

# Azaleas in Atlantic Canada

By Peter Iveson—Toronto, Ontario, Canada

I knew they could grow azaleas and rhododendrons in the Canadian Maritime provinces, but I was pleasantly surprised by the extent and magnificence of their blooms. Upon taking the pre- and post-conference tours and attending the Spring Conference of the American Rhododendron Society in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, from June 5–8, 2025, I gained further knowledge about how they grow in my own country. The pre-conference tour lasted five days starting on May 31 starting in Halifax, NS, making our way down the East Coast stopping along the way to visit private gardens in Yarmouth at the southern tip of Nova Scotia, then up the west coast bordering the Bay of Fundy to have lunch at the historic gardens in Annapolis Royal and a guided tour by horticulturalist Ashlea Viola.

The conference was entitled “Emerging Trends for Rhododendrons” and featured key speakers Dr. Hartwig Schepker from the Rhododendron-Park Bremen in Germany; Connor Ryan, Holden Arboretum in Ohio; Joe Brusco, president of the Massachusetts ARS chapter; and Ron Rabideau of the Greater Philadelphia ARS chapter. Tara Spears from the Jenkins Arboretum, known by many ASA members who attended the ASA 2025 annual conference in Malvern, PA, spoke on public gardens playing a vital role in plant preservation through conservation efforts. Jim Sharpe, President of District 12 Atlantic region chapter of the ARS, did a magnificent job organizing the spring convention and pre- and post-tours. The pre-tour had 21 in attendance and the post-tour, which crossed the Bay of Fundy to New Brunswick and continued into northern Nova Scotia and back to Halifax, had 19 attendees. It was made mostly of Canadian and American ARS members and two members from New Zealand. Since *The Azalean*’s primary focus is on azaleas, I am focusing on azaleas we saw on the tours.

## Freeman Patterson’s Garden in Shampers Bluff in New Brunswick

Perhaps, this was the “piece de resistance” of all the gardens we visited. We entered into a glade of Northern Lights Azaleas set off by sentinels of paper birch trees with trembling aspen-like leaves sparkling in the morning sun. Pink opening white and very fragrant was a bush of ‘Arctic Lights’. ‘Homebush’ had balls of deep-pink, while ‘Gibraltar’ was brilliant-orange and fragrant. ‘Mandarin Lights’ had fragrant, vivid orange/red flowers and ‘Rosy Lights’ was a knock out



Fig. 1. Azaleas in bloom at Annapolis Royal. Photo by Peter Iveson.

with deep-pink, very fragrant blossoms. ‘Oxydol’ had large, white, fragrant blooms; while ‘Toucan’ was a large fragrant white/yellow blend. Our host gave us a documented tour of his garden. Other members scampered into the evergreen forest admiring flowering rhododendrons despite the mosquitoes, which were in their first spring fling. Ferns and ground-hugging native plants, and trailing dogwood covered the ground. I did not venture into the forest as the ground was uneven. We had the whole morning to ourselves, as I was mesmerized by the beauty and fragrance. It was soon time to have lunch catered by the ladies of the Kingston Loyalist Historical Society, which consisted of homemade sandwiches, rhubarb custard pie, and a delicious rhubarb punch.

Readers of the *ARS Winter Journal* Volume 79, No. 1, 2025 will have read “The Rhododendron Garden at Shampers Bluff” by Freeman Patterson. The garden



**Fig. 2** Plaque to Captain Richard Steele in Pine Grove Park in Liverpool, NS, Photo by Peter Iveson.

is on the Kingston peninsula about 20 miles north of St. John, NB. Wild lupins were in bloom in the fields and the hilly countryside was covered with coniferous forest. Patterson first started his garden over 20 years ago, when he planted three Northern Lights Azaleas. The Northern Lights Series are deciduous azaleas developed by the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. They are able to survive the severe cold winters of the northern United States, and they do well in Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic Canadian provinces. The garden now spans 1.62 hectares (four acres) of open woodland and coniferous forest, containing about 1,600 azaleas and rhododendrons and representing 175 varieties all growing on a rolling terrain. Patterson faced a monumental task, which involved removal of dead trees and selective cutting of trees to ensure adequate sunlight, with the goal of stimulating a heavy set of flower buds. Tree roots were also a problem when he was planting. He simply set the plants on the ground, then built a mound of horse manure compost and mulch around them. He deliberately left the stumps of trees. If a tree was dead and already rotting, he hollowed out the stump and planted a rhododendron or an azalea inside in order to protect it from the savage winter wind and to provide moisture from the rotting stump in summers with low rainfall. To avoid buying expensive mulch, he used what nature was providing in the way of rotting leaves, twigs, and evergreen branches to hold dry deciduous plantings in place. It saved him a huge sum of money when buying plants from nurseries.

