately, the late May days are long at the northern latitudes, so we had a little time to explore the area surrounding the hotel after dinner. Between the hotel and the river, they have a long promenade which allow you to easily explore the area without losing your bearings. Many of the buildings in the area were in the typical old Finnish architectural style, much like we had seen in Porvoo.

May 30

The following morning, we packed up and left our hotel in Turku for our final day of visiting Finnish gardens. This day was a special treat in that we were visiting the private garden of our tour organizer, Kristian Theqvist. While Kristian lives in Turku, he had built a comfortable weekend home on the island of Korpo where he had his azalea and rhododendron garden, Rhodogarden. This was the first time he had opened his garden to the public. Even long-time members of the Finnish Rhododendron Society had never been there and some of them joined us for this special event.

To get to the island of Korpo, where Kristian's garden is located, required taking two ferries. Our bus driver's timing was perfect, and we were at each ferry about the time they were loading. As a result, we arrived in Korpo ahead of schedule. That allowed us the time to visit the historic St. Michael's Church in Korpo. The church, whose construction was started at the end of the 13th century, was completed in the 15th century. From the tower of the church, the parish priest could keep an eye on his parish as well as sight any enemies or pirates arriving by sea. Repairs and improvements

◀ Photo 5—Azaleas along the lake at Ilola Arboretum.

▼ Photo 6—Wiurila Manor's massive architecture.



Photo Richard Bauer



Photo Richard Bauer

continued to occur over the years. The latest restoration occurred in 1952-53.

Our next stop was Kristian's Rhodogarden. Our bus driver attempted to get us as close to the garden as possible, but finally hit a stretch with rocks on one side and a ditch on the other which precluded going any further. The final one-kilometer stretch was a beautiful walk through the Finnish countryside.

As had become customary, our first order of business was to enjoy the cakes, coffee and other refreshments provided. Once we had restored our energy, Kristian took us on a tour of his garden.

Kristian and his wife had discovered the property 30 years before. They had been walking through property previously owned by Ragnar Granit, a Nobel Prize winner. Ragnar's mother had planted a garden which included rhododendrons. While the garden had long since disappeared, one rhododendron managed to flourish. This was Kristian's inspiration for starting his rhododendron garden.

Kristian's garden has a wide variety of rhododendrons, including all of the Northern Lights azaleas which were developed by the University of Minnesota. Work on the Northern Lights azaleas commenced in 1957 with the goal of developing an azalea which would thrive in USDA Zone 4. The first introduction in the series was made with the release of 'Northern Lights' in 1978. There are currently 14 varieties. [See Photo 7.]

While the latitude of Kristian's garden is about 15 degrees north of the area where the Northern Lights were developed, they are thriving in Kristian's garden. This is partly the result of the high rocks surrounding the garden, which not only shield the garden from wind but also retain heat from the sun. [See Photo 8.]

The garden is comprised of over 1000 varieties of azaleas and rhododendrons planted on 8.9 acres. This includes hybrids created by Kristian, who has made over 500 crosses since he started in 2002.

Rhodogarden was the last garden on our post tour of Finnish gardens. We hiked back to our bus for the trip



▲ Photo 7—'Golden Lights' azalea in Kristian Theqvist's Rhodogarden.

▼ Photo 8—Garden Path through Rhodogarden.



to Helsinki. Before heading out, we stopped for lunch at the waterside Buffalo restaurant in Korpo.

In the evening we arrived back in Helsinki where we checked into our hotel, the Radisson Blu. The hotel is located in the center of the city near the main train station designed by famed Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen. Eliel's son, Eero, is a famous architect known in the United States for his design of Dulles Airport in Washington, DC, the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, and the TWA terminal at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport. In our final dinner we recognized the efforts of Kristian and Peter in arranging and conducting the tour. They were each presented with a small flag commemorating the Bremen convention and the pre- and post-



Photo Richard Bauer

▲ Photo 9—*R. luteum* azaleas in Kaisaniemi Park.



Photo Richard Bauer

▲ Photo 10—'Northern Hi-Lights' azaleas in Kaisaniemi Park.

tours. The evening ended with the participants bidding farewell to old and new friends they had made from around the world.

While the post-tour was officially over, the hotel was conveniently located near the Kaisaniemi Park. Some attendees extended their stays and took the opportunity to visit the garden before flying home. The garden contained a number of rhododendron varieties, including a collection of the Northern Lights azaleas as well as other northern varieties such as *R. luteum*. Those who remained also enjoyed the warm, sunny weather, and the opportunity to explore the beautiful city of Helsinki. [See Photos 9 & 10.]

The post-tour of Gardens in Finland was a rare opportunity to visit public gardens as well as private gardens not normally open to the public. The attendees certainly appreciated the thought, planning, and meticulous execution of the tour by Kristian and benefited from the in-depth knowledge of Peter Tigerstedt who accompanied us as a guide.

References

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Wiurila, Finland
<http://www.wiurila.fi/heritage/>

University of Minnesota Northern Lights Azalea
<https://mnhardy.umn.edu/varieties/woody-ornamentals/azaleas>

Richard Bauer is serving his second term as national ASA President. He is a member of the Northern Virginia Chapter and actively promotes the ASA at conventions and chapter meetings throughout the US.



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