

Member Profile: Harold Belcher

My love of azaleas started when I was a teenager in the 1960s living in nearby Cheverly, Maryland. I would go to the U.S. National Arboretum to explore its bounty of plants and wildlife across 450 acres. Much to my delight no one was there back then, so I had free run to explore. I especially enjoyed climbing Mt. Hamilton by going through the azalea collection. It was wonderful to wander the trails. They were very peaceful. I used to come to the arboretum to relax, wander around, and see the plants. My love of nature is what cultivated my 60-plus year-long connection with the arboretum and its azalea collection. My mother also had a help in my love of gardening. She would have me go into our yard to weed, water, and care for her azaleas. We had different varieties of azaleas planted in our front yard. One of my favorites was, and still is, 'Coral Bells'. My mom showed me how, and when, to prune azaleas—and when to fertilize them. We would use cotton seed meal as fertilizer.

Bob Hobbs, who moved next door in 1965, was also a lover of azaleas. Bob helped teach me about azaleas while we worked on building a house for one of his pipe organs. Later, Bob and I talked about joining the Azalea Society of America (ASA). I joined the Ben Morrison Chapter of the ASA as a life member, just in time to help with the planning and execution of the Ben Morrison-sponsored ASA National Convention to be held in Bowie, MD. Later, I also joined the Northern Virginia Chapter of the ASA as an associate member. I am also a member of the Potomac Valley Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society and the Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA). I've been a member of those organizations and for many very enjoyable years.



Harold Belcher volunteered at the U.S. National Arboretum's azalea collection for 10 years.

After I retired from my government career working for the US Navy Department and the Justice Department, my attention turned back to my gardening hobby and spending time at the arboretum. I volunteered to work in the azalea collection with Barbara Bullock. Barbara was the curator of azaleas at that time. She was very helpful and kind in sharing her knowledge of azaleas and offering suggestions to help volunteers with their gardens. While volunteering, I met and made many wonderful friends. I volunteered for over 10 years and enjoyed every minute of it! I still go back to walk the azalea and other collections—and see some of the folks that I worked with while volunteering.

While a member of the Ben Morrison Chapter, I served four-terms as the president of the Ben Morrison Chapter of the Azalea Society of America (2006-2010). During my tenure, I worked diligently with other stakeholders and ASA members, to ensure the successful preservation of the historic and cherished azaleas on the Glenn Dale Hillside of the Azalea Collection. A large portion of plants there as well as in the Boxwood Collection were slated to be removed—deaccessioned—from the collection along with staff gardener positions due to USNA budget challenges hampering collection maintenance. I'd like to think my efforts, along with Friends of the National Arboretum, and several other organizations, raised awareness and funds helped to preserve some of the most horticulturally valuable and spectacular azalea hybrids developed by the Arboretum's first director Benjamin Morrison.



The deciduous Aromi Hybrid 'Lemonade' in Harold Belcher's home garden.