

Armstrong's Azaleas

William Poling

Silver Spring, Maryland

The name Stuart Armstrong is a familiar one to many in the azalea community, particularly those with a historical bent. A former president of the American Horticultural Society, Armstrong was a friend and neighbor of Benjamin Y. Morrison, the legendary creator of the Glenn Dale hybrids. Armstrong's name is said to have been inscribed on a bench in the National Arboretum, though I've never found it. I have found a small park not far from his former home, named in his honor. Morrison himself named two of his Back Acres hybrids after Armstrong and his wife Marion.

In the mid-1930s, the Armstrongs moved into a spacious, new brick home overlooking Sligo Creek Park in Silver Spring, Maryland, not more than a mile from Morrison's home in Takoma Park, Maryland. Over the years, the Armstrongs cultivated a large garden with hundreds of azaleas, rhododendrons, hollies and other trees and shrubs. It was a life-long avocation. Armstrong died in 1970. Marion Armstrong, who resides today in another Washington suburb, remarried and continued to live in the Silver Spring house until the mid-1980s.

The next owner of the property allowed much of the garden to fall into a state of disrepair and neglect. By January of 1992, a good bit of Stuart Armstrong's garden had grown into a sprawling thicket. Andromeda and azaleas in one area competed for light by growing unattended to heights of over ten feet.

Elsewhere on the property, scores of plants were choked with ivy, honeysuckle, wild grape, Virginia creeper and other vines. Some, matted with layers of vines, fallen leaves, and tree limbs, were dead to the root, their metal name tags dangling hopelessly in the cold. Saplings gathered in what was once a pond. One garden path was blocked by a fallen tree. Others were obscured by weeds and invaded by unkempt azaleas. This was the condition of the Armstrong garden when my wife and I bought the place in 1992.

Dilettante gardeners that we are, we're still asking ourselves, "Where do we start?" We have hacked much dead wood and have cut some of the overgrown giants down to size, but we have moved nothing and, so far, have killed nothing worth keeping, we think.

Despite the passage of time and the years of neglect, over 40 azaleas have been found with plastic and/or metal name tags. But for every plant with a tag, we have four or five without one. Several tags have six-digit numbers and other notations, including a few that include Morrison's initials, such as "Samite BYM NRI". One can only guess here, but NRI could stand for National Radio Institute, where Armstrong spent most of his professional life as an advertising executive. But what's the connection?

Nearly a dozen tags have been found loose on the ground, including 'Marion Armstrong'. If there is a 'Stuart Armstrong' on the property, we don't know where it is. Of course, nothing is certain about these tags. The tags for 'Bravo' and 'Moonbeam' are on plants that seem to have common roots.

Armstrong himself apparently fell victim to uncertainty from time-to-time. One label has a question mark following the word Gable, along with the note

For what it's worth, here's a list of the tags we have found on and about the grounds:

Tag	Status	Tag	Status
Acorn	Alive	Kusadama	Alive
Ambrosia	Alive	Leonore	Alive
Andros	Alive	Mme. Butterfly	Alive
Angela Place	Alive	Malaguena	Loose Tag*
Baroque	Alive	Marion Armstrong	Loose Tag*
Bravo	Alive	Moonbeam	Alive
Bridesmaid	Alive	Nocturne	Alive
Cinderella	Alive	Pilgrim	Dead
Cora Brandt	Alive	Pinto	Alive
Darling	Alive	Prosperity	Alive
Dazzler	Alive	Prudence	Alive
Defiant	Alive	Psyche	Alive
Duenna	Alive	Rosette	Loose Tag*
Emblem	Alive	Salmon	Alive
Eucharis	Alive	Samite	Alive
Faith	Alive	Scout	Alive
Gable ?	Loose Tag*	Sea Foam	Alive
Galathea	Loose Tag*	Shell Pink	Alive
Geisha	Alive	Suwanee	Dead
Grenadier	Alive	Swan Song	Alive
Helen Close	Alive	Trousseau	Alive
Ivan Anderson	Alive	Vespers	Alive
Ivory	Loose Tag*	Vision	Loose Tag*
Jongleur	Dead	Whimsical	Loose Tag*
Joseph Hayden	Alive	Winner	Alive
Kintano	Alive	Yeoman	Alive

* [Loose tags were not attached to any plant, ed.]

"Pink H in H". Alas, the tag was not attached to a plant when we found it. Only recently did we learn that "Gable" is a group of hybrids and not some potentially priceless cultivar wasting away in a tangle of ivy.

