

Member Profile: Don Hyatt

Tell us about yourself and your background.

I have had a lifelong interest in plants. I started my first garden when I was three years old at the family home my parents built in McLean, VA, in 1950. Over the years, I developed a shady garden featuring rhododendrons, azaleas, and wildflowers. For the first 60+ years, my $\frac{3}{4}$ -acre property was ideal, a moist sloping tract with rich organic soils. The typography faced northeast and had high dappled shade provided primarily by century-old oak trees that were 80 to 100 ft tall. Aided by unique microclimates available on the property, I was able to raise many plants that were difficult for others to grow. My garden was featured during the 2009 ASA Convention garden tour in Northern Virginia.

Due to unfortunate circumstances in recent years, I am now having to start over. The initial problem was the arrival of deer that found my organic garden especially tempting. More recently, I have been besieged by weather extremes that have killed most of my mature plants. Living on the same piece of property for 75 years, I can attest that the climate has definitely changed in the past decade. I have seen some of the hottest temperatures on record as well as some of the coldest. I have had periods with excessive rains and flooding, with an incredible eight feet of rain that fell in the summer of 2018. That year, my soil became super saturated, even on sloping terrains. It was the equivalent of river bottom muck that smothered the root systems of many rhododendrons and azaleas that were 40 to 50 years old. That was followed by several extreme droughts where my soils hardened like cement and cracked open. What is frustrating is that so many 100-year and 500-year weather records seem to be falling on a regular basis. This climate is not normal.

Warm temperatures often continue late into the fall now, but that can be followed by sudden deep freezes that have damaged hardy plants that had not yet gone dormant. A similar problem is happening in the spring when warm winter days will wake plants early from their dormant state, but then they get hit by a severe, late freeze. That can kill the blossoms for the current year, burn off the new growth, and it can often kill the plant. The freezing weather causes the rising sap to form ice crystal splitting the bark and separating it from the wood underneath. That girdles the plant which causes it to die in the summer.

A final blow the past few years has been the loss of my shade canopy. I have lost a total of 12 of my tallest oaks that were 100 years old. Some were lost to storm damage, but others to disease. My sheltered microcli-



Don Hyatt at the Jenkins Arboretum. Photo by Kathy Jentz.

mates are no more and I feel like I am trying to garden in the deserts of Kuwait.

Now that I have discussed the evolving history of my garden, I will shift to my personal history. I always considered myself a science nerd and assumed I would end up in a career related to horticulture. As a child, my favorite time was in the garden. I was always moving plants to improve the color scheme in the landscape. I also adopted the woods behind my house where I tended my wildflower colonies. In first grade, I actually made corsages for every girl in my class and I suspect that gesture helped me win class president. I sketched my flowers and painted watercolor portraits of them. I was hybridizing azaleas and rhododendrons when I was in my teens. I selected orchids for my high school science projects, since they were growing during the school year.

I earned a BS degree in Horticulture with a double major in Biochemistry from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 1969. I had won a state science scholarship so my curriculum advisor allowed me significant freedom to add additional courses of interest each semester. I ended up with an extra 90 quarter hours above graduation requirements. In addition to the prescribed curriculum for my double major, I took advanced classes in mathematics and chemistry, food science technology, a class in FORTRAN, several classes in Shakespeare due to a superb visiting professor, classes in Russian and art illustration. I sang tenor in the Varsity Glee Club.

I had actually started a PhD program in biochemistry at Tech thinking that I would go into plant genetics but had an epiphany during the first summer term. Realizing I might end up in a career where I would spend most of my time in a laboratory, I felt it would be too confining. I had so many other interests. At that same time, Fairfax County Public Schools announced that they had a shortage of math teachers and were recruiting. Since I was certified to teach multiple subjects at

the secondary school level, I decided to accept an offer to teach math for one year while I assessed my priorities.

As often happens in life, your chosen career doesn't materialize and instead, some other career chooses you. That is what happened to me. I knew that teaching would not be a lucrative career but money was never a high priority for me. However, I found teaching very rewarding on a personal level. When I asked myself about the importance of teaching compared to other careers I might pursue, I had to rank it right at the top. Educators were highly regarded in many ancient cultures. I made my decision and spent the next 33 years teaching mathematics and computer science in Fairfax County, VA. In reflection, I think the personal satisfaction one feels in those two careers is really quite similar. A gardener plants some seeds, provides a nurturing environment, and creates a population of wonderful new plants. A teacher takes young minds, also provides a nurturing environment, and hopefully produces a group of competent young adults who will be assets to society.

