

In Search of Evergreen Azaleas in Germany

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The Netherlands

Every year I make at least one trip to Northern Germany; alone or with another rhodoholic or with a group of members of our Dutch Chapter of the ARS. This we did last spring.

But last fall, during my autumn vacation, I made about the same trip for three days with my wife. This time especially looking for evergreen azaleas. I hoped to find some more nurseries where evergreen azaleas would be grown and maybe some new introductions unknown to me. Therefore, we visited a region somewhat north of the region that we usually visit—between the Netherlands and the city of Oldenburg. This area is called "das Ammerland". North of it is a typical nursery village called Wiesmoor. I read that there should be many nurseries there. It was here that Carl Fleischmann created his famous 'Diamant' azaleas—beautiful, compact and hardy evergreens. But now it is almost 25 years later and I expected something more.

But the more we looked for something interesting, the less we found. We visited many nurseries, but the choice of evergreen azaleas was very limited. Everywhere the well-known hybrids: 'Multiflorum'; 'Kermesina' (also Alba and Rose), etc., and even at the nursery of Horst Fleischmann (the son of Carl) only the 'Diamant' azaleas. Rather disappointing.

But I am not easily discouraged. In the very worthwhile book of Walter Schmalscheidt¹ I read about a certain Mr. Buchtmann, in Varel, who has found in his seedlings of crosses with 'Multiflorum', a very slow growing azalea with nice small red flowers. Never give up!! So we drove about 15 miles east to the city Varel, close to a bay of the North Sea. His wife Renate (also the name of the small azalea) opened the door and was very surprised to see us from Holland. We explained the goal of our visit, and that we were anxious to see this nice baby. Hans Georg himself gave us a tour through his large garden, showing his large collection of hollies (he has probably the largest collection in Europe) but no azalea 'Renate Buchtmann'. So we got impatient to see the little girl. Well, behind his greenhouse, there it was. Really small. Even Hans Georg apologized for its smallness. A bad looking baby, even ugly and disfigured. "Normal" people would call us crazy to go to so much trouble for one "stupid" plant. Well, must I explain it to you? I guess you know this disease. To cheer us up the real Renate offered us coffee with a whole plate of home-made cream-filled puffs. Probably new friends...who calls this a worthless trip??

What to do next? Meanwhile we were on our way to another nursery, "Vorwerk Garden Center" in Rastede. I think that many evergreen azaleas were sold out, because the choice was very limited too...well, guess...'Multiflorum', 'Kermesina' and the 'Diamant' series. I tried to speak to the owner, but could not find him. We left and drove to our hotel in Westerstede. We were tired and badly wanted a nice meal, hot shower and a warm bed.

Next day we went again to our "always visit nurseries" Hobbie - Wieting - Böhlje - Dürre - Robenek. To make this story short, at the Wieting nursery I met his son-in-law Uwe Genzel. Some years we exchange plants, and so we did again. I told him about my increasing love for evergreen azaleas. He brought us in his nursery-car to an area a bit outside from his nursery, where long rows of azaleas were planted. He dug out some of the fine introductions of Hans Hachmann. Suddenly we stood face-in-face with evergreen azaleas, completely unknown to me. This trip would not be worthless!! Strange names: 'Dretonia' dunkellila - dunkelrot - dunkelrosa - helllila - hellrosa - etc. 'Fairy

Bells'; 'Kamenz'; 'Lilac'; 'Lobau'; 'Lucky Chance'; 'Charm of Flower'; 'Meissen'; 'Riesa'; 'Wispering'; 'Zittau'; 'Pink Jam'; and 'Bautzen'. Some names reminded me of Eastern Germany—the former DDR. Kamenz, Meissen, Zittau and Bautzen; we were in some of these cities last summer with friends from eastern Germany, when we stayed at a camping site in Dresden. So I asked Uwe where these azaleas came from. A certain Mr. Bernhard Knorr from Dresden was the answer. What a shame that I did not know him before, because we surely would have visited him when we were there!!

No problem—I looked him up in the members roster of the German Rhododendron Society—and wrote him a detailed letter. We have a saying in Holland: You have no—but you can get yes. Since then we have written each other long letters and he has promised to visit us as soon as possible. I will tell now about his activities in the former DDR and now.

He and his wife Karin worked as research workers at a so-called VEG (=Volkseigenes Gut) Saatzucht-Baumschulen. Translation is not so easy, because Germans always liked complicated names for offices—state or military. So they both worked at an experimental research station of the state. And what sounds real weird: it was forbidden to hybridize privately; it was only allowed to be done at this station. So he had to hide his hybridization from his bosses; he did it by giving his own hybrids English names; so they thought that they were real plants from abroad. There was very little money to import plants from the USA, so he imported mostly seeds, or got seeds from Mr. Schwind in Atlanta. He did import some evergreen azaleas from America, but most did not grow well in the cold climate of eastern Germany. In 1980 he was dismissed as a leader of this station, because he did not want to "confess" the communist regime. He and his wife are idealists and their love for plants goes beyond a stupid state system. That is something to think about; they had no easy life!! And yet made the standard for what people should do.

