

# ARNOLDIA



A continuation of the  
BULLETIN OF POPULAR INFORMATION  
of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University

VOLUME 3

JULY 2, 1943

NUMBER 7

## GHENT HYBRID AZALEAS ARE HARDY IN NEW ENGLAND

THESE are probably the most beautiful of all the great group of azaleas, but curiously enough, comparatively few are to be found in the gardens of New England. Many have felt them to belong in the class of tenderer shrubs, while others have believed them too much of a hazard for the amateur to attempt, especially as the initial price seems high. Then, too, they have been often difficult to obtain.

True it is that the novice, just beginning the cultivation of azaleas, is wisely advised to start with our own native species as being the hardiest and surest of success. *Rhododendron calendulaceum*, for example, probably the finest with its range of color from pale yellow to orange and crimson, and with its long season of bloom is so sturdy, that granted the simplest requirements of practically all azaleas, will survive the rigors of the coldest winter and many abuses beside. Another native, the lovely shell pink *R. Vaseyi* from the Carolina mountains, is equally sturdy, while *R. nudiflorum*, *R. roseum*, *R. arborescens* and *R. viscosum*, noted for their exquisite fragrance as well as beauty, deserve to rank with the best and strongest of our native shrubs.

Azaleas from the Orient—such as *R. molle*, *R. obtusum* varieties *japonicum* and *Kaempferi*, *R. Schlippenbachii*, *R. mucronulatum*—with their various colors, are deservedly great favorites in our gardens and have been widely planted with varying degrees of success. Hybrids of *R. molle* and *R. obtusum japonicum* have been particularly popular, though not rewarding as to hardiness. But the Ghent hybrid in abundance is likely to be missing, not only from the garden collection but from many nursery catalogues as well.

The history of the creation of this valuable class of azaleas is a fascinating one, but suffice it to say here that Ghent hybrids (*R. gandavense*) are the results of crossing the only European species, the large yellow Pontic Azalea (*R. luteum* or *Azalea pontica*) from the regions of the Black Sea with the American Flame Azalea

(*R. calendulaceum*) and Pinxterbloom (*R. nudiflorum*); sometimes also with the Swamp Azalea (*R. viscosum*) and the Sweet Azalea (*R. arborescens*). Though the first experiments were made in England early in the nineteenth century, the developments of lasting importance came out of Ghent in Belgium in about 1825; and many are the beautiful offspring of this magnificent accomplishment. The species seems to possess so many virtues!—a bewildering range of color running from creamy white through pale yellow and pink, salmon and rose, to flaming orange and red; fine form, which applies not only to the flowers—large in some varieties, medium or small in others, single, double, “hose-in-hose”—but also to the rich foliage and the shrub itself which may in many varieties grow to six or seven feet in height and nearly as wide. Then, too, they have that important asset, delicious fragrance, and last but not least, proven hardiness. This last statement is made after twenty-four years of experience in growing them, as well as close observance of the plantings in the Arnold Arboretum.

These plants in the Arboretum were very likely the first large shipments imported into this country, coming in 1913 and 1914:—from Veitch in England, the rosy “*Beauté Célèste*,” “*Cardinal*” and “*Flamboyant*”; from Wezelenburg in Holland, “*Fürst Camille von Rohan*,” “*General Trauff*,” “*Minerva*,” beautiful salmon rose, the extraordinarily brilliant “*Pallas*,” “*Pucelle*,” the crimson “*Josephine Klinger*,” and the delicate “*Heureuse Surprise*”; from Koster, the brilliant red “*Comte de Flandre*,” the lovely “*Aurore de Royghem*,” the dark “*Julius Caesar*” and many others. “*Gloria Mundi*” always stands out as a marvel of orange magnificence!

Besides these in the Arboretum many plants went to nurseries and thence to private growers. One hears that a large percentage of the latter were lost, due to owners not realizing what these rare specimens required in the way of soil, nutrition and natural surroundings. Fortunate it is that those in the Arboretum flourished, and now produce one of the most magnificent displays of any kind to be seen anywhere in May and June! And fortunately, too, enough of those in private hands survived to demonstrate what a satisfactory shrub this can be, because Plant Quarantine No. 37—effective June 1, 1919—cut short the importation of all nursery stock with soil about the roots of the plants, and so our nurseries were thrown on their own to keep alive and propagate these valuable hybrids.

The experience of this writer has been to find them infinitely more satisfactory in every way than the Oriental species; i. e., *R. molle*, *R. Schlippenbachii*, *R. obtusum japonicum*, and even *R. obtusum Kaempferi*. We had some hundred of these *R. gandavense* hybrids installed in 1919 with almost no loss in Brookline and also in Maine, sixty miles north-west of Portland, where in winter the temperature drops anywhere from ten to forty degrees below zero. Yet not only have the plants proved hardy, but the flower buds have survived as well.