### Captain Dick Steele's Plants

His big break came when an important infusion of azaleas came from the Steele ancestral home, Tyng Hill, three miles away. Little did he know that the renowned hybridizer, plantsman, and ARS gold medalist winner who lived in Nova Scotia was cold testing azaleas and rhododendrons there. Concerned about the fate of Tyng Hill nearby, after the death of Dick Steele's brother with weeds and wild trees taking over the garden, he sought and received permission to move 100 azaleas (young to 10 years old) to his Shampers Bluff garden. Tall rhododendrons were too big to move. He later realized that Captain Dick Steele was focusing on Mollis stock for his breeding projects at Tyng Hill. We visited Dick Steele's Nova Scotia farm on June 3 as we proceeded down the east coast on our way to Yarmouth at the southern tip of Nova Scotia.

The property is currently owned by Dianne Chisholm and Chris Cooper and they are now starting to learn about horticulture. Chisholm described the garden as "The Old Bayport Plant Farm," which was created by Captain Richard (Dick) Steele QC (Queens council judge). It is an arboretum consisting of 40 acres of azaleas, rhododendrons, other shrubs, and exotic trees planted in a forest. The property contains



**Fig. 3** Northern Lights Azaleas in Freeman Patterson garden. Photo by Peter Iveson.



**Fig. 4** Linda Derkach retiring ARS president takes a picture of 'Gibraltar' azalea. Photo by Peter Iveson.

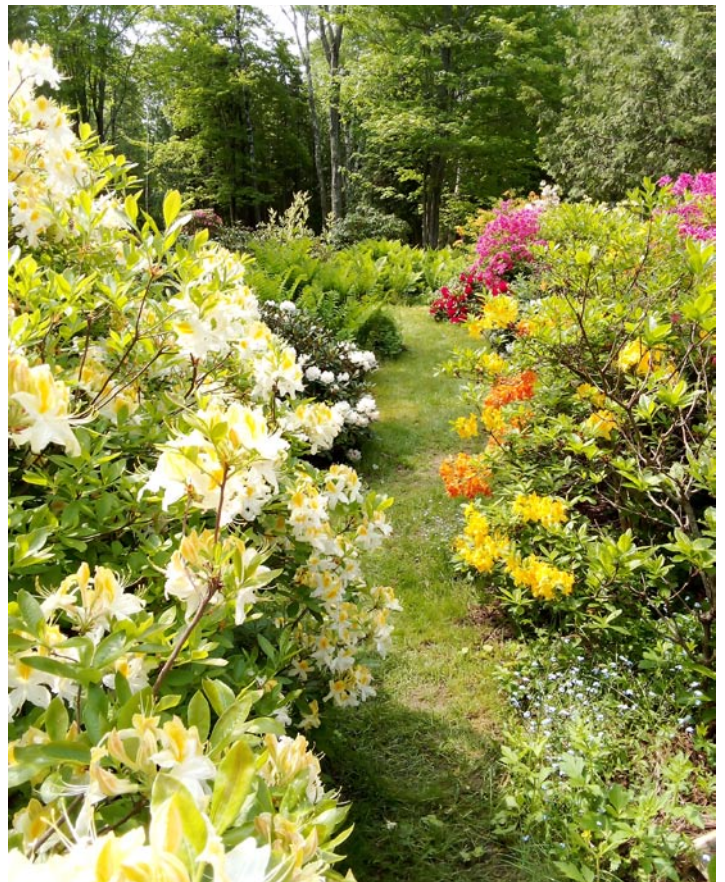
the largest number of azaleas and rhododendrons in Atlantic Canada. Although a bit untidy, paths were well groomed for a visit by adventurous hill climbers. I sat on some Adirondack chairs overlooking the pond with ducks and flowering azaleas. Earlier, we visited Christopher Clarke's garden in Liverpool, NS, which is another beautiful garden full of blooming azaleas and rhododendrons. Clarke, a former mayor of Liverpool, and Captain Steele created a beautiful public park called "Pine Grove," where huge rhododendrons were in flower by the Medway River. There is a memorial plaque to Captain Dick Steele (see Figure 2.) and the park is enjoyed by walkers, joggers, children, and lovers.

Now at 87 and living alone, Freeman Patterson is a renowned photographer. He still gives workshops on photography. I was telling some dinner companions about him recently at the Toronto Arts and Letters Club, where I am a member, and I discovered that they had never heard of him... but then one member piped up singing his praises. She had attended one of his workshops. As a member of the Order of Canada, Freeman realized that he wanted his garden to survive him after he was gone; so he formed a small non-pri-

vate organization, with two friends, in order to endow the garden. The board of directors is in the process of preparing an application to Canada Revenue Agency for charitable status. There is a website you can join to support Shampers Bluff. We visited two other beautiful private gardens, one on two acres in Sackville, NB, and another in Marylake, NS, which should also be preserved, as widows are keeping them going. Later that day, we went to St. Andrews-on-the-Sea, NB, to tour the fairly new Kingsbrae Garden and to dine at its café. While speaking to Mary who was in charge of the perennial garden there, I learned that Freeman Patterson was giving a workshop the next week at Kingsbrae.