In my last letter I asked him to send me some photos or even slides, if he had made any. Awaiting this, I can tell you the following things about his hybrids.

Many of his hybrids come from the same cross: 'Haruko' x 'Noordtiana'. First he called them Dretonia with the color added. Dretonia is an abbreviation for: DREsden TOLkewitz (= a district of Dresden). They are all hose-in-hose and hardy to very hardy.

Haruko is one of the introductions of Werner Arends, a son of George Arends, who was the first in hybridizing new evergreen azaleas in Germany. Werner developed his hybrids between 1950 and 1960 and called them "Geisha". Not to be confused with the Glenn Dale hybrid 'Geisha'. "Geisha" red - pink - clear pink - dark red - etc. This Haruko was one of these crosses—formerly "Geisha" dark lavender, nr. 3.

Other hybrids of Mr. Knorr are from the cross: 'poukhanense' x 'Multiflorum' seedling or F2 crosses. His hybrids must be hardy, because it can be very cold in that region. Last summer I was there and visited the old and famous nursery of Seidel. The present owner of it is Mr. Schröder; he told me that his wife is the last descendant of the Seidel family. I walked through large fields and park full of thousands of rhododendrons and evergreen azaleas in pots on his sales area. In the strong winters here in Europe, 1984/1985 it has frozen 34 degrees Celsius [-29 degrees F, ed.]. That is very very cold.

Last summer I also visited the Rhododendron Park in Dresden-Wachwitz, with many rhododendrons from Seidel and also some Pillnitzer azaleas. We saw the beautiful castle of Pillnitz on the bank of the river Elbe, and tried to find the research station where these azaleas were released, but it was closed, and it does not exist any more. These azaleas are indicated as *kiusianum* hybrids and got their names from rocky mountains in the "Elbsandsteingebirge": 'Koenigstein'; 'Lilienstein'; 'Rauschenstein'; 'Schrammstein'; 'Weesenstein';

'Wildenstein'; 'Falkenstein'; 'Rotstein'; 'Winterstein'; 'Zirkelstein'. I have seen many of these hybrids (not in flower) and they look very pretty, but some people from western Germany doubt if they are real hardy. I will ask Mr. Knorr to send me some cuttings, and try them in my garden. If I have the space!! Always too little!! My biggest problem!! And my wife keeps telling me: "it's your own fault. You want too much." I bow my head; she is right...what can I do? By the way, we visited this flat rock mountain "Koenigstein", rising from the Elbe valley. The whole flat top is a large—about 15 acres—area with an impressive old castle and connecting buildings, with a very nice view of the valley and other flat rocky mountains around. Worthwhile to see!!

Back to my story. After Wieting we visited the old nursery of Böhlje in Westerstede, one of the oldest nurseries in Germany since 1845. Mr. Gerhard Diedrick welcomed us and told us that nursery business did not do well last season. People hardly buy plants in the fall, most in spring and not as much as desired. Economic recession!?

We walked through his large nursery and saw a large area with evergreen azaleas; the well known...you know now...but also many other hybrids. Especially plants from Hans Hachmann and introductions from Georg Arends; I mentioned him already. He hybridized before the First World War and made his crosses with 'Hinodegiri'; 'Hatsugiri'; 'Benegiri' and 'Macrantha', 'kaempferi' and the *R. ledifolia* of Noordtiana. The first results were not very good or hardy, so he made back-crosses with them and he planted these hybrids in his nursery. Then the First World War came, the plants were not taken care of and many were destroyed in some severe winters. Just the very best survived. He introduced many of them for the first time in one of the big spring shows for garden plants in Dresden in 1925 or 1926. To give you an impression how enormous these shows in Dresden were, some notes on an international garden exposition in the exposition

city palace in 1907 (!): total indoor area 15,900 square meters; 250,000 visitors; number of exhibitors was 925. Production numbers of plants from the Dresden area: 750,000 azaleas; 150,000-200,000 camellias; 50,000-60,000 rhododendrons. The Jubilee exposition in 1926 was even much bigger. On this occasion Mr. Arends presented his new introductions and this caused a real sensation! They were introduced under numbers and most of them got their names in 1950; names of rivers in a region in Germany called "Bergisches Land" such as: 'Agger'; 'Bever'; 'Bigge'; 'Diemel'; 'Eder'; 'Ennepe'; 'Glor'; 'Kerspe' and many others. They are hardy to at least -10 degrees F, have single flowers and are mostly in the colors pink, red, lavender or in between.

Mr. Böhlje had a nice collection of these plants, but my station wagon was chock-full with plants from Wieting and from Mr. Robenek. So I could not buy any more and as you know, that is a hard decision. Even my wife was surrounded with plants.

