
HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Alice Holland
Silver Spring, MD

I didn't fall in love until a few years after we moved to our new house in 1960. We occasionally would drive down Kensington Parkway in Kensington, Maryland, where in the spring there was a house whose whole grounds were one glorious azalea garden. We'd pull over to the side and just enjoy. At the time I didn't know that I'd ever have anything like that. I didn't know enough about gardening but I sure wanted to learn. I asked a neighbor whose passion happened to be roses if he knew of a good garden club that I might join. He recommended the Silver Spring Garden Club. I joined and met many wonderful people; among them were Paul and Rebecca Stadler of Stadler Nurseries, where I bought my first five azaleas. Paul would walk me all around his grounds to see the azaleas, which I think were his first love also. In later years the Stadlers sold their grounds to the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission to become a large part of Wheaton Regional Park, of which Brookside Gardens is a substantial portion.

Another kindred soul I met was Emile Deckert. In his postage-stamp sized back yard he was growing so many lovely azaleas. Emile started out as a hairdresser; I went to his home to have my hair done for years. When Brookside Gardens became an entity, Emile was responsible for the azalea gardens there. He made most of those old Glenn Dale azaleas from cuttings from Stuart Armstrong's garden and set them out all over the hills under the pines with mulch around them; they dug no holes. When the Silver Spring Garden Club voted to give Barry Yinger \$1,000 toward his trip to Japan to bring back Satsukis, Emile grew those too, from cuttings, in a special garden below the Stadler house. We both used to bemoan the lack of information on azaleas, although Fred Lee's *Azalea Book* was our Bible. I occasionally attended an ARS meeting but gleaned very little on azaleas. One evening I was discussing this situation with my husband and he said, "So why don't you start an azalea club?" I told Emile what he'd said the next time that I visited, and Emile said "Let's do it!" So we did. The following are the minutes of the first meeting:

On Friday, December 9, 1977 at 8:00 PM a meeting was held at Brookside Gardens for the purpose of forming an azalea society. Present were: George Harding, Mike White, Bob Caviness, Frank White, Emile Deckert and Alice Holland. We decided that it was premature to elect any officers. Emile was asked to be acting president and Alice was asked to temporarily be secretary-treasurer. We explored the feasibility of forming an azalea society and whether or not to be a part of the American Rhododendron Society. After much discussion we decided: 1. to be a separate entity, 2. to cooperate with ARS, and 3. to seek their support in a friendly manner.

Frank White felt there was a need for an azalea group everywhere in our country that azaleas are grown and rather than have a small local group, that we should be nationwide. So, everyone concurring, we became "The Azalea Society of America." Alice suggested that we become the Brookside Chapter and this also met with agreement. We discussed methods of acquainting prospective members with our organization. Frank has been discussing the possibility with azalea people up and down the coast and met with much enthusiasm. Also, Ruth Harrington writes a weekly newspaper column; Tom Stevenson and Carl Hahn write garden columns in the big Washington newspapers. We could pass the word through the Federation of Garden Clubs and through county agents.

We discussed our purpose. It was felt that our prime purpose should be education. Also, Frank White is very interested in setting up a workable system of awards. We are to write a purpose and bring it to the next meeting.

We decided to get a post office box and to give press releases that we are formed. We will need a letterhead and an application for membership. Frank can do our mailing with his bulk mailing from Lanham going for about 7 cents a piece. Each of us is to bring to the next meeting ideas for the letterhead, press releases and range of officers. Our by-laws should wait a while. We would like to have a public meeting in April and will need several meetings and a lot of work before then.

We discussed dues but came up with nothing definite except that they should be low because we will only need money for postage, paper and printing probably for some time. We decided to set up a bank checking account with Emile and Alice to be co-signers for checks. Frank White donated a check for \$200.00 and George Harding gave \$50.00. We will look into the possibility of a tax exempt status. Our next meeting will be Thursday, January 19th at 8:00 PM at Brookside. The meeting adjourned at 11:00 PM.

*Alice Holland,
Acting Secretary*

Frank White and George Harding were both growers and well known among azalea people, so events mushroomed pretty rapidly. Present at our second meeting were Nathan Fitts and Bill Parsons, both lawyers, and Warren and Judith Groomes. Until he became ill and had to resign in 1979, Nate worked very hard on setting up the basic organization and the by-laws, as did Bill. Bill assumed more and more responsibility and was national treasurer for some years. Nate was our first editor of **THE AZALEAN**. That position was then assumed in 1979 by Jack Shaffer, a landscape designer with degrees from Harvard and Oxford Universities.

