

Kinney Azalea Gardens, Rhode Island—Part 1

By Dr. Susan Gordon—Kingston, Rhode Island

Editor's Note: This is part one of a two part series. Dr. Gordon is horticulturist and manager of Kinney Azalea Gardens.

In a time not so long ago or far away, humans walked the Earth without face masks. They greeted each other by touching hands and encircling one another with their arms. And young people congregated, to learn, in groups. One such setting was the Rhode Island State College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts (RISCA, now University of Rhode Island, URI) in Kingston, RI. The college was young in 1894. It had a lady professor of art, Helen May Wells, and a man who was the college's first botany professor, Lorenzo Foster Kinney. These two educators gave birth to a son. They called him Lorenzo Foster Kinney Jr. Over the years, many simply called him "the Azalea Man." (See Photo 1.)

In the Beginning

Lorenzo graduated from RISCA in 1914. He earned his MS from the University of Wisconsin in 1915, just as WWI was unfolding. Lorenzo registered to serve but was deemed too thin to send overseas. Instead, he began his career as an agricultural extension agent and leader of the "Boys & Girls Clubs" (now 4-H). He did his part in both war efforts via the "food will win the war" program. Teaching young people to grow and preserve food, in his role as extension agent and youth educator, Lorenzo traveled frequently. On one of his trips, he was smitten by a Virginian with sparkling blue eyes. This was Elizabeth Todd, soon to be Elizabeth Todd Kinney.

As Lorenzo courted Elizabeth, he couldn't help but notice some flowering shrubs nearby. Shrubs like none the young Lorenzo knew. He was well acquainted with rhododendrons and a few deciduous azaleas. He'd grown up summering and working at his father's nursery, "Lowland Rhododendron Farm". Lorenzo Jr., like his mother, was a painter. To his artist's eye, those azaleas didn't compare to what he saw in Virginia. It was like colored balloons in the sky vs. an entire sunset. He never forgot those plants.

Elizabeth agreed to become Mrs. Kinney. Before young Lorenzo could bring his young bride north, he needed to build a house worthy of her. He decided on a tract of farmland in Kingston. The land was at the top of Kingston Hill. Many of the surficial rocks had been removed and placed in piles or used in the fieldstone walls. But deeper down, 3 or 4 feet, there was a compressed layer of granitic sand and shale. This layer, called crushed glacial till, created a hardpan. The soil was arable but a little poorly drained. The result was soil perfect for many woody plants, including azaleas.

Lorenzo Sr. was very interested in the timber industry. He collaborated with a local sawyer, harvesting white pine and cedar from the woodlands at his nursery. But he wished to try other species, so he and Lorenzo planted groves of hemlock, spruce, arborvitae, yews, and even a China Fir on



Photo Susan Gordon

▲ Photo 1—Lorenzo Kinney Jr., "the Azalea Man" with 'Indian Summer' a Gable selection from *R. kaempferi*.

the property on the hill. Later, he gifted 50 umbrella pines to Lorenzo to celebrate his wedding

Lorenzo brought his bride north. Soon there were three young Kinneys at the home they called "Virginia Oaks".

At first the front of the house was planted with red cedar, an umbrella pine, and rhododendrons. The rhodies were *R. maximum*, ironclads, and Lorenzo Sr.'s own hybrids. He'd crossed *R. maximum* with *R. ponticum* from Europe. The latter species was used as the understock on which catawbiense hybrids were grafted. The cross yielded about 15 nice selections worth keeping and propagating that we call the "Peachblow Series." (See Photo 2.)

These large rhodies and conifers created a perfect backdrop for the azaleas. They also divide the landscape visually, creating "rooms". This makes the garden feel bigger than its' 15 acres. It also results in many ladies becoming lost and asking for directions. The men just walk in circles for a while.

Most importantly, the large evergreens create microclimates. The wind is vastly diminished, and their canopy literally insulates the garden. As warm air begins to rise, the convective cooling is blocked or decreased by evergreen boughs.



Photo Susan Gordon

▲ Photo 2—*Rhododendron* 'Peachblow'.



Photo Susan Gordon

▲ Photo 3—(L to R): 'Brazil', 'Narcissiflora', "Sue's Golden Oriole" (a Susan Gordon selection), 'Amoena Coccinea', 'Palestrina', 'Amoena'; in foreground, unnamed Red Kalmia (Ed Mezzitt), 'Hino Crimson'.

▼ Photo 4—Azalea color along a trail, highlighted by deciduous azalea 'Brazil' in foreground.



Photo Lorna Wright; Courtesy of John Carter, Landscape Architecture

Lorenzo continued his work as 4H leader and extension agent, traveling a good deal. One of these trips included a visit to the USDA experiment station in Glendale, MD. There he met Ben Morrison. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship that would change Kinney's life. Lorenzo and Elizabeth never missed an opportunity to visit Morrison and bring back a few of his latest azalea hybrids. Morrison and his companion, Ivan Anderson, would host elaborate dinners and private recitals with Ben singing and playing the organ.

Lorenzo was determined to have Morrison's hybrids survive in Rhode Island. He quickly learned that "protection" meant some shade and wind buffers. It also became apparent that size mattered. Plants that were "knee high" had a much higher survival rate than small ones.

The year was 1955. A young URI grad named John Creech was working with the USDA at Glendale. Creech brought a large selection of Morrison's hybrids to URI to test their cold hardiness. The plants were young, and Creech planted them in the middle of a windy field in full sun. Within a year or two, all had died. The USDA's recommendation was to avoid planting the Glenn Dales as far north as Rhode Island.

Meanwhile, two miles away, up the hill and sheltered by trees, Lorenzo's collection was growing.

Lorenzo continued to travel in his work with URI, and even more upon retirement. He sought out hybridizers and nurseries, collecting friends, cultivars, and knowledge as he went. The list of friends/sources reads like a horticultural all-star team—Tingle, Serbin, Jaynes, Mezzitt, Hershey, Hill, Linwood, Medeiros, Galle...

Besides Morrison, it was Joe Gable who had the biggest impact on Lorenzo and his gardens. Joe shared his knowledge of species, hybridizing, and cold hardiness freely. Some of our most magnificent specimens are species and hybrids from Gable.

There was never a "master plan" for the gardens. In his travels, Lorenzo also visited and learned from many gardens: Arnold Arboretum, Longwood, Callaway... US gardens he didn't visit would probably be a shorter list.

Ben Morrison was his biggest mentor here as well. The influence of Morrison's work at the US National Arboretum on Kinney is clearly evident. And Lorenzo took to heart

Morrison's advice on color. He always included a white in plantings. It brought out the other colors, "...like a brooch or corsage on a lady's dress." (See Photos 3, 4.)

The Kinney garden grew organically as plants and land were added. The original six acres were actually three separate purchases, resulting in a "T" shape with minimal road frontage. Later, in 1997, the next generation of garden owners, Betty Kinney Faella and Tony Faella, purchased nine abutting acres.