For the first 16 years of my teaching career, I worked with all levels in middle school including non-readers and belligerents, as well as academically gifted. During that time, computer technology was being introduced in education. I had found that very interesting while an undergraduate, so I decided to pursue a MS Degree in computer science at night school offered by my alma mater, Virginia Tech. I had just completed my degree in 1985, when the Governor of Virginia announced a new magnet school, the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJHSST), designed for students with special talents in math, science, and technology. There was a call for a teacher with a Master's degree in computer science and at least 5 years of teaching experience to be the Director of a Computer Systems Lab. I decided to apply and was offered that position. For the next 17 years, I developed advanced computer classes for gifted students based on my Master's program. That position was very demanding of my time, so it became my primary focus from the time the school opened in 1985 until I retired in 2002.

One life-changing experience for me and my students at TJHSST happened early in my tenure there during the summer of 1988. There was a national contest called SuperQuest sponsored by ETA Systems, a division of Control Data, where they were going to give away a million-dollar supercomputer to some high school in the U.S. I decided we should go after that prize. I formed a team with four of my students, and entered the competition. There were 2,500 entrants that they narrowed down to four finalist schools, so we were invited to spend the entire summer in Min-

nesota learning about the technology as we competed for that powerful machine. It was an awesome summer where each student had to develop a research project that would challenge their supercomputer. I was so proud of them and we did win. One of the judges, who was a Nobel Laureate, said he would accept the research project of one of my students, as is, as a Master's thesis. That computer was installed in our lab when we returned home. All seniors at Jefferson were required to do an independent research project, so it became a valuable tool for interdisciplinary computer applications, computer simulations, and graphics visualization.

From that point on, the students I taught at Jefferson were very successful in a wide range of competitions such as the Intel Science Talent Search, the International Science Fair, and an Internet competition called ThinkQuest where they won over \$250,000 in scholarships for themselves and prizes for the school. It has been so gratifying to follow the success of my former students as they pursued careers in college and industry.

After retiring in 2002, I shifted my focus back to my original interests in horticulture. It had taken a back seat because of the demands of teaching, but I was able to maintain a small business on the side, Stonehouse Creek Nursery. Started in 1978, I propagated rare rhododendron and azalea cultivars that I sold locally during the summer. A nursery can be rather confining, so eventually I closed that down, too. That allowed more time for travel and a chance to explore a wide range of interests including gardening, photography, botanical illustration, writing, and the study of native plants in the wild.

Since 1990, one of my main priorities has been documenting the beauty and diversity of our native azalea and rhododendron species. Rather than working on my own garden, I have preferred to use my time trying to preserve rare native azalea and rhododendron populations in the wild. I also look for ways to support public gardens since they will have permanence whereas private gardens are usually lost after the property is sold.

I did miss the daily lectures and interaction with my "audience" when I retired. Since then, I have become very active on the horticulture lecture circuit. I have given many presentations at national and international horticulture conferences on both coasts and overseas. I have been a frequent speaker at local garden clubs well as chapter meetings of the American Rhododendron Society and the Azalea Society of America. I received a number of awards including the ARS Silver Medal in 2002 and the ARS Gold Medal in 2012. I received the Distinguished Service Award from the ASA in 2009. I have served on the national Boards of both organizations.

Who are your influences/heroes?

I have had many people influence me over the years. Starting so young, my parents had much to do with nurturing my initial interests in horticulture. Before moving to McLean, VA, my parents had a small townhouse in Arlington, VA, where they raised roses, peonies, iris, and a few other perennials in the backyard. They brought those plants to our new house and gave me a place for my own garden. We used to go on wildflower hikes in the woods to bring plants back for the garden. We dug up dogwood seedlings as well as hemlock seedlings to plant around the property.