The situation in which these have grown have not been uniform by any means except for the one required fundamental condition—acid soil with plenty of leaf

mold and humus, and protection from hot winds. For instance, "Narcissiflora," the beautiful pale yellow "hose-in-hose" variety grows six feet tall under tall red pines at the eastern edge of the lake at Bryant Pond, Maine, while underneath and growing lower are the brilliant vermilion "Coccinea Speciosa," the clear yellow "Nancy Waterer" and orange "Unique." Cold icy winds tear down the lake in winter, but still these lovely things persist happily. In another spot more secluded, on a gentle slope going to the lake on the south side, these same varieties mixed with the native *R. arborescens* thrive so happily that they seem as at home as the old white pines and maples under which they grow. Across the lake on the side of a sheer wooded mountain are more varieties growing perhaps not so tall, but sturdily nevertheless. The lovely Japanese Torch Azalea also is here but its growth is not so vigorous.

No weeding was necessary after the first year and no feeding has ever been given them, the annual dropping of the soft pine needles making a natural protective mulch and a continuous source of supply. In Brookline, on the other hand, cottonseed meal has been applied to the soil from time to time, and a fall mulch of oak leaves added.

Perhaps the most amazing of all are the specimens which have grown in Maine in a bog by the pool in the sunken garden. This is a natural pool which rises and falls with the changes of water level of the lake, and in spring the roots of the azaleas are almost surely in water. The plants are exposed to full sun practically all of the day until September—the best possible condition of course for setting buds. Here is really a brilliant spectacle when "Minerva" and "Bouquet de Flore" both salmon rose and the pale "Raphael de Smet" cover their branches with a miracle of bloom and fragrance. The trunks of these shrubs are one to two inches thick and the side branches grow so well that long sprays may be used for cutting each year. This also keeps the plant from getting "leggy." Below are the fragrant Swamp Azaleas, absolutely at home, yet a few yards away not a hybrid tea rose will survive a winter, having to be sunk not two, but four feet in the fall, so deep does the frost penetrate the ground. Also it has been found that none of the true rhododendrons can be grown in this locality, yet the supposedly tender *R. gundavense* hybrids live and like it!

It is no news that azaleas can be moved in full bloom, but we put some of these to a terrific test when we dug many of our tallest treasures in August at Bryant Pond, Maine, balled them and sent them to Brookline, Massachusetts in a closed truck. The day they were dug a sudden change in the weather sent the temperature into the nineties for five cruel days, yet all survived and bloomed profusely in the spring, and for two years gave no evidence of the shock they had received. However, conditions in Brookline were not nearly so ideal, and at the end of that time the two main stalks showed no signs of approaching death. Accordingly these were cut to the ground and have since grown into new vigorous plants which are now thriving. This ability to "keep going" after a severe pruning of the dead

wood is a valuable characteristic in these azaleas as it is fortunately in many other deciduous shrubs. No one should decide too quickly that an azalea is dead merely because the main branches look dead.

If one would multiply these hybrid treasures, the layering process is to be recommended. "Irene Koster" a very beautiful but tender and temperamental hybrid—of which out of a thousand imported to this country only six are now known to be alive—thus far having defied all the improved methods of propagation by cuttings, has finally been successfully multiplied by layering. Two years is necessary before severing the layer from the main plant in order to obtain an adequately strong root system.

This past difficult winter has brought one of the severest possible tests to all flowering shrubs (a rare winter indeed when Forsythia buds are killed!) and it was probably one of the worst about here for azaleas. *Rhododendron mucronulatum* failed to bloom; *R. Schlippenbachii*, another early Korean was poor; *R. molle* varieties had many flower buds killed; and *R. obtusum Kaempferi* had flowers in evidence only below the snow line—all the more apparent after last year's glorious array!

On the other hand, all the azaleas native to northeastern United States bloomed well this spring, (see *Arnoldia* 3: 25-36, 1943) with practically no evidence of winter injury.

Coming in far ahead of the orientals and second only to our natives were the *R. gandavense* hybrids—not a hundred percent bloom to be sure, but with flower buds hardy enough to be considered as among the hardiest of azaleas for our New England climate.

All of which goes to show that the native blood in this fine hybrid species is the answer! More and more are hybridizers coming to eliminate the tender *R. luteum* strain and are substituting these strong native parents. Worth while results may be expected along this line.

Now one hopes that many more nurseries will be encouraged to carry these on and that more individuals will know them better through living close to them. Surely they will add even more glory to our great season of flowering shrubs!

BESSIE COLLIER ELLERY  
(MRS. WILLIAM ELLERY)

Mrs. Ellery, past President of the Chestnut Hill Garden Club, has been growing magnificent Ghent Azaleas in Maine and in Brookline for many years. They have survived intense winter cold astonishingly well. What she has to say about them indicates their hardiness, adaptability and desirability for planting throughout New England.—Ed.