About Hans Robenek: I met him four years ago and saw his creations of rhododendrons, deciduous azaleas, etc. For those who love them more than the evergreens: in 1968 he made a cross between *R. bakeri* (= *R. cumberlandense*) and a dark red Knap Hill hybrid. One of the seedlings he called 'Liebesglut', a very compact and slow growing plant with glowing clear red flowers with a small orange blotch. I got one grafted plant of it and will give it a special place in my garden.

We also visited Mr. Friedrich Wilhelm Dürre, who has been married to the daughter of Dietrich G. Hobbie, Elisabeth. (You know the Repens group hybrid [*R. forrestii*, ed.] 'Elisabeth Hobbie'?) He worked with Mr. Robenek a long time at the Hobbie Nursery and they did the hybridizing for many years. When Mr. Dürre sees me, he always calls me Mr. Vuursteenbergh, because some years ago I introduced to him to a different form of *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* with pink flowers and ruffled leaves. My

name is hard to pronounce, so he calls me after the street where I live. He even did something with evergreen azaleas, but they are difficult plants here, because of the early and late spring frosts. That's what I heard from some other nurserymen. Bark split in winters without snow and loss of most of the leaves. But I would say that in the last ten to 20 years we had a good number of new and better introductions from Hans Hachmann and others and as I hope from Mr. Knorr, whom I wish a lot of success on the introduction of his new hybrids.

I will save you from the rest of this story, which is not interesting enough to write you about. There are more hybridizers of evergreen azaleas in Germany. For instance, Mr. Walter Nagel from Bretten, further south in Germany. I will soon write him a letter and ask him about his activities.

Some day I will write another (continuing?) story. Just wait and see. As far as I am concerned, this would be the nicest thing to do—travelling throughout the world, looking for and at plants—rhododendrons and azaleas. Germany is not far away for me. I would like to do the same through the West and East coasts of the USA. My dream. Some dreams come true...like the dream perhaps of some of you to be in Europe.

References

1. Walter Schmalscheidt: *Rhododendron—und Azaleenzuchtung in Deutschland*, Verlag Heinz Hansmann, Rinteln, Germany.

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An Ilam Experience

George S. Switzer
Port Republic, Maryland

The Ilam hybrid azaleas are a group developed by the late Edgar Stead¹. The name comes from Ilam, a suburb of Christchurch, New Zealand. The work was continued by Dr. J. S. Yeates of Palmerston North, New Zealand. The principal parents used were the Knap Hill Azaleas. Fred Galle points out that because of this they could be called Knap Hills, but now all deciduous azaleas originating in New Zealand are called Ilam Azaleas, as are seedlings grown from seed obtained from New Zealand. Galle lists 72 named cultivars.

In October and November of 1992, Sue (my wife) and I joined an American Horticultural Society Travel Study Program (highly recommended) to New Zealand and Australia. The 23-day trip was divided into two weeks in New Zealand (both North and South Islands) and one week in Australia (only the principal cities on the south-east coast). In New Zealand our group, numbering 29, travelled by bus, except for the short flight from Rotorua (North Island) to Queenstown (South Island).

We spent three days in Christchurch, located in the Province of Canterbury. A city of 300,000, it is New Zealand's third largest city and the largest on South Island. It is described both as "The Garden City of New Zealand" and "New Zealand's Most English City", both apt descriptions. Our tour was scheduled to be in New Zealand in their Spring, and gardens everywhere were at their peak, especially in Christchurch.

There we saw magnificent displays of yellow, orange, and red Ilam azaleas at Millbrook Reserve, Mona Vale Homestead, and the Christchurch Botanical Gardens. The latter is a 75-acre reserve encircled by a deep bend in the Avon River, in the heart of the city. We also visited several private gardens that had been judged earlier in October in an annual city-wide competition. At the end of our tour we were invited to afternoon tea (not unexpected in this "Most English City") by the Canterbury Horticultural Society at their headquarters in the Botanical Gardens.

During tea I spoke to Mr. Neiel Drain, the Society President, about my desire to obtain some Ilam seed. He made notes of my name and address and said he would try to arrange for some seed to be sent to me. In May 1993, I received a letter from Mr. Drain (dated May 13). I quote from his letter:

"Following your request last year for some azalea seed, I am writing, albeit rather belatedly, to advise that your request has not been forgotten."

I did contact the Grounds Supervisor of the Ilam Gardens at the time who advised me that he would be happy to send you some seed. However, I have just learned that he is still awaiting the full ripening of the current season's crop but will send you seed as soon as it is ready, probably in a few weeks time."

I heard nothing until August when in the mail arrived the following letter, along with a very generous packet of seed (carefully cleaned!):

11.8.93

Dear Mr. Switzer:

Enclosed is a sample of seed collected from open pollinated Ilam hybrid deciduous azaleas grown at Ilam Gardens on the University of Canterbury campus in Christchurch, New Zealand.