
An Azalea Project at the Wakeman Center Greenhouse

Margaret L. Sibert and Polly Hill

Introduction Polly Hill

The Wakeman Center on Martha's Vineyard was begun seven or eight years ago as headquarters for five conservation groups on the island: Trustees of Reservations, Sheriff's Meadow Foundation, Open Land Foundation, Vineyard Conservation Society, and the Martha's Vineyard Garden Club. The greenhouse is owned by the group, and is used by the Garden Club. The ladies greenhouse committee had undertaken to use the greenhouse for the months of October to May. Summers are for out of doors, so it must be closed down from June to September.

On September 16, 1991 Maggie Sibert and Mary Cressy had come to my Play-Pen to take cuttings of some North Tisbury azaleas to root. On May 6, when I had returned from our winter home in Delaware, Maggie invited me to see the results.

When we opened the door of the greenhouse we entered an enchanted spot. A perfectly grown *Streptocarpus* 'Good Hope' in full bloom hung from the roof at eye level. On benches in the center and right were row upon row of rooted evergreen azaleas in three- and four-inch pots; many were sporting pink or red flowers. They were only a few inches high. The place was immaculate and tidy, and we breathed happily the warm air.

Martha's Vineyard in early May seems like deep winter still, and that day was no exception. The temperature was 40 degrees F, a misty rain falling and a stiff breeze blowing. Inside the greenhouse the ladies had rooted and potted 396 out of 429 of the cuttings they had gathered. They had reason to be proud. Maggie grows plants like a pro and she must have been a good teacher, for most of the ladies were entirely new at the process.

What a splendid chance she gave me to learn a new aspect of my introductions. Which ones rooted with difficulty? Could I identify them by foliage only? It was a chance to see the flowers side-by-side for comparisons. I looked for 'Mount Seven Star', my *nakaharae* seedling from Taiwan. Its close-clustered furry leaves were a good rich green, but had no bloom as yet. It is often reluctant to start into growth in spring, I am told, though it roots readily. The favorite of the group was 'Bartlett', a lovely pink. Everyone wanted a 'Bartlett', Maggie told me. 'Hot Line' was also popular. It made a beautiful showing in a tiny pot with its large crimson flower. 'Corinna Borden' the palest of pinks, was enchanting with its three-flowered truss blooming in a three-inch pot.

Since 'Bartlett' is a new introduction, I only had the one original plant in my Play-Pen. I had asked Maggie in October for a 'Bartlett' if she should have one to spare. So when we left I was carrying not only two 'Bartletts', but also 'Andante' and 'Midori' as a bonus. They were most welcome extras. That wonderful horticultural merry-go-round of generosity!

As we walked out again into the raw blustery morning, I wondered what would have been the favorite azaleas of a like group of men? Maybe 'Joseph Hill' or 'Trill'? Both are red-red. One man, my father, had a direct approach to color. He always said, "I like any color so long as it is red."

This is really Maggie's story and she tells it all.

Martha's Vineyard Garden Club Margaret L. Sibert

Last winter, the Greenhouse Committee of the Martha's Vineyard Garden Club had the unique opportunity to try their luck at growing many of Polly Hill's much admired North Tisbury azaleas. Thanks to Mrs. Hill the committee was given a chance to propagate many of her much sought after *nakaharae* and Satsuki azaleas. This was strictly an amateur endeavor. Only one member of the committee had previous experience.

On September 26, in the pouring rain, Mrs. Hill walked around her well known Play-Pen with members of the club to help them select and take cuttings of many of her prized plants. Without waiting to dry off, members of the club hurried to the Garden Club greenhouse where 429 cuttings were made.

The cuttings were treated with Rootone F and placed in a medium of peat and sand in the propagating bench, which was equipped with heating cables and an automatic misting system.

Two days later, a disaster in the making was discovered. The greenhouse temperature had risen to over 100 degrees F. The mister was off and the fans and vents were not functioning. Husbands rushed to the rescue. Vents were pried open, thermostats reset and the misting mechanism rebalanced. The drooping cuttings began to revive.

On November 4 the first five cuttings had rooted. They were removed from the bench and potted up into three-inch pots in Pro-Mix. Two weeks later 116 rooted cuttings were removed from the bench and potted. The root systems on some were so large that they had to be put into four-inch pots. By February 3, 89% of the azaleas had rooted.

