

Advice from An Azalea Widow

Janet B. Miller—Bethesda, Maryland

Author's note: While going through old files during my COVID-19 self-quarantine, I came across this piece. It is as I wrote it, some 30 years ago, with just a few notes added for clarity. Many things have changed since then.

I've been considering putting this to paper for many years, for I am sure that the experiences of an "azalea widow" may be of some help to newcomers to the Society.

For a long time, I had thought that it all started when we bought our first house. My husband's training was in biology, and we both found some satisfaction in digging in the dirt. The Azalea Society of America was just getting started then, and joining in just seemed natural. But, as I look back on it now, I realize that his increased interest in azalea-related activities coincided with the birth of our first child. It was a good excuse to get out of the house.

A best-in-show award at the first Brookside Gardens Chapter flower show probably sealed my fate.¹ For a novice grower with absolutely no flower show experience, winning that recognition from a panel of azalea experts was quite a high. Forget that cutting that single spray took nearly the entire plant (See Photo).—It was worth it! Many shows and awards later, his enthusiasm has never dimmed; he loves the competition and winning.

No matter how it starts, though, working with azaleas can become addictive. The field is so broad and challenging, one can never learn it all. The people are wonderful, and they are a joy to be around. The annual meetings are held in so many interesting locations and provide opportunities to see places and private gardens that one might never otherwise get to see.

But, beware – there is a definite downside. So, here are my recommendations for keeping your sanity.

1. Don't buy or propagate azaleas (unless you know specifically what you're going to do with them). Although beautiful in the spring, our yard would never make the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*. It's the pots. My husband explains that rather than plant something he's not sure he'll like, he prefers to leave it potted. Hours are spent up-potting, watering, and moving the literally thousands of potted azaleas in our backyard. (The kids vow they will never become gardeners – they've been pressed into service to move azalea pots too many times.)
2. Always ask the questions. (Don't let anyone know you have any answers). We have had to get an answering machine and call waiting for our phone (only partly because of the kids). We get calls, lots of calls. Although the US National Arboretum has been known to give it out, I honestly don't know where some of the people get our phone number. His parents would be proud.—My husband's good



Photo William C. Miller III

▲ The Millers' winning entry at the first Brookside Gardens Chapter flower show, May 1980.

upbringing shows through here; he is helpful and polite to everyone. As a matter of fact, he loves to talk to anyone, at length, about azaleas. Just ask him. He gives talks to garden clubs; he'll field questions at membership tables; he'll even make house calls.

3. Don't volunteer (unless you are prepared to keep the job for an indefinite period of time). Like any organization run by volunteers, the Azalea Society is only too happy to take advantage of anyone's willingness to help. Since there are more than enough jobs to go around, my husband does several.² He IS the Society's Glenn Dale preservation project,³ going out on each scheduled

workday, no matter what the weather. (His conscience won't let him quit, even though almost everyone else apparently has.) He spends a major part of every weekend responding to the Society's mail, which he routinely retrieves from the Society's two post office boxes, one of which is so far out of the way that it requires a major effort to get to. He's off to committee meetings constantly, it seems. (These, of course are in addition to all of the other kinds of meetings – national meetings, chapter meetings – you get the picture). He served several years as Brookside Gardens Chapter president, and for many years he devoted countless hours to proofing and editing the copy for *The Azalean*. (I think there is a special place in Heaven for people who work on the journal. Only a select few know what a monumental task it is.) And, it goes without saying that the first weekend in May is spent entirely at the annual flower show. A corollary rule is: don't volunteer if you already have a full-time job.

4. Select your spouse and family carefully. (This is especially important if you have ignored suggestions 1 through 3). You will need an understanding, supportive family that is capable of managing in your absence. An alternative would be to get them involved, too, but then you run the risk of getting absolutely nothing else accomplished.

EndNotes

1. The flower show, "Salute to Azaleas," was held on May 17 and 18, 1980, in the South Conservatory at Brookside Gardens in Wheaton, Maryland. There were 19 exhibitors. The Millers brought seven entries from their yard, of which 'Lady Cavendish' received top honors. The award for Best Azalea in the Show, as selected by the judges, was deemed "The Frank White Award" and consisted of a \$25 gift certificate to his nursery.
2. While accurate when the article was written, this list of jobs is now incomplete and out-of-date.
3. The ASA's first national project, the Glenn Dale Preservation Program, existed from 1982-1997. See the comprehensive summary and farewell article: Miller III, W.C.: "Glenn Dale Preservation Program 1998. *The Azalean*. March 1998. 20(1):15-16.

Janet B. Miller (the "Azalea Widow") lives in Bethesda, Maryland, with her husband, William C. Miller III. She spent her professional career—and now much of her retirement—working for the National Institute of Standards and Technology (formerly the National Bureau of Standards) in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

New Azaleas for the Trade

Buddy Lee and Allen Owings are shown with the two new Encore® azaleas for 2021. Descriptions for the trade are:

Autumn Majesty™—*Rhododendron* 'Robledzd' PPAF—glows with masses of petite, ruffled, semi-double dark purple blooms in spring, summer, and fall. Hardy to USDA Zone 6A, this season-extending repeat bloomer is sure to be a crowd pleaser. Growing in a rounded, compact habit—only 3' high by 3' wide—its evergreen foliage stays bright green in winter.

Autumn Starburst™—*Rhododendron* 'Robleze' PPAF—blooms in coral pink with bold white margins against dark green evergreen foliage. Flowering profusely in spring, summer, and fall, Autumn Starburst grows compact and mounding—only 3' high by 3' wide—and is hardy to USDA Zone 6A.

- ▼ Buddy Lee (L) and Allen Owings, Louisiana Chapter, are shown with the two new Encore® Azaleas for 2021. Buddy is holding 'Autumn Starburst'™. Allen is standing behind 'Autumn Majesty'™.



Photo: Jim Putnam