
Azaleaphile Salute

Sue and George Switzer

Bob and Bee Hobbs — North Beach, Maryland

Sue and George Switzer developed their intense interest in azaleas (and they do have an intense interest in azaleas) after coming to the Washington, DC, area about 1947. Their interest grew from the desire to landscape a home and a summer cottage, and from their friendship with azalea aficionados, both hobbyists and professional. Some readers may remember the visit to the Switzers' home in Calvert County, Maryland, as part of the 1992 Convention of the Azalea Society of America.

George and Sue were born in northern California in the town of Petaluma, near San Francisco. George studied mineralogy at the University of California Berkeley, and was awarded a PhD in Mineralogy from Harvard University in 1942. Of course, as part of earning that degree, his field work had been carried out in northern California, and a summer assistantship had him at Stanford University in Palo Alto for a summer. During that time he became well acquainted with and married Sue, whom he had known, but not well, while they were growing up. Of course, this was the post-Depression era, so in order to support a new wife, George became an instructor at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, while he was finishing his PhD at Harvard. Upon leaving Yale and for the duration of WWII, George and Sue lived in Chicago where George worked at Majestic Radio, making quartz crystals for frequency control of military radios. After the end of the war, George and Sue (and by this time two children) moved to the Washington, DC, area where George began to work for the United States Geological Survey, and in 1948 for the Smithsonian Institution where he served as Curator of Mineralogy and was Department of Mineral Sciences chairman until his retirement in 1975.

Many readers may be familiar with some of George's work at the Smithsonian—he was the driving force behind the fabulous gem display that attracted so many people to the Smithsonian from 1958 to the early 1990s.

The Switzers acquired a home for their family in Bethesda, Maryland, among many homes landscaped with azaleas, and later acquired a summer cottage at Scientists Cliffs, a community and a site of geologic interest in Calvert County in southern Maryland. Now, a slight digression. —The cliffs contain deposits of fossils from the Miocene era, and are an excellent record of the life that existed in the Chesapeake Bay 15 million years ago. In addition, there were many locations on top of the cliffs, well back from the edge, that were good sites for summer cottages and cabins. In 1952, Sue and George acquired such a cottage.

Among the other scientists who had summer places at Scientists Cliffs were Henry E. Allanson and Eugene Hollowell, who were at the Plant Introduction Station in Glenn Dale, Maryland, the site of the development of the Glenn Dale azaleas and who were friends of Ben Morrison. And, because they also lived in Takoma Park, Maryland, the Switzers were also neighbors of Ben Morrison. Allanson was the Director of the Plant Introduction Station of the US Department of Agriculture. Add to that the fact that a colleague of George's at the Smithsonian was a lover of azaleas. How could the Switzers not become azalea lovers?

Sue and George began to propagate cuttings from their various "azalea friends" in order to landscape their properties in Bethesda and Scientists Cliffs. They also began to buy bare-root field-grown plants from Tingle's

Nursery on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The metamorphosis was complete—azaleas were in their blood.

In the early 1970s George and Sue started to build a permanent residence on a 30-acre wooded property near the Scientists Cliffs community, in anticipation of George's retirement. The 30 acres was reduced to 16 due to the acquisition of a major right-of-way by the Baltimore Gas and Electric Power Company for power transmission from the Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant. The 16 acres are ideal for azalea collecting and growing: a rolling second-growth eastern hardwood forest (probably first cut in Colonial times), with sandy loam soil. In other words, lots of high shade from oak trees, good well drained soil, and lots of native azaleas. For the Switzers' own description of their property see **THE AZALEAN**, September 1992, p. 56.

While George was pursuing his career, Sue was raising the family of three children and gardening. George and Sue both admit that of the two, she is the real gardener. Sue has also been a leader in the Calvert County Garden Club for 24 years, and is one of Calvert County's better-known gardeners. She started a nursery, Cavalier Nursery, so as to be able to provide many azaleas, and other plants, to local gardeners without violating laws with regard to plant inspections, etc.

Their favorite activities with azaleas are collecting various azalea hybrids, and subsequently enjoying their garden and sharing cuttings with anyone who is interested in acquiring them. Their three acres of azaleas have contained as many as 1,000 varieties and 20,000 plants in the ground. Their focus has been on collecting Glenn Dale hybrids, although, as is obvious from the numbers of varieties that they have had, many other plants from other

hybrid groups are in their collection. They have, for example, about 60 or more Eden Hybrids. In 1991 they granted an easement on their property to the Maryland Environmental Trust in order to assure the long-term preservation of the property.