Both of my parents grew up on the same street in Washington DC, Franklin St. NE. It is located just on the other side of New York Avenue across from the U.S. National Arboretum. Whenever we visited family for Easter, birthdays, Mother's Day, or other holidays, they usually took me to the Arboretum to see the azaleas and other floral highlights. That was very indoctrinating. I can remember the Azalea Valley with the Knap Hill azaleas and Exbury hybrids given to the U.S. by The Netherlands after World War II. There were also the Glenn Dales. My grandmothers were always giving me flowers from their gardens for me to plant at home. The grandmother on my mother's side said I was like a miniature Luther Burbank. I must admit that I did discover the 12-volume set of *Luther Burbank, His Life and Works* in the library which was some of my favorite reading material. As I recall, I gave a book report on that somewhere along the way. My mother and grandfather on her side were both commercial artists so they also encouraged my interest in botanical illustration. I was always painting my flowers as a child, but I remember the excitement when in elementary school they gave me a copy of the *MacMillan Wildflower Book* for my birthday. They directed me to the work of many other botanical artists that I admired, especially Anne Ophelia Dowden.

Other influences include Dr. John Creech. When he worked at the USDA, prior to becoming the Director of the National Arboretum, he set up displays at the Arboretum during azalea season. One year, he showed the variation possible from a single azalea cross. I forget the cross, but one of the plants he showed was eventually named 'Mrs. LBJ', which has white, hose-in-hose flowers and 'Brookside Delight', which is a pale lavender. I became more excited about the possibilities of hybridizing azaleas and rhododendrons and began making all kinds crosses.

I was always looking for new azaleas to plant in the garden. Frank White in Maryland and Ben Birch in Virginia sold cuttings rooted from the Glenn Dale azaleas at the National Arboretum. As a child, I saved my allowance to buy azaleas from them.

I was already enamored by the Knap Hill and Ex-

bury Azaleas from ads I saw in the Wayside Gardens catalog, but they were too expensive. Our ARS chapter had an auction of deciduous azaleas when one of our members passed away. That is when I got my first stock plants of those clones, probably in the early 1970s. I was raising lots of seedlings by then and one of my hybrids with huge yellow trusses I decided to name, 'Yellow Cloud'. It won Best Deciduous Azalea in the Show at the 1982 ARS Convention we hosted in Washington, DC, and a picture of the truss appeared on the cover of the *ARS Journal*. Suddenly, my plant was in great demand and I thought that it might be my big break into the nursery business. I sent one of my three plants off to Briggs Nursery and signed a contract to have it propagated under tissue culture. Murphy's Law was working overtime in 1988 since that was the year I got my 3,000 liners back from Briggs to pot up and grow on. That was the same summer I was supposed to take the team of students to Minnesota to compete for the supercomputer. Big life decision... grow my yellow azaleas to start a nursery or try to win that million-dollar supercomputer. I opted for the latter. I set up automatic watering systems, headed for Minnesota, and hoped for the best. I didn't lose too many plants that summer, but teaching responsibilities increased when we won the computer so I tried to unload my tissue culture plants wherever I could. I eventually broke even on the investment, but it was clear at that time I was not going to be a nurseryman.

Another person who was influential in a way was Fred Galle. He was an icon and I met him at a number of ARS meetings. He knew I was focusing on those large-flowered Knap Hill type deciduous azaleas so we often discussed them. He thought those "Dolly Parton" azaleas were a bit gaudy and asked, "Have you ever seen the native azaleas in the wild? They really are charming." I admitted that I had not been able to travel to see many plants in the wild, but in 1995, I finally had a chance to get up to Gregory Bald. He was right and I am a convert, now, too. There were other ARS leaders who gave me advice including Augie Kehr and George Ring. They were wonderful mentors.

What other plants do you like to grow and collect?

In addition to rhododendrons and azaleas, I really like all kinds of plants. My first love and still high on my list for favorite plants are wildflowers, and especially our native orchids. I have already mentioned the 80-acre tract of pristine woodland behind my house that became my extended garden playground. It was a lovely piece of property and botanically rich. On the ridge there were still ghostly white trunks of chestnut trees that died of the blight, holly trees, hemlocks, dogwoods, native azaleas, mosses, ferns, arbutus, and at least four native orchid species.

