

The Azalean

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Chinese Azaleas Big Rock Garden nursery in Bellingham, Washington informs us that they recently received a shipment of rooted cuttings of 143 azalea cultivars from the People's Republic of China, and that only one plant seemed non-viable on arrival. The rest, while showing some signs of stress, seemed in good condition and should survive, according to Dr. George F. Drake, Big Rock Garden proprietor.

The method of packing was simple but effective. Cuttings were bare-rooted, as U.S. law requires, and shipped in damp sphagnum moss, packed in small plastic envelopes, tied closed. Three of these envelopes, each with two or three rooted cuttings, then were placed in plastic baggies (sandwich bags) which Drake had sent to China with plant material a month or two earlier. Time in transit was seven days, plus two for packing and phytosanitary inspection.

The azaleas received were the major part of some two hundred cultivars selected from a 20 year hybridizing project developed by a Mr. Huang. Plants used in the hybridizing were the Yunan Jia-tao (hose-in-hose) hybrids, an old Chinese late flowering double variety called "Wu Bao Lu Zuu (Five Precious Stones and a Green Pearl), another old variety called "Yung Gui Fein (the name of a king's wife; single flower, large, rose-red margined, probably of Japanese origin), and Japanese hybrids (Kurume and Satsuki).

Dr. Drake understands that the better of the Huang cultivars are the early flowering hose-in-hose and the late-flowering doubles and semi-doubles. The early-flowering varieties tend to be hose-in-hose while the late flowering tend to be single (20 varieties) or double (19 varieties). About a half of all the late blooming varieties are reported to be bi-color while only four of the 28 early blooming varieties are bi-color. Of the 143 cultivars 28 are early bloomers, 43 early mid-season, 26 late midseason and 46 late bloomers. Most are compact in form and are probably only marginally hardy, given the parentage and the fact that they were hybridized in a part of China where the mean temperature in January is 37°F and the minimum temperature in January is 10°F. July temperatures average 73°F. Annual rainfall is 45 inches.

The Big Rock Garden nursery plan for the distribution of the Huang hybrids and their introduction to azalea fanciers in the U.S. is to exchange cuttings with interested growers who would evaluate them and make them available in their parts of the nation. Priority, says Dr. Drake, will be given to public arboreta and botanical gardens, hybridizers, azalea authorities and nurseries that specialize in azaleas. Plant material received in exchange for these cuttings will be propagated at Big Rock Garden and sent on to public gardens in the People's Republic of China. Individuals interested in acquiring Huang Azaleas should write to Dr. George F. Drake, Big Rock Garden, 2900 Dakin St., Bellingham, WA 98226.