

2022 Distinguished Service Award Winner

By Shane Harris—Dadeville, Alabama

John Torbert is the current president of the Alabamense chapter of the Azalea Society of America. He has been a member since 2012 and was elected as chapter president in October 2020.

John spent his career in the field of forest soils; the first half in academia and the second half with timber industry. Now, in semi-retirement, he mostly spends his time working in his small native azalea nursery and occasionally selling timberland as a real estate sales person for AFM Real Estate. His many years of work in the great outdoors prompted his curiosity, interest, and love of our native azaleas.

John and his wife Kira Bowen, (Alabamense Chapter Treasurer) enjoy life on their 160-acre tree farm in Salem, Alabama. John is passionate about native azaleas and has grown them very successfully over the last few years. He propagates them from seed as well as from cuttings. Amongst the pine trees around his home is an impressive collection of planted specimens and a miniature nursery of potted native azaleas. John enjoys sharing his passion and knowledge of azaleas with members and others and actively sells his plants locally. Like most of us, he is always improving his knowledge of azaleas and often seeks advice and conversation with members and experts. John is very well respected and enjoys people, plants, and learning.

The Alabamense chapter under John's leadership has increased its visibility and activities. Each quarter, John writes, produces, and distributes a chapter newsletter of news, photos, articles, interviews, and business items. The feature stories and photos he does on members and the time and travel he dedicates to producing it is not only admirable, but engaging. The chapter's Facebook page, presently with 155 followers, has gained more attention from nonmembers and has been a great outreach platform, specifically for answering questions and highlighting events. It has been an efficient means to share interests with the community and to help attract new ASA members.

Despite the social distancing restrictions and cancellations in 2020 and 2021, John also organized several programs, garden tours, and outings for members. Business meetings were held via Zoom with an informative educational program



always included. In the spring of 2021, the chapter partnered with Alabama Extension to offer an "All About Azaleas" public webinar series to showcase our favorite plants when conferences and gatherings were impossible. Over 500 people participated, both nationally and internationally, at some point in the four part-series from March to June. Various member garden tours in Georgia and Alabama were held with John going to all of them and sharing photos and info back with those who could not attend. John speaks often of getting more members involved and doing more outreach programs. Additional strategies are currently being pursued to invite and include Master Gardeners and other plant enthusiasts to future endeavors such as the 2024 ASA Convention, to be hosted by the Alabamense chapter.

This recognition of John Torbert's service to the Azalea Society of America is well deserved

About the Author:

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