
The Massed Glenn Dale Azaleas on Mt. Hamilton at the National Arboretum: A Commentary and a Call for Action

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The results of an investigation of the massed Glenn Dale hybrid azaleas planted on the southern slope of Mt. Hamilton at the U.S. National Arboretum (NA) were reported in the March 1992 issue of *THE AZALEAN* [1]. The investigation found the massed planting to be an important and valuable germplasm collection, contrary to popular belief, comprising some of the very best azaleas selected from some 70,000 seedlings produced in the Glenn Dale hybridizing program of B. Y. Morrison. Donated to the NA for its permanent collection by Morrison's Division in the Bureau of Plant Industry, the more than 15,000 azaleas are arranged mostly in groups of twelve, representing about 1,200 individual selections.

The development of the massed planting was no accident. It was totally consistent with the reasons for which a national arboretum was established. Under Public Law 799, passed by the 69th Congress on March 4, 1927, the Secretary of Agriculture was authorized and directed to establish a national arboretum "for purposes of research and education concerning tree and plant life." In support of that legislative mandate and from the beginning, the NA intended to establish permanent living collections of plant material for the purpose of scientific research and education — or, in the words of Dr. Frederick V. Coville, first acting director and the father of the National Arboretum, to create a "bureau of standards for horticulture" [2]. The NA has served and continues to serve professional botanists and horticultural researchers by maintaining such collections, which constitute valuable sources of germplasm.

The report of the investigation, coauthored with Barbara L. Bullock, Curator of Azaleas and Rhododendron at the NA, supports our hypothesis that the massed planting contains virtually all of the named and unnamed azaleas selected in the Glenn Dale program, including the unique group of hybrids that produced the color-bordered and white-edged flowers (e.g., 'Martha Hitchcock' and 'Surprise', respectively). Morrison candidly referred to the massed planting as the "cream of the hybrids that were produced" [3]. The report states that the massed azaleas have historic and research value, but it does not state whether conditions and accessibility make research activities possible or elaborate on that research value with specific examples.

We are very concerned about the general condition of the massed azalea planting. While the azaleas on the hillside are a testament to the durability of azaleas in general and to the quality of the Glenn Dale hybrids in particular, nevertheless, the hillside azaleas are in a threatened state due to many years of neglect. The lack of basic maintenance has taken its toll. The mistaken belief that the contents of the hillside were rejects and castoffs has understandably contributed to their present condition. In places, the azaleas have been invaded by vines and all manner of weeds, and existing or volunteer trees need pruning or removal. Access to some parts of the planting is not now possible. Erosion and drainage problems persist, and over the years we have watched as sections of the planting have declined and died. Unless steps are taken to improve the situation, the rate of decline and loss will increase.

The picture is not entirely negative. The Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA) has come to recognize the problem and has committed funds (non-federal) for the creation of a four-month fellowship to aid the curator in the execution of her responsibilities. This is an important and symbolic first step to address problems with the azaleas, but much more needs to be done. As recently as last year, the National Arboretum's Advisory Council recommended that additional "support positions be provided, particularly new curators for the conifer, azalea/rhododendron, Fern Valley and holly/magnolia collections..." [4]. The take-home message here is that the Arboretum's Advisory Council, like FONA, has recognized the problem and has formally reported that the Council gives "high priority" to the recommendation that full-time permanent staff be added to the azalea/rhododendron collection for the immediate care of the gardens.

We urge the NA to move quickly in response to the FONA action and the Advisory Council's recommendations. A comprehensive status report on the entire azalea collection is needed as a beginning. From it, a plan of action for improving the hillside, specifically, and the complete azalea collection in general should be developed. Priorities of action should be indicated, and the key problem of assuring the viability and continued maintenance of the azaleas should be clearly addressed. How the NA is to meet stewardship responsibilities for existing collections with available resources should be answered before any new and grandiose demonstration garden projects or initiatives are undertaken.

In order to assist the NA in developing an action plan, we recommend that an advisory group of outside experts be established to help address the need for an immediate remedial intervention, as well as to identify the resource level (as measured in committed staff) necessary for on-going

maintenance. Membership should include azalea experts and horticulturists knowledgeable about azalea collections and landscaping, as well as representatives from FONA and the NA Advisory Council.

Once maintenance and access are assured, the massed hillside azaleas can provide a research resource from which many important developmental and research endeavors are possible. For reasons that have never been explained, there is no longer an active research program in azaleas at the Arboretum, despite the fact that there are numerous research opportunities of both a basic and applied nature that cry out for attention. The development of a yellow evergreen azalea has never been realized, although this probably is achievable using modern technology (vectors and recombinant DNA) that was not available to Ben Morrison or Robert Pryor. Petal blight, root rot, powdery mildew, and other conditions of fungal origin are major problems in the azalea and rhododendron trade for which the development of resistant cultivars would be a major advance and contribution to the horticultural community and industry.

The NA should be a repository of complete azalea collections, and starting with the Glenn Dales would be fitting [5]. We would welcome the creation of a complete, accurate collection of the 454 named Glenn Dale hybrids. A priority task should be the identification of as many of the hillside azaleas as possible. Once identification is well underway, other studies would become feasible, and the NA should assist and encourage azalea re-

searchers. An update of the descriptions of the Glenn Dales (Monograph 20) based on mature plants is needed and would be of tremendous benefit. Of equal value would be the creation of computer databases and photograph files for the Glenn Dale and other azaleas. The hillside azaleas can be an important germplasm resource for hybridizing to create improved varieties. Other examples of research include a study of "sporting" and the identification of the origins of certain Glenn Dale cultivars, such as 'Grace Freeman' and the assumed Glenn Dale, 'Ben Morrison'.

The Curator of Azalea and Rhododendrons at the NA, our colleague Barbara Bullock, has overseen many improvements to the hillside planting in a short period of time. The progress, when compared to the total task at hand, must be considered as prologue. She will barely be able to maintain the improvements made so far with her present resources, let alone work on more of the hillside. The azaleas have been an outstanding and prominent feature of the Arboretum since the beginning of its collection development. Their place of value and importance to the NA and to horticulture needs reappreciation, and their maintenance must be assured.

References and Comments

1. West, R. T., Miller III, W. C., and Bullock, B. L. *The Massed Glenn Dale Azaleas on Mt. Hamilton: A Valuable Collection at the National Arboretum*. *THE AZALEAN*, March 1992, Vol. 14 No. 1, pages 8-13.

2. *Science*, December 25, 1925, Vol.

LXII, No. 1617, pages 579-581.

3. A quote from a Morrison letter dated May 13, 1947 that was written to Robert Pyle who asked about the origin of the hillside azaleas. Robert Pyle was President, Conard-Pyle Nursery Co., West Grove, PA; Chairman, Botanical Gardens and Arboreta Committee of the American Association of Nurserymen, Inc.; and a member of the Arboretum's Advisory Council.

4. Report to the Honorable Clayton Yeutter, Secretary of Agriculture from the National Arboretum Advisory Council. January 18, 1991.

5. The idea of having a complete Glenn Dale azalea hybrid collection at the NA was Morrison's goal originally, but it was never achieved. Dr. Roy Magruder, Ron Bare, and others over the years have tried to complete the Arboretum's Glenn Dale azalea collection without success.

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