In early winter, mice took up residence in the greenhouse. Husbands were again called upon, and mouse traps were set. Fortunately, the mice had passed up the azaleas preferring

the pyracantha instead—a strange choice.

Encouraged by our success, in December, we went back to Mrs. Hill's and took cuttings of her named varieties of *Ilex opaca*. These rooted rapidly and had put on a great deal of new growth more than doubling in size.

In mid-February, there was much excitement when the first azalea, 'Hot Line', came into bloom. It was a real show stopper with its large size and hot pink color. On March 3, 'Corinna Borden' with its soft lavender flowers was in bloom. A vibrant light red, 'Jeff Hill' came next soon followed by 'Pink Pancake' with its two-inch pink blossoms—and so it continued. When 'Bartlett' bloomed, it became an instant favorite. The sequence of blooms in the greenhouse appeared to have nothing to do with their sequence in the garden. In a commercial operation it is probable that the flower buds would have been removed. Leaving them on, however, did not seem to slow down the new growth and it gave a great deal of pleasure to all who saw them.

In April, the small plants were potted on into four-inch pots in Peters Potting Soil where they have flourished and put out new growth. Three hundred plants are now ready for sale to the members at \$4.00 for the larger ones and \$3.00 for the smaller.

Committee members have been allowed first choice and 'Bartlett' remained the favorite. 'Louisa', a sister seedling, had not yet bloomed; otherwise it would have given 'Bartlett' lots of competition. 'Yaye', although it has yet to bloom, was second choice due to its lovely foliage and vigor. 'Pink Pancake', 'Jeff Hill', 'Alexander', and 'Andante' were not far behind. In fact, we all had our favorites.

The cutting bench is now filled with *Camellia oleifera* which we found blooming in Mrs. Hill's garden in December. Only four have rooted so far, but the rest have callused and should root before we close the greenhouse at the end of May.

It was been an exciting and stimulating year. We have learned a lot. Our gratitude goes to Polly Hill who has shared not only her plants but also her knowledge and enthusiasm and to Dot Howard, our chairman, who encouraged us to try something new.

Notes

A disproportionate number of cuttings made on December 2 did not survive. Nineteen percent of those potted up on December 2 did not survive compared to a total loss ratio of 12%. If you were to discount the loss ratio on December 2, our losses would have been 9%. I feel even this number is high.

There may be two problems. The first is that there is a tendency to plant the azaleas too deeply when they come out of the cutting bench. Second, our biggest losses were

among 'Mount Seven Star', 'Corinna Borden' and 'Flaming Mamie'. These three azaleas shared the coldest corner of the greenhouse where there is considerable draft. We plan to remedy this condition.

'Gabrielle Hill' was very slow to root, although once rooted it seemed to do all right. The 'Gabrielle Hill' cuttings were the smallest of those we had taken.

It was evident that those cuttings that were directly over a heating cable rooted the fastest and had the most roots. Being directly under the mister and not at a corner of the cutting bench was also beneficial. The corners tended to dry out.

As this is a club greenhouse, members take turns watering. It is possible that pots were allowed to dry out or over watered. The pots in the back of the benches over the heating pipes dried out rather rapidly.

The following table identifies the azalea cutting, date taken, how many rooted and how many were distributed:

Martha's Vineyard Garden Club Greenhouse

	<i>Cuttings Made September 26, 1991</i>	<i>Rooted</i>	<i>Distribution</i>
'Andante'	3	3	3
'Alexander'	46	46	44
'Balsaminaeflora'	15	14	8
'Bartlett'	20	20	19
'Corinna Borden'	11	9	5
'Flaming Mamie'	13	13	5
'Gabrielle Hill'	28	21	21
'Hill's Single Red'	17	12	12
'Hotline'	23	23	23
'Jeff Hill'	32	32	27
'Joseph Hill'	19	19	19
'Ladylocks'	9	8	8
'Libby'	16	14	14
'Louisa'	5	5	5
'Marilee'	31	29	28
'Midori'	6	4	4
'Mount Seven Star'	21	19	7
'Pink Pancake'	22	22	21
'Red Fountain'	9	9	9
'Susannah Hill'	28	27	25
'Trill'	18	16	15
'Wintergreen'	17	13	10
'Yaye'	20	18	16
TOTAL	429	396	348
	92%	81%	

We have decided to hold out 48 of the smallest and put them in a nursery until next year. □