At the 1992 ASA convention, they introduced a new azalea variety *Rhododendron* 'Nannie Angell', named in honor of Sue's mother. It was selected by the Switzers in 1965 and registered in 1992 by Sue Switzer. *R.* 'Nannie Angell' has petals similar to *R.* 'Koromo Shikibu', but the petals are white. It was described in **THE AZALEAN**, September 1992, p. 57.

Three particularly interesting features of their azalea collection are the "Sweet Pea" azaleas, the Belstvilles, and the Belstville dwarfs. The "Sweet Pea" azaleas are a collection of hybrids that were unnamed by Morrison, having a range of pink to lavender colors (light to pastel shades). Mr. Allanson had obtained cuttings of this collection before the Glenn Dale hybridization project of Ben Morrison was terminated. These plants, rather large now, occupy a prominent place in the Switzers' garden. Hollowell also planted a complete collection of the Belstvilles (about 47) and Belstville dwarfs (about 19), in the Flippo Gravatt Memorial Garden in the Scientists Cliffs community. Society members visited this site as one of the functions of the 1992 Convention. Unfortunately, this shade-free site is less than desirable for azaleas; sadly the plants are dwindling. However, Sue and George have had luck propagating most of the Belstvilles and Belstville dwarfs. The Belstville dwarf collection is described by George Switzer in **THE AZALEAN** September 1992, p. 63.

The Switzers have a love of travel. During George's career, much of their travel was related to mineralogy, but there was time to visit azalea gardens also. George actually carried the Hope

Diamond in his pocket from Washington to Paris, including an unexpected stop in Philadelphia. Since George's retirement they have continued to travel worldwide. A photograph that was taken during a trip to Australia and New Zealand appeared on the cover of **THE AZALEAN**, June 1994.

The Switzers have been active in the Azalea Society of America and the Ben Morrison Chapter. For several years the chapter held its annual cutting picnics at the Switzers. Members first met for a business meeting, shared good food, and descended on the azalea garden with clippers and plastic bags to take cuttings. If one didn't bring their own clippers and plastic bags,



George and Sue Switzer at their home with one of their favorite azaleas. (Photo by Bee Hobbs.)

George and Sue provided them. Virtually any azalea was fair game for those attending. Many of us in the southern Maryland area started our own azalea gardens from plants grown from cuttings from the Switzers. Bee and I obtained some of our original cuttings, the day after the annual cutting picnic when we arrived at their door with our "covered-dish" in hand, fully expecting to be part of the picnic. Thanks to the gracious hospitality of Sue and George, we were able to obtain all of the cuttings that we cared to deal with, even though we

had interrupted their quiet Sunday afternoon during which they had expected to relax after the Saturday picnic!

Sue and George have both served as President of the Ben Morrison Chapter, and George has served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Azalea Society of America. In December 1999, the Ben Morrison Chapter presented both Sue and George Switzer with Certificates of Recognition of Exceptional Contributions to the Ben Morrison Chapter.

George was the assistant editor of **THE AZALEAN** from 1989 through 1998, writing several articles and providing color photographs for covers of **THE AZALEAN** during that period:

- "A Simple Structure for Overwintering Containers", March 1989, p. 12.
- Cover photograph (the first color printing to appear in **THE AZALEAN**) "Satsuki 'Tatsumino-Hikari'", March 1990.
- "Franklinia—A Companion Plant", March 1990, p. 8
- Cover Photograph "Satsuki 'Amagasa'", June 1990.
- "The Flowering World of Chinese Wilson", with Sue Switzer, December 1990, p 20.
- "Scientists Cliffs and the Belstville Azaleas", September 1992, p. 63.
- Cover Photograph "'Nannie Angell'" September 1992.
- Cover Photograph "Ilam Hybrid, Christchurch, New Zealand" June 1994.

Bob Hobbs and his wife Belinda are former editors of THE AZALEAN. Bob and Bee have an azalea garden at their home in North Beach, Maryland. Bob was President of the Azalea Society of America in 1988 and 1989. They are honored to have known and to have been friends with Sue and George Switzer for nearly 20 years. Most of their azalea plants started from cuttings obtained from the Switzers.