

# 2023 Annual Convention Summary

By Kathy Jentz—*The Azalean*, Editor

The 2023 annual meeting of the Azalea Society of America (ASA) was held as a joint convention with the American Rhododendron Society (ARS) from April 18 to April 23 in Dunwoody, Georgia, just north of Atlanta. Approximately 130 people attended the event. A huge debt of gratitude goes to Charlie Andrews and Rick Bauer for serving as co-chairmen for the convention.

A photo collage from the event is on the back cover of this issue. Many hundreds of additional photos that I took during the meeting are posted at the ASA Facebook page, please feel free to tag yourselves and to share them.

Several attendees went on a pre-convention field trip on Wednesday to the Flint River to see the Oconee azalea (*Rhododendron flammeum*) in bloom. On that same afternoon, both societies held Board of Directors meetings. That evening, a reception featuring posters describing rhododendron and azalea research projects took place in the hotel lobby. Then, the convention plant sale opened in a tented room next to the hotel with over 3,000 plants for sale.

On Thursday morning, buses took attendees to the Atlanta Botanical Garden for a morning of immersion in the wonderful plant collections there. Then it was on to the Atlanta History Center for lunch and to explore the center's museum and gardens. Upon returning, part two of the research poster reception was followed by more plant sale shopping.

On Friday, tour buses headed to Gibbs Gardens in Ball Ground, GA. The Gibbs collection of azalea plantings has been greatly expanded recently and many attendees scaled the steep hillside paths to get shots of those in flower, as well as the extensive rhododendron collection. Next, we went on to Babyland General Hospital in Cleveland, GA. The creator of the Cabbage Patch Dolls, Xavier Roberts, was our host for a delightful buffet lunch including horsedrawn carriage rides.

The ASA banquet was held that evening and featured a presentation by Susan Treadway on her grandmother, Mary Gibson Henry. Henry was a plant explorer, native plant enthusiast, and led a fascinating life—a woman well ahead of her time.

The Saturday programs were all indoors. It rained outside as attendees listened to several seminars. The first was a panel on the *Rhododen-*

*dron smokianum*, a “new” North American species, by Don Hyatt, Tara Spears, and Ralf Bauer. Next was Steve McCormick, Rick Bauer, and Linda Derkach sharing chapter ideas for success. Following that, was a panel collecting ideas for future rhododendron and azalea research. Then, Rick Edwards presented, “Why Is *R. occidentale* So Difficult to Grow in the East?” and Jackson McCarter spoke on “Rhododendrons for the Southeast.” Finally, Rick Bauer gave an overview of the ASA Legacy Project. The ARS banquet was held that evening with a humorous and energetic speech by Tom Johnson.

As I was not able to attend the bonus excursion, Rich Lasonde shared his experience of the post-convention field trip:

“On Sunday April 23, nine of us and our leader, Charlie Andrews, ventured up into the north Georgia foothills and arrived at Hurricane Creek at an altitude of about 1,800 feet. There we were not only surrounded by incredible natural beauty, but we also had the privilege of witnessing azalea evolution in action. Over the years, Charlie has identified, marked, and numbered important specimens most of which tower to 15 feet or more, some to over 20 feet. *R. calendulaceum*, *R. canescens*, and *R. arborescens* are the dominant understory plants in much of the area. The *canescens* and *calendulaceum* were in bloom, the *arborescens*, confined mostly to creek banks, will bloom later. Here, some of the *arborescens* lived up to their name, large tree-like plants with enormous trunks. Because of their overlapping bloom times, *R. calendulaceum* and *R. canescens* have hybridized, which appears to have allowed *R. canescens* to mix its genes coding for the production of the red plant pigment anthocyanin with the yellow and orange pigments of *calendulaceum*. The resulting triploid progeny possess flowers with forms most resembling *calendulaceum* but in a multitude of beautiful colors of pinks and peaches, not typical of the surrounding *calendulaceum*, but with the typical flame azalea orange or gold blotch. One outstanding specimen displays a combination of cherry red and creamy white. Many natural triploids were confirmed through chromosome analysis, which added to excitement for those of us seeing these azaleas for the first time. This was truly a trip to remember.”