We may have an example of the elusive Glenn Dale 'Luna', a rarity recently found by Richard West in the Ten Oaks Nursery (see **THE AZALEAN** 15 No. 1 (1993): 12-16), but we don't know for sure.

When we mentioned Morrison's name to one of Armstrong's sons, who paid a surprise visit recently, he waved his arm across our half-acre and said, "Yeah, this is all his stock". Blockhead that I am, I didn't follow-up and ask, "What exactly do you mean by that?" So we don't know, yet. What we don't know could fill this garden, and has.

In a moment of panic a few months after we arrived, I posted a note on a computer bulletinboard under the heading "Azalea Jungle", hoping for some guidance on how much pruning some of my ancient giants could withstand. By a lucky accident, my electronic message caught the eye of ASA member Nancy Swell of Richmond, VA. Nancy put me in touch with Bill Miller of the Brookside Gardens Chapter, who was then the Society's Vice President and co-chairman of the Membership Committee. After adroitly recruiting me to join the chapter, Bill suggested an article such as this to inform **THE AZALEAN** readers about the fate of the Armstrong garden.

I can report that the state of the Armstrong garden is improving slowly. The property consisted of three adjacent lots in Armstrong's time. One is not ours, and is losing a battle with pokeweed and honeysuckle. Our side, two of Armstrong's original three lots, is gradually revealing its secrets.

William Poling is a journalist by profession. His new "hobby" was brought about by circumstance when he bought his current house. □

The Origin and Children of "Kermesina"

Tijs Huisman
The Netherlands

Just by accident (?) I turned over the leaves of my "Azalea-bible"—as I call the book by Fred C. Galle.¹ On page 180 I read about 'Kermesina': "(old variety in Boskoop, parentage unknown): strong purplish red; very hardy. Also listed as a *R. kiusianum*."

Who am I to doubt what Mr. Galle writes? But this made me curious, and I looked at the beautiful book of Mr. Schmalscheidt.² He tells something different, as I will describe below.

"Kermesina" is probably a hybrid of Georg Arends. Mr. Ernst Stöckmann, who owns a nursery in Bad Zwischenahn-Rostrup told the following story:

About 1955 he bought a collection of evergreen azaleas from a garden-architect, Mr. Hermann Brumund in Oldenburg, who had laid out some beautiful gardens. He had also a garden-area in Blohenfelde, a part of Oldenburg. This Mr. Brumund had worked as garden help at the nursery of Mr. Arends and had taken these azaleas from his nursery. He called them "Kermesina rosea". When he got older (he died rather young) he asked Mr. Stöckmann to take over these about 100 Kermesinas.

And if this Mr. Stöckmann tells the truth, this must be the right story. Nevertheless it is still uncertain, what the parents of this azalea are.

After the introduction of 'Kermesina', many hybridizers made crosses with it as father or mother. Hans Hachmann for instance has had some fine results:

'Granada' = 'Rubinstern' x ('Red Pimpernel' x 'Kermesina')

'Gabriela' = 'Muttertag' x 'Kermesina'

'Rosalind' = 'Kermesina' x 'Jeanette'

'Schneeglantz' = ditto; how is it possible? 'Rosalind' clear pink; 'Schneeglantz' pure white with a small yellow blotch.

'Rubinetta' the same cross as 'Gabriela'

'Schneewittchen' = 'Kermesina' x 'John Cairns'

Also Mr. Urban Schumacher made the cross 'Kermesina' x 'Muttertag'. The result: 'Ruhrfeuer', a clear red low growing plant.

The last cross that I know of is from Mr. Heinrich Meyer in Uchte: 'Patricia Barmold' = 'Kermesina' x 'Blue Danube'

'Kermesina' has produced also some sports. In 1972 the nurseryman August Wemken found on the plant a sport with pink flowers but now white edged—called 'Kermesina Rose'. On this sport he found in 1978 a pure white sport and he called this descendant 'Kermesina Alba'.

The last note that I found is 'Diamant Weiss'. This hybrid does not belong to the other 'Diamant' plants which are from Mr. Carl Fleischmann. This 'Diamant Weiss' is a cross between 'Kermesina' and *Rh. prinophyllum* (*Rh. roseum*) and made by Mr. Stöckmann.

All these 'Kermesina' plants are rather compact, hardy to at least -10 degrees F and have flowers between 4 and 5 cm. Flowering is late to very late.

Reference

1. Galle, Fred C. *Azaleas*. Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1985.
2. Walter Schmalscheidt, *Rhododendron—und Azaleenzucht in Deutschland*, Verlag Heinz Hansmann, Rinteln, Germany. □