

# Blue Genes Or Plant Exploring Without Pain

Polly Hill

Vineyard Haven, MA

To a Delawarean, a local historian, the name "Delaware Blue" suggests a reference to a Delaware regiment in the Revolutionary War, whose mascot was a blue hen. Their soldiers were called Blue Hen's Chickens. The University of Delaware also uses the name for its athletic teams. Delaware's Blue Hen was in my mind when confronted with naming a blue foliated plant of



*R. viscosum* 'Delaware Blue'

*Rhododendron viscosum* growing in a central Delaware wetland. What to call a plant with blue-grey glaucous foliage when foliage of its neighbor's in the same species is a rich shiny green? Chicken or not, I like the ring of *R. viscosum* 'Delaware Blue', and that is how I registered my selection. The flowers are pure white with a long, thin, sticky tube and a narrow flare at the top, richly fragrant.

Over the years I have been aware of another azalea with glaucous leaves, also growing in the wetlands area of the Choptank River. Dr. Henry Skinner identified my first collection as a natural hybrid of *R. atlanticum* and *R. periclymenoides*. The plant I collected in 1967 died in my Delaware garden, but not before producing copious seed. That seedling strain is now simply called 'Choptank'. Ten years later I made another collection from that same area, a plant with wide petals and a rosy color both inside and out, and registered it as 'Marydel' in honor of the border town nearby. *R. 'Marydel'* is now growing in my Barnard's Inn Farm arboretum and has been widely propagated.

Since the species *R. viscosum* and *R. atlanticum* in the Choptank area have both produced glaucous foliage, might there not be a blue-leaved *R. viscosum* with lovely wide flower petals and rosy color inside and out like 'Marydel'? Perhaps blooming times are not right for cross fertilization, or have the two species Balkanized over the

millennia? Would this not make a fine objective for a plant explorer? To aid my explorer I have assembled these few data. In Gray's *Manual of Botany*, 8th edition, pp. 1119-1120 for this same area he lists:

*R. viscosum* forma *glaucum*, forma *rhodanthum*, forma *roseum*

*R. atlanticum* forma *neglectum*, forma *confusum*

Gray suggests that the place to look is "swamps, thickets, damp clearings". Counting and locating the hairs and glands on the blossoms should not be ignored in a proper identification.

With luck the explorer would find other treasures such as *Hottonia*, featherfoil in the Primrose Family, or *Helonias*, swamp pink, in the Lily Family. They were there thirty years ago, a valued memory. It is comforting while exploring to realize that the area is more easily accessible than are the glamorous mountains of Bhutan or the remote wonders of Shennongjia Forest District deep in Western Hubei. If one wearies while slogging through swamps, river beds, thickets, woods, or damp clearings it is easy to stop in the town of Marydel for coffee or refreshment. I am not unmindful of the great successes of the Beasleys through breeding our native azaleas, but exploring is easier and the product is nature's way.

*Polly (Mrs. Julian) Hill is well known among azalea lovers for her introduction of the North Tisbury Hybrids and her selections of native azaleas.* □

## JUNE Mailing Statistics

There were 853 copies of the June issue of THE AZALEAN in the bulk mailing.

Below is a state-by-state summary of the mailing:

|                    |                     |               |                 |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Foreign = 18       | Virginia = 158      | Kentucky = 3  | Louisiana = 24  |
| Massachusetts = 15 | West Virginia = 4   | Ohio = 7      | Arkansas = 3    |
| Rhode Island = 2   | Washington, DC = 16 | Indiana = 24  | Oklahoma = 4    |
| New Hampshire = 1  | North Carolina = 38 | Michigan = 2  | Texas = 62      |
| Maine = 1          | South Carolina = 14 | Wisconsin = 1 | Colorado = 1    |
| Connecticut = 6    | Georgia = 77        | Minnesota = 2 | Nevada = 1      |
| New Jersey = 32    | Florida = 15        | Illinois = 2  | California = 28 |
| New York = 31      | Alabama = 22        | Missouri = 4  | Hawaii = 2      |
| Pennsylvania = 27  | Tennessee = 11      | Kansas = 3    | Oregon = 10     |
| Delaware = 5       | Mississippi = 7     | Nebraska = 1  | Washington = 10 |
| Maryland = 159     |                     |               |                 |