Right from the beginning we decided to have a board of governors (BOG). [Known as Board of Directors after 1990 change in by-laws. Ed.] Our first five were Emile Deckert - president; Frank White - vice president, Thais Spencer (a retired lawyer and a wonderful lady from Fulton, MD), Bob Mallet and Bill Parsons. We mostly met in the library at Brookside Gardens and sometimes at homes of members.

Our first public meeting was October 29, 1978 at Springbrook High School in Silver Spring, MD. There were 43 of our over 100 members present. Ryon Page was introduced as our plant-sale chairman, Rusty LaGuardia as our hospitality chairman and George Harding to keep the slide library.

On January 3, 1979 a proposed slate for BOG for 1979 was mailed to the membership. Included were Emile Deckert, Frank White, Bill Parsons, Thais Spencer, Nate Fitts, Judith Groomes, George Harding, Dr. Neil Campbell (a retired physician who claimed he caught "azaleaitis" from a patient, Albert Close, who was chief propagator at Glenn Dale), Alice Holland and Nancy Swell. Nancy has been active from the very beginning. She would drive from Richmond, VA

to Silver Spring, Maryland, just to attend board meetings. She put together the Richmond Chapter and was their first president. We were attempting to move along as fast as possible.

Our annual meeting was held at the National Arboretum on March 25, 1979. Seventy-five members of our 140 were present. Ryon Page reported on the mart to be held in May. Nate Fitts announced that issue #2 of **THE AZALEAN** would be out shortly. Buck Clagett was putting together a source list. The slate for BOG was accepted unanimously. When Nate's resignation was put before the BOG, it was accepted with reluctance and Jack Shaffer was asked to take his place.

By the next year, 1980, we were able to confer charters on five chapters: Brookside Gardens, Richmond, Northern Virginia, Ben Morrison, and Robert D. Gartrell. The presidents of chapters were automatically made members of the BOG.

In 1981 Bob Barry chaired the work for ASA to be represented at Flora Fest at the US Botanical Gardens as one of 29 plant societies. While he was working there, a big, lovely man walked through. He was in Washington DC with the dairyman's association and was fascinated with the azalea display.

His name was John Rochester. He and Bob talked, and the result was a new chapter in Louisiana and a friendship that lasted many years and beyond John's death. John was the president of ASA in 1985.

I think that what pulls at my heartstrings the most is the memories of all the dear wonderful people. You know azalea people are very special. I felt that so many of the people that I worked with were my very dear friends: George Harding, Emile Deckert, Ryon Page, Bill and Thurza Parsons, Bob Barry, Nancy Swell, Jerry Goodman, Mal Clark, Gordon Severe, Roger Brown, Art Vance, Marge and Glenn Taylor, Rusty LaGuardia. It was a privilege for me to know Tony Dove, John Rochester, Frank White, Fred Galle, Don Hyatt, Charles Evans; and on and on and on. This eight years was a part of my life that I wouldn't give up for anything. When people say "Hey, who are you?" I say "I'm the lady that started the Azalea Society of America".

Alice Holland, a member of the Brookside Gardens Chapter, has a degree in Home Economics from the University of Maryland, and is an avid birdwatcher as well as an avid gardener.

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The First Twenty Years: A Tabular History of the AZALEA SOCIETY OF AMERICA

STARTED IN 1977 AND INCORPORATED IN 1979 IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA AS A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

FOUNDERS

NATHAN C. FITTS, W. H. PARSONS, WARREN AND JUDY GROOMES, BOB MALLET, FRANK B. WHITE, JR., WILLIAM L. CLAGETT, GEORGE W. HARDING, EMILE DECKERT, ALICE HOLLAND, AND THAIS SPENCER

FIRST ELECTED BOARD OF GOVERNORS (1979)

NEIL CAMPBELL, EMILE DECKERT, NATE FITTS, ALICE HOLLAND
JUDY GROOMES, GEORGE HARDING, BILL PARSONS,
THAIS SPENCER, NANCY SWELL, FRANK WHITE

BOARD OF GOVERNORS CHAIRMEN

1979 - FRANK WHITE
1982 - RYON PAGE
1986 - MALCOLM CLARK
1987 - RYON PAGE
1988 - DONALD VOSS

PRESIDENTS

1979 - NEIL CAMPBELL
1980 - ARTHUR VANCE
1981 - RYON PAGE
1982 - JERRY GOODMAN
1983 - TONY DOVE
1984 - JOHN ROCHESTER
1986 - RYON PAGE
1987 - MALCOLM CLARK
1988 - ROBERT HOBBS
1991 - MALCOLM CLARK
1995 - STEVEN S. BRAINERD
1997 - JAMES O. THORNTON