
Focus on Azaleas

Don Hyatt

McLean, VA

'Dream'

The Glenn Dale hybrid 'Dream' is surely one of our most robust and spectacular azaleas. Blooming with the early Kurume and *poukhanense* hybrids, 'Dream' puts on an incredible show with opulent clusters of brilliant purplish pink flowers, a color so intense I just call it "electric pink." Although individual blossoms are single, they are frilled, fragrant, and nearly three inches across, appearing in such abandon as to completely hide the foliage in frothy masses of color.

As a young plant, 'Dream' tends to be a bit open, but that is true of many of the larger-growing azaleas. Genetically, 'Dream' must know that it is destined to become one of the most prominent azaleas in the landscape, so it wastes no time in getting there. After about twenty years or more, my plant spreads ten feet across and is about six feet tall. It is dense and full, covered in flowers every year from interior branches to the outer twigs. I suppose my plant should be significantly larger than it is right now, but I have had to prune it frequently to keep it within bounds. It has been crowding out several white 'Treasure' azaleas and a couple of yellow Knap Hill hybrids too. Since some of 'Dream's' shoots can grow as long as 18 inches in a season, I do try to chop them back a little, sometime before the fourth of July so that I won't be cutting off next year's flower buds.

With respect to hardiness, 'Dream' is also one of my best. Although a cross of a tender azalea species from China *R. simsii*, with a hardier, 300-year-old Japanese plant known as *R. mucronatum* var. *mucronatum* [often cited as "Mucronatum", ed.]. 'Dream' seems hardier than either parent. 'Dream' has never failed to put on a show for me, even though my garden has experienced low winter temperatures on the order of ten to fifteen below zero Fahrenheit at times. This spring, it even withstood a late freeze while showing color. The temperature fell to 25 degrees and the winds howled at 50 miles per hour all night, but two weeks later, 'Dream' was in glorious full bloom with no signs of nature's test.

'Dream' makes an excellent parent for hybridizing, too. Although it has not been used as much as the very hardy 'Elsie Lee', it has produced some excellent plants for me. My students and I are evaluating some beautiful seedlings of 'Dream' crossed with 'Nancy of Robinhill' which we started under artificial lights in our high school's Computer Lab. We have now planted them around the parking lot, and since most of them are pretty, it will be hard to choose a favorite!

I have thought to myself, if I could grow just one azalea, which one would it be? Now as I watch a certain "electric pink" azalea in my back yard engulf all that grows nearby, I realize that in time, 'Dream' will have made that decision for me. I will have but one azalea, 'Dream'.

Wagner's "White Spider #1"

At a flower show many years ago, Dave Wagner, one of our local Maryland hybridizers, exhibited some of the seedlings he had produced from his azalea breeding program. One of his entries was most unique, a pure white azalea with narrow pointed strap-like petals which were not fused into the usual tubular corolla but were separate. It looked just like a white form of the familiar lavender spider azalea known as 'Koromo Shikibu'. Dave confided in me that 'Koromo Shikibu' was one of the parents, but I do not remember what the other one was. I do not even remember if his seedling won a prize that year, but as far as I was concerned, it was the Best in Show.

Admiring the delicate beauty of this new seedling, I asked Dave if I could take the spray home and try to root some cuttings. I have had great success rooting azaleas from flower shows, and there is always that satisfaction of knowing that the plant I want is the one I see in bloom. He said certainly, but call it "White Spider #1" since he had another white spider, and he was not sure which one was best.

I rooted several cuttings of the white spider that year, and shared them with other interested members of our chapter. I have lost track of Dave Wagner over the years, but I haven't lost track of his marvelous azalea. My plant is probably fifteen years old now and has secured a very prominent spot at a focal point in my garden. The plant is not as rapid a grower as 'Koromo Shikibu', since it is only three feet high by four feet wide in all those years.

The airy texture of the white blossoms of this azalea gives the same effect in the landscape that Baby's Breath gives to a flower arrangement, or that touch of lace gives to a lady's blouse. It is delicate, it is pristine, it is that subtle finishing touch to a carefully designed ensemble. I never saw "White Spider #2", but as far as I am concerned, Wagner's "White Spider #1" is good enough!

Don Hyatt has been hybridizing azaleas and rhododendrons for over 30 years. He has been president of the Northern Virginia Chapter, and currently serves on the Board of Directors. He has taught mathematics and computer science in the Virginia school system for 28 years.



Wagner's "White Spider #1"

Photograph by the author