My main focus was on some pink lady's slippers growing in a pine grove in that woods. I learned to pollinate them when I was quite young, maybe 6 or 7 years old. In the fall, I would shake the dust like seeds around the pine woods when the pods ripened. By the time I went to college, I had a carpet of orchids back there with many hundreds of blooms. The soil conditions and micorrhiza were never right in my own garden to support pink lady's slippers so I could never successfully transplant any to my yard. No matter how careful I was, the transplants would decline over time and be gone in a few years. While I was in college, that tract of land with the pink lady's slippers was sold to a real estate developer who leveled the terrain to build houses on ¼-acre lots. He took the whole top of the hill and put it in the valley to have more lots to sell. The trees were gone, my wildflowers were gone, and my carpet of orchids was gone.

About the same time that I started pollinating my lady's slippers, we took several family vacations to Florida. That is when I became interested in tropical orchids. I joined the National Capital Orchid Society when I was probably 10 years old. Orchids were expensive but they had auctions where some plants were very cheap... only \$0.25 or so. I remember bidding on Cattleyas named "Lebalon #5" and "Lebalon #19" thinking I'd start a collection of the whole Lebalon series. That is when some kind lady leaned over and said, "Lebalon is 'No Label' spelled backwards." After that realization, I started buying community pots and growing them on. I gradually took over my mother's dining room table with my orchid collection since it had the best light. Then I moved to the basement under artificial lights when she decided to reclaim her space. After I started teaching, my father and I built a greenhouse off of the garage for my expanding orchid collection. By that time, I was also into camellias and azaleas that I would force into bloom in the winter months. Unfortunately, I lost my orchid collection one year due to a freeze while I was at school. That was when I shifted to propagating azaleas and rhododendrons and officially opened my nursery business.

I did get some yellow lady's slippers when I was in high school and they are probably still my most cherished plants in the garden. I was never able to get them to reseed elsewhere in my yard, but the clumps did boast on the order of 110 blossoms each year. I had to move them in mid-summer one year when I had a large tree taken down. That did set them back but they are recovering.

I have been adding lots of deer-resistant plants to my garden in recent years including daffodils, double hellebores, and tree peonies. I used to have a large daylily and hosta collection at one time, but that was pre-Bambi.

What got you started on collecting native azaleas?

We had the native *R. periclymenoides* in the woods behind my house so those were around from my earliest memories. I did dig some of those to plant in my first garden. I remember being awestruck seeing my first *R. calendulaceum* on a family vacation down the Blue Ridge Parkway when I was in elementary school. I really became earnest in collecting native azaleas following the 1990 ASA Convention our Northern Virginia Chapter hosted at Tysons Corner. I gave a talk at the banquet titled, "Azaleas: A Look Toward the Future" where I referenced many points already discussed.

I had been a member of the Middle Atlantic Chapter ARS Species Study Group where we met regularly to review a slide library provided by the ARS to teach people about the genus. The slides on our native azaleas were terrible, so our group planned a project to update the photos and text for that portion. I invited the group which included Ken and Sandra McDonald, George McLellan, Bill Bedwell, David and Debbie Sauer, and Walter and Sybil Przypek to my house on the Sunday after the 1990 ASA Convention where we started planning trips to document our native azaleas. Because I couldn't take off from school when most of the early things were in bloom, I was not able to join others to see species like *austrinum*, *canescens*, or *atlanticum*. I did join the group in 1995 when we planned a week-long extravaganza, going to Roan Mountain, Wayah Bald, Hooper Bald, and Gregory Bald. George McLellan eventually presented a program using the best photos from our group at an ARS Eastern Regional conference in Williamsburg, VA, in the fall of 1999. From that point on, I was totally hooked and we arranged trips every year, as soon as school was out.

Fred Galle was right. Once you see the natives in the wild, all other forms seem trivial. After nearly 20 years, Charlie Andrews has now taken over planning for the mountain hikes from us. I am happy that tradition is still continuing.

What is your favorite azalea that you grow?

My favorite azalea has to be *R. calendulaceum*, not necessarily as it grows in my yard but the way it grows in the wild. The Appalachian Trail on Roan Mountain from Round Bald, to Engine Gap, and beyond to Jane Bald to Grassy Ridge Point is beyond compare! People who have hiked the entire 2,000+ miles of the Appalachian Trail say that is prettiest stretch of the entire trail. What is amazing is that those assessments were made when the azaleas and rhododendrons were not in bloom. Seeing those plants flowering in that gorgeous mountain setting is truly a spiritual experience!