### The Tours and Gardens

We visited the Corn Hill Nursery between Quispamsis, NB, and Moncton. We had a tour of their operations and had lunch in their Cedar Café. They told us their business has increased double-fold since opening (see [www.cornhillnursery.com](http://www.cornhillnursery.com)). They have a paper catalog. I noticed that they had February daphne (*Daphne mezereum*), which I had not seen offered in years. I ordered two plants and they shipped them immediately. There is a section in the catalog on the azaleas and rhododendrons that they offer. Many azaleas and rhododendrons are too tender for the true north. These



**Fig. 5** 'Toucan' azalea (at left) blooming at Shampers Bluff. Photo by Peter Iveson.



Fig. 6 'Rosy Lights' azalea blooming at Shampers Bluff. Photo by Peter Iveson.

are the hardiest cultivars available. They require well-drained acidic soils that are high in organic matter. If your soil is above pH 5.5, add iron sulphate or wettable sulphur to lower the pH. They have very fine roots and should never be allowed to dry out. Though they will tolerate shady conditions, they will flower better in the sun. Avoid cultivating around roots, as they are very near the surface. Use mulch and hand weed. Priced one-gallon at \$49 and two-gallon at \$79, they only ship in the spring. They carry 'Gibraltar' Zone\* 4, grows 2.5m, a brilliant-orange which is mildew resistant; 'Homebush', Zone 4, deep-pink; 'Mandarin Lights', Zone 3; 'Orchid Lights', Zone 3, very hardy with compact, pink blooms; 'Rosy Lights', Zone 3, deep-rose pink, very fragrant; 'Toucan', Zone 4, large white-yellow blend, very fragrant; and 'White Lights', Zone 3, fragrant, pink opening white, very fragrant.

On the second and last day of our post tour, we visited the Willow Garden near Antigonish, NS. A lovely and well-maintained garden with slopes of rhododendrons and azaleas in full bloom. Sharon Bryson welcomed us and joined us for dinner at Gaspereaux in Antigonish. Asked about her azaleas, Bryson responded, "Most of the azalea growing was by her late husband, Bill, who sourced seed through various seed exchanges over many years. We have acquired some named cultivars as well. 'Homebush' was obtained many years ago and the plants are very large specimens—focal points for the azalea season in the back garden."

'July Jester' is a longtime grower and is welcomed for the later bloom. Late-bloom was a thing we tried to encourage in the seed choices and have accomplished several types to fill the bill. 'Pennsylvania', 'Lemon Drop', and 'Millennium' are three of the named cultivars, which grow here as well. We have grown quite a number of native species, but the shade factor has an effect. *Rhododendron eastmanii* is a favorite and the plants here likely represent some of the very few grown in Nova Scotia. *R. cumberlandense* exists, but seems to be a bit tricky and there are a number of crosses here and there. A great number of beautiful plants have resulted from OP (open-pollinated) seed from a variety of seed parents. I have only adopted my plants as the years have gone by. I thank Sharon for the kindly information she has also provided me with some pictures of her favorite azaleas.

Michael Bamford is the new ARS president and he, along with his wife, were with me on all the tours. He told Jim Sharpe, the tour leader and organizer of the conference, that he was very impressed that they could grow azaleas and rhododendrons far better than they could in his native Georgia. I was impressed too as many gardens in the Maritimes grow them beautifully. I've never seen any in Toronto. I was speaking to a gardener at the conference who lives between

