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## 1994 Society Convention: An Attendee's Perspective

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**Ben Blankenship**  
*Stafford, Virginia*

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*Note: The following observations were prompted by your editor Bob Hobbs, a fellow who looks much younger than he writes or talks, as I and my wife discovered on a delightful day-trip visit to Richmond and the ASA convention in April.*

“Do another piece for **THE AZALEAN**”, he pleaded while I was still wondering if he was old enough to be a voting member. On reflection, I decided he must be desperate, knowing my published proclivity for treating azalea growing and such with something less than awe. But, aw shucks, if my innocent vanities will make the nice kid happy, here goes:

—**Nice folks.** But too few. All you no-show members, especially from the Washington Beltway vicinity so conveniently close by, really missed out on fun, education, and beautiful Richmond scenery, at a cost about equal to a few hours of shopping at an outlet mall, for crying out loud (I do at such a thought).

—**And too little multicultural diversity.** Saturday afternoon during our tour of the Ginter Botanical Gardens (an interesting glimpse of an ambitious work in progress, which in another five years will be on everyone's must list), someone came running up to our group, asking if any of us had left an item in the gift shop. They thought it was someone from our group, a lady with white hair. “That doesn't narrow the field much here”, some unnamed sexist wag responded to general mirth.

—**But diverse, nevertheless.** At the same place, during a picnic lunch, the wife and I learned from far-off fellow members from Washington State how to pronounce Puyallup. As I recall, it began with POO, or was it PEW? Whatever, the remarkable thing about our new acquaintances, Fred and Jean Minch, was that they rode their own boat once up to Alaska. Big deal? Yep, it was a 19-foot outboard. They both swore it was true. In the Pacific, no less—then sold it for a handsome profit. I'm not sure about that part, because Fred then got a definite twinkle in his eye.

—**And competitive.** My prospects for a prosperous retirement took a nose-dive later that day when I revealed that as soon as Disney's America got going at Haymarket, I was going to work there as their steam engine train driver. “Naw, I've got a lock on that job”, replied Phil Louer, of nearby Haymarket, no less. Too bad. Earlier he had seemed such a nice fellow, assuring me that my recent practice of establishing planting beds for rooted cuttings, by erecting them atop compressed tree leaves, was neat. Not only did it recycle what neighbors had raked up and bagged for me each fall, the subsequent decomposition of the leaves helped to keep the over-wintering baby plants warmer and cozier than otherwise. Sounds logical, and made me feel good too!

—**And finally, delightful.** One example: Back at the Swells' place, a gorgeous home and garden featuring, yes, azaleas. There was Leon's much better-half Nancy, patiently explaining to me and Carole the origins of the 'Pocono Pink' we had received by virtue of attending the ASA convention a few years ago in Bethesda, Maryland. She



*The plant at the Swells' garden from which 'Pocono Pink' has been propagated. Photographs by the author.*



*Ben Blankenship and Leon Swell marvel over the blossom Ben is holding—a sport of 'Easter Parade'.*

pointed to one of her “mama” plants that she and a neighbor had discovered in an old overgrown and neglected nursery lot nearby, named Pocono, of all things. They decided to name it that after all the azalea literati couldn't identify it as anything else. Sounds suspicious of our horticultural betters, don't you agree, but that's what she said. So I took a picture of it. Gorgeous, with a trunk like a tree. Looks unique enough to my amateur's eyes. But shoot, I can't even tell the difference between old 'Herbert' and 'Purple Splendor' already.

Later in the evening, Carole and I were utterly astounded at the prices at the members-only plant sale, featuring azaleas only (naturally). I mean, how could the providers, Malcolm Clark and David Lay, still be in business following such a virtual giveaway! Maybe they're just hobby growers too. Anyhow, the upshot was that my big old Town Car's cavernous trunk was bulging with new bewitching young azaleas as we gingerly and regretfully took our leave of the Sheraton parking lot. See you next year?

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