

# The Nanneys—Building an Azalea Society

*By Barry Sperling—Alexandria, Virginia*

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If roses naturally grew thornless, then two of the great private azalea collections might never have been created. Leslie Nanney's mom, Frances, realized the children would have more fun in the yard if the thorny problem of roses was replaced by friendly azaleas. This realization, in the late 1950s, at their North Arlington, Virginia, home ushered in a lifetime of our favorite plants.

Leslie married Dave Nanney in 1968, and they bought a house with a large back yard in Annandale in 1971. Frances provided many azaleas to make their house a home.

Dave was poking around Betty's Azalea Ranch in Fairfax, VA, when he was introduced to ARS Potomac Valley Chapter president George Ring. Dave and Leslie were now firmly embedded in rhododendron/azalea culture.

Moving to a half-acre in Saratoga in 1976, they became friends with hybridizer Frank White at Art Vance's house. Their 5-year-old son made a point of lecturing hybridizer Pete Vines (of Holly Springs Azaleas) on how to take cuttings and the need to join the newly formed Azalea Society of America.

The Nanneys were founding members of the Northern Virginia Chapter of the ASA. Dave has been the club's president, vice-president, and treasurer multiple times, as well as being an ASA director. Leslie has been a director of the ASA four times, and its national secretary for eight years, also handling the post of treasurer of the local chapter.

The family moved to a 2.5-acre wooded plot in West Springfield, VA, in 1986, to which they brought an accumulation of 500 azaleas in pots from their former residence.

Building their gardens was a joint interest. The present location was built south to north (south is by a sharp curve entering the property off Tuttle Road), cutting out many small trees to increase the light within the forested property. The last area to be planted was the north end in the back yard behind the house—done hurriedly in 2009.

## Collecting and Touring

Leslie organized the plantings by hybridizer. Selections from Back Acres and Robin Hills were some of the earliest planted. She plotted curving paths around the beds, near trees, and calculated space for the groups.

They currently have 110 beds. There are 1,975 plants representing 155 hybridizers. The organization naturally reflects the ASA's Legacy Project.

In particular, their collections of Robin Hills, Encores, and Pete Vines' Holly Spring hybrids are almost complete.

A major improvement has been the installation of deer fencing (now through its second winter), which allowed a great display in the spring! Of course, the work never stops. Beds, such as the Gables, are being renovated and the Klimavicz collection spread out.

While the above numbers are amazing, Frances and her husband Phil Louer collected 7,400 plants, representing 182 hybridizers, at their Haymarket, VA, home.

A Rhododendron Society convention in Cape Cod was the Nanneys' introduction to those enjoyable gatherings. Such conventions have always been a high priority, and they try to go to several a year, which makes the past year's COVID-19 cancellations particularly frustrating.

A book could be created from the positive comments by people who know the Nanneys, but we'll stop here, for now, noting that, as their hybridizer collections reach completion and the plants grow larger, their already impressive garden will become a "must see" for azalea lovers around the world!

## Friends' Thoughts

### From Carolyn Beck:

It seems like Leslie and Dave Nanney have always "been there" for us. From the inception of our NV-ASA Chapter in 1980, they have been staunch supporters, serving as officers, helping with chapter events, and supporting our group in many, many ways. Together they have served as the NV-ASA librarian, and have hosted some of our speakers from out of town. [Their ASA leadership roles were mentioned earlier in this article.] We have had an opportunity to enjoy some of the many open gardens the Nanneys have graciously hosted. These are not to be missed, as their garden

The NV Chapter is working with Jenkins Arboretum in Devon, PA, to develop a Holly Springs Legacy Garden, with intern Jake Summers coordinating the project. Leslie and Dave Nanney are shown here delivering the first group of Holly Springs Azaleas to Jenkins on September 13. Rick and Susan Bauer delivered additional azaleas were delivered to Jenkins October 8. Photo by Steve Wright.



boasts many azaleas representing dozens of hybrid groups, each collection sited together, which helps to facilitate study, evaluation, and data collection, allowing them to confirm identification and provide information for others to use. Finding an azalea garden so well organized and labeled is a rare treat.

After Leslie's mother, Frances Louer, died in 2013, Phil Louer donated all their potted azaleas (over 2000) to our chapter. The Nanneys were chief among people who moved these, provided a home, and cared for them until they were placed in one of our plant sales.

Both Leslie and Dave can be counted on to help with the preparations for and operation of our plant sales and auctions.

One major contribution that I recall in detail is Dave's heroic effort in transporting plants to our 2016 ASA/ARS Convention in Williamsburg, VA. He made three trips, each time carrying 400-500 plants in their large vehicle. For an added touch, he endured the fragrance of Holly-tone® fertilizer

the whole way.

They have provided space and care for chapter azaleas, including several hundred Holly Springs Azaleas, for which they are the Legacy Leads. Both Leslie and Dave have volunteered many hours in "potting parties," where chapter plants are moved up to larger pots.

Most recently, Dave joined in on the fun during our Klimavicz Legacy Garden workdays in 2019 at Meadowlark Botanical Garden in Vienna, VA.

#### **From Paul Beck:**

Dave Nanney has been champion for the new website, touting its features, ease of use, and general usefulness while in the garden trying to identify azaleas. He is constantly extolling its features to anyone who is interested.

Dave and Leslie have been a valuable resource to assist with testing new ASA website features, providing valuable feedback about usability, and finding bugs. Most recently, they were an integral part of the testing for the new convention registration web page. As a result, the initial software



release has been very successful, and did not need to be updated during its first use for the, unfortunately cancelled, Houston convention”

They have been a tremendous help with data entry for the azalea database. In addition to becoming Legacy Leads for the Holly Springs Azaleas, Dave and Leslie have volunteered many hours with updating the online azalea database by entering descriptions from Galle's *Azaleas* into the website.

#### From Rick Bauer:

Dave and Leslie have been members of the ASA and the NV Chapter from the earliest days of both organizations. They are extremely knowledgeable about azaleas and have built an extensive garden of different varieties, including a large collection of Holly Springs Azaleas. They are very generous in opening their garden to visitors. It was as a result of one of these visits that Susan and I became members of the society and chapter.

Dave and Leslie give freely of their time to support the chapter and the society. Both have served in elected positions. Most recently, Leslie has served as the secretary of the ASA. Dave is especially good at warmly welcoming visitors and other guests at our chapter events. This has, on more than one occasion, resulted in the visitor becoming a member. We've enjoyed sharing garden adventures with them in various parts of the US, as well as in Germany and Finland. We are very pleased to know them and call them friends.

#### About the Author:

Barry Sperling was the editor of *The Azalea Clipper*, the online newsletter of the Northern Virginia Chapter for 10 years, as well as the NV Chapter's corresponding secretary. Rick Bauer took over both roles in October 2020.



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