As for an evergreen azalea, my favorite is probably 'Wagner's White Spider'. I salvaged that plant from a spray one of our members entered in the Potomac Valley Chapter ARS Flower Show one year. It won best new hybrid and I asked Dave Wagner if I could propagate it and distribute the plant according to the name he chose. It is wonderful in the landscape since it's delicate and airy blossoms work like baby's breath in a flower arrangement.

For a large-flowered deciduous azalea comparable to the Knap Hill and Exbury forms, I am very fond of 'Sweet Christy' due to the very ruffled blossoms of soft lemon yellow. It was a selection by one of our early ASA members, Dr. Roy Magruder.

In the native azalea category, I think 'My Mary' is one of my most favorite garden plants because of its plant habit, delicate blossoms, and very strong fragrance. I thought it was hardy as a rock but it did suffer this winter in a number of locations. I like growing plants that remind me of people I know. George Beasley, who named that plant for his wife, Mary, were both good friends. I still laugh when I remember how he introduced that azalea. George rambled on about the great characteristics including flower color, mildew-free foliage, and fragrance. He concluded with the remark that the plant was "wider than tall" and then said it reminded him of his wife so he named it 'My Mary'. Wider than tall? Mary didn't appreciate that last comparison.

What advice would you give to beginners?

I would recommend that a beginning azalea collector join the ASA and get involved with some of the group's activities. We have many knowledgeable members in our organization and a new person will learn much more from the personal advice during hands on activities than from a book or asking advice from a clerk at a garden center. Most commercial nurseries carry plants being pushed by wholesalers, whereas the local experts know about the latest introductions that haven't even gotten to market place. Talk to the experts. They will give the best advice.

I also recommend that beginners should try to attend national conferences and conventions. It is inspiring to see private and public gardens since they will give us ideas for our own home landscapes. The planners will have arranged a series of entertaining speakers who will educate and inspire us, too. Finally, we can always count on a convention to offer a killer plant sale that will provide rare and exciting new cultivars to add to our collections. Most of those plants will not

be available at the local garden centers.

Over the years, I have found that the friendships I make at these meetings and the memories I bring back are far more valuable than the plants I grow.

Anything else you want to add?

I have already rambled enough in answering these questions. There is an incident I would like to share that was during my trip to Exbury Gardens. I had joined a tour George McLellan arranged for his landscape clients and we were supposed to arrive by 12:30 PM and get a private tour by one of the head gardeners. The travel agent who handled the tour spent too much time at the pub where we had lunch. Then he thought he'd take a "short cut" but got lost. We missed the tour and then learned that the gardens would be closing early because they were preparing for the Founders' Dinner that night. We would have maybe 30 minutes to see all 250 acres. George McLellan, Bill Bedwell, and I were not in the regular tour bus but in a car carrying excess baggage, so once we were in the garden we decided to see as much of it as possible before the officials at Exbury ran us out. I had wanted to see Exbury since grade school. I wasn't about to miss it.



Don Hyatt with R. 'Caroline' in his former garden.

It had been a rainy morning and the skies cleared just as we arrived. We went through the gate and ran through the garden snapping pictures as fast as we could. We got through the main rhododendron area, the maples, and then found the Exbury Azalea display. Eventually, we worked our way back to the far corner of the estate where there was a large pond with the famous Black Swans and yes, more Exbury Azaleas.

I was standing there snapping pictures when I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I was sure it was the Exbury police and they were going to escort me out. Instead, it was a petite elderly woman who said in a strong Southern accent, "I know you, I've been to your garden!" That woman was one of the most cherished icons in the ASA, Margie Jenkins. I said, "I know you, I've been to your garden, too!"

Margie explained that the weather was so cold and rainy earlier in the day, they didn't get to see much. Once the sun came out, though, her group decided to get lost in the garden until they were run out, too.

We parted ways and left the garden around 6:00 PM as the distinguished guests were just arriving. Edmund de Rothschild was there at the entry greeting his guests and we did wave as we drove off to our next destination. It was a fantastic afternoon, and finally a childhood dream fulfilled!