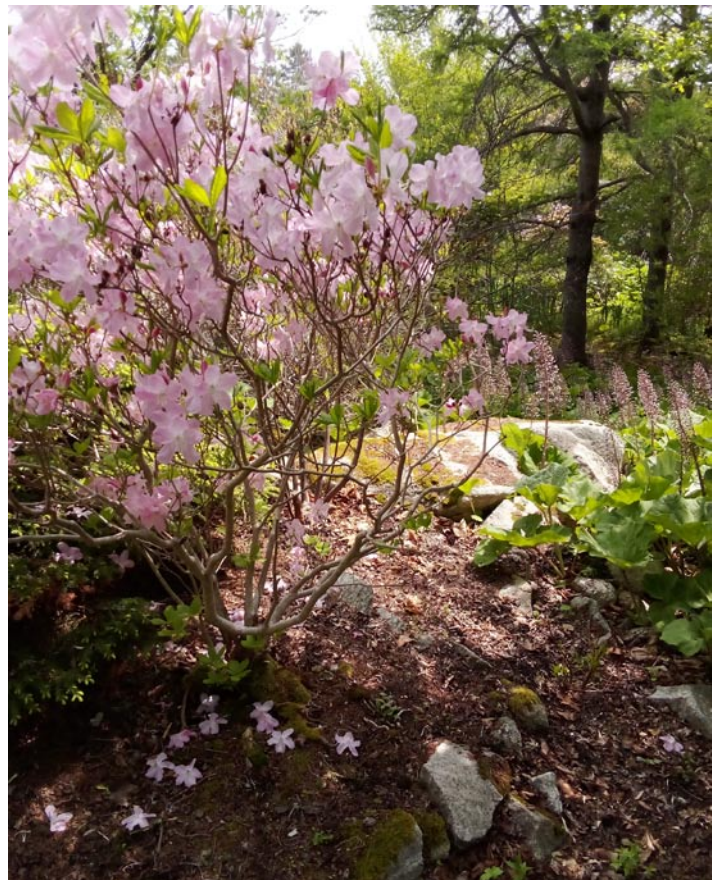


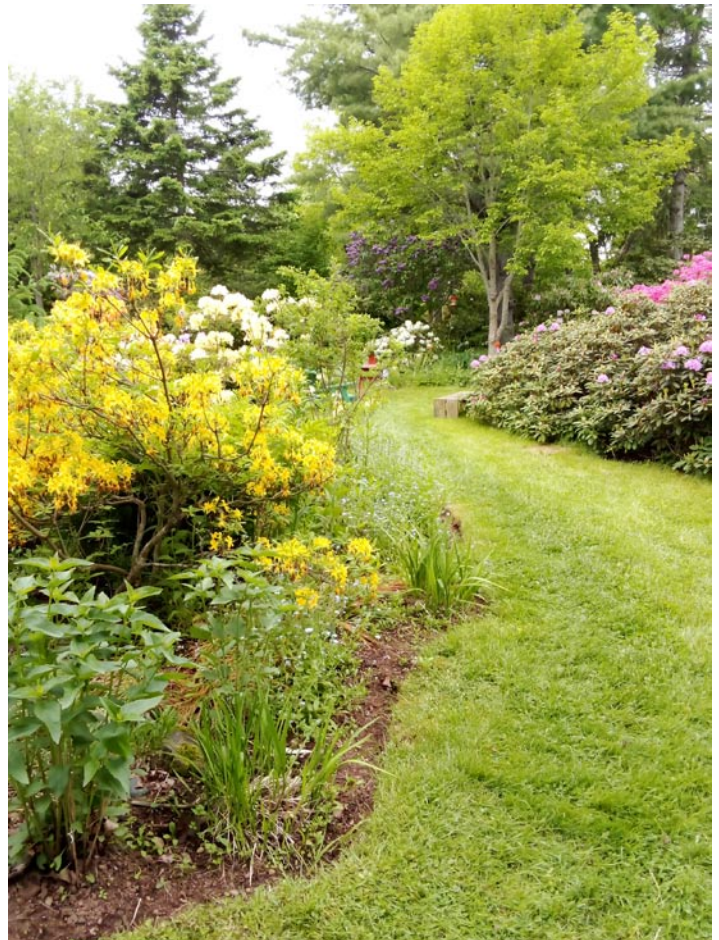
Fig. 7 Azaleas blooming in private gardens at Indian Harbour, NS. Photo by Peter Iveson.

Belleville and Kingston, Ontario, and who tries growing them. He says no one knows how to grow azaleas and rhododendrons or knows anything about them. Perhaps, the ASA should have an azalea chapter for Eastern Canada. Jim Sharpe attended the ASA conference in Pennsylvania and invited ASA members to register to learn more about azaleas in Atlantic Canada. I know three of us were there. How many more were there? Connor Ryan from the Holden Arboretum learned about Charlie Andrews' treks in the Appalachians to see native azaleas on the ARS post-tour and was enthusiastic about going.

What makes the azaleas in Atlantic Canada so resplendent? I was almost ready to move to the Maritimes. Is it due to the proximity to the Atlantic Ocean, the mild climate, the dampness, or perhaps from the acidity of the soil from the evergreen forests that cover the land?

**About the Author:**

Peter Iveson is a retired gardener from Toronto who worked in horticulture all his life. Trained under the in-Service training for apprentice gardeners of the Niagara Parks Commission in 1973, his last job was 25 years with the City of Toronto. Peter is a member of ASA and ARS, gardens in his co-op, and belongs to several horticultural societies. His main interests are perennials. He is a former member of the Garden Writers Association (now GardenComm) and is learning to become computer literate.



**Fig. 8** Garden in Sackville, NB, with azaleas at left. Photo by Peter Iveson.

\*Note that the Canadian hardy zone classification system differs from USDA hardiness zones.



**Fig. 9** Azaleas in Freeman Patterson Garden at Kingston, NB. Photo by Laura Grant.