

Convention Keynote Speech

Best of the Best: In Search of Native Azaleas

Donald W. Hyatt — McLean, Virginia

Introduction

The late Fred Galle has left us a great legacy. Through publications including his monumental work *Azaleas* [3] and preservation efforts at Callaway Gardens, he did so much to educate us about our native azalea heritage. Although Fred had wide horticultural interests and renowned expertise in many areas, I suspect that the native azaleas were his first love. After many years of hybridizing and collecting azaleas of all sorts, I have turned to the natives as my primary interest too. Professionally, I have been a public school teacher for the past 32 years, spending much of my time educating the next generation of mathematicians and computer scientists. However, I think we all need to become teachers. It is not enough for us to grow native azaleas in our gardens or enjoy these lovely species in the wild. We have an obligation to educate the public about these wonderful plants. The native azaleas and the habitats in which they grow must be preserved for generations to come, and it is our responsibility to help champion that cause.

For the past seven years I have been on a quest to identify some of the finest forms of our native azaleas. This

has been my search for the “Best of the Best.” There are many spectacular forms still out there in the wild, and some of them are growing in spectacular settings, too. Unfortunately, real estate development has been encroaching on many of these habitats; and, even in preserved sites, there are other threats to the native azaleas. There is an urgent need to protect the genetic diversity that still exists, and I hope we can all join together in this endeavor.

Appreciating the Antiquity of Our Native Azaleas

Most people immediately recognize historical sights in Egypt and Rome, and they universally acknowledge that mankind must preserve the old buildings and artifacts left from these ancient civilizations. However, few people see anything more than a pretty orange flower when they admire a plant like the Flame Azalea in bloom. Even fewer people have an appreciation for the antiquity of these plants, our native azalea species. The mountains in the eastern United States are among the oldest ranges on the earth, and the variety of native azaleas that grow there are certainly not

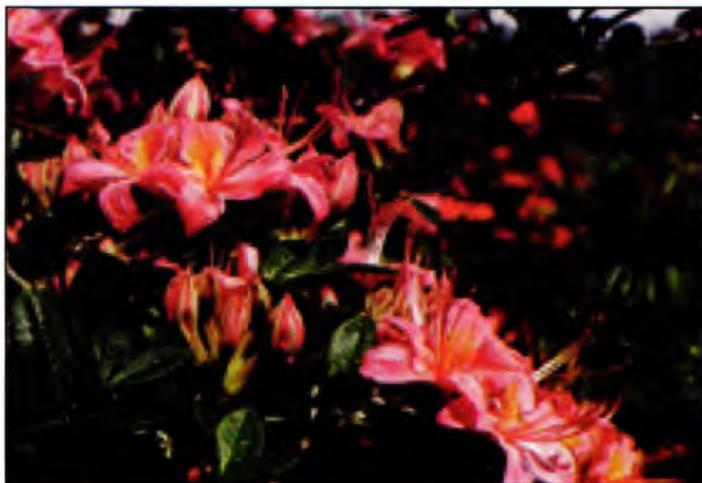
recent arrivals either. Indeed, our native azaleas are artifacts far older than any outward accomplishments of mankind.

At first, it may seem surprising that many of the azalea species from around the world are so closely related. Azaleas like



Don Hyatt keynote speaker presented a way of organizing the natives into three color groups, showed many slides of unusual hybrids in situ, and encouraged the Society to educate the young in conservation of these valued natural resources. [Photo by Bill Miller.]

Rhododendron luteum from the Caucasus, *R. molle* from China, *R. japonicum* from Japan, and even our West Coast species, *R. occidentale*, are very closely allied with many of our eastern natives. Yes, our native azaleas are very similar genetically to species from distant lands separated by thousands of miles, arid deserts, and vast oceans. These plants have not recently traveled to such remote loca-



From Gregory Bald in North Carolina, this is one of Don's favorites, *R. "Gregory Candy Stripe."* The name comes from the striking white striping on the pink buds. [Photo by Don Hyatt.]



R. luteum is an oriental species from the Caucasus Mountains that is closely allied with our native species.

[Photo by Don Hyatt.]

tions by themselves, and they were probably not carried around the world by admiring cave men. Instead, they have been quietly growing in our forests, slowly evolving in local habitats while the rest of the earth has changed about them.

The late David Leach noted that fossil records in North America and Europe show that certain species in the genus *Rhododendron* have existed essentially unchanged for at least 50 million years [8]. I suspect that precursors of our native azaleas were probably blooming on "Pangaea," the hypothetical landmass that millions of years ago split apart to form the continents we know today. Similarly, many of the favorite trees and wildflowers we find in our eastern woodlands (dogwoods, magnolias, trilliums, arisaemas, etc.) have counterparts in these same far places of the world. Like our native azaleas, they have survived earthquakes and asteroids, dinosaurs and ice ages, but they are facing their most critical test right now, the effects of mankind. We must be certain that these plants can survive the severe disruption to their habitats that humans have wrought in just 200 years.

Identifying the Natives

There are 15 native azalea species here in the Eastern United States. Dr. Kathleen Kron has developed an excellent method to help identify the natives by separating them into three color categories: white, pink, and orange [7]. She points out other distinguishing characteristics so that one can easily differentiate among the many species. Using her approach with additional information from Galle [3, 4] and Davidian [2], I have tried to develop a website where people can learn to identify the East Coast native azaleas [6]. I am grateful to George McLellan, members of the Middle Atlantic Chapter American Rhododendron Society Species Study Group, Mike Creel, and others for providing slides of native azalea populations in the wild that I have not vis-

ited personally. It has allowed me to make a much more thorough presentation.

The White Group

The "White Group" contains *R. alabamense*, *R. atlanticum*, *R. arborescens*, *R. viscosum* (which now includes *R. oblongifolium* and *R. serrulatum*), and our newest species, *R. eastmanii*. The azaleas in this group are not necessarily pure white since there may be forms that are shades of light pink. All of the species in the White Group are delightfully fragrant, which adds to their appeal as great garden plants.

If I were to select my favorite from this group, it would be *R. arborescens* because of its pristine white flowers with striking red stamens, and its powerful heliotrope fragrance that perfumes the entire yard. There is an excellent selection of *R. arborescens* by Clarence Towe called *R. 'White Lightning.'* It has huge white flowers with distinctive red stamens, a yellow blotch, and that delicious fragrance so characteristic of the species. Some believe that *R. 'White Lightning'* is a natural hybrid of *R. arborescens* with *R. cumberlandense*, but whether hybrid or species, this variety is surely one of the best of the best, a superior plant in any garden. There are some wonderful stands of *R. arborescens* at the top of Wayah Bald in North Carolina and along many waterways in the East, including the Cheat River in West Virginia. *R. arborescens* usually grows near moist areas, but one is usually aware that the plant is nearby long before seeing the blooms because of that wonderful fragrance.

The Pink Group

In the "Pink Group", there are five species: *R. canescens*, *R. periclymenoides* (formerly known as *R. nudiflorum*), *R. prinophyllum* (formerly known as *R. roseum*), *R. canadense*, and *R. vaseyi*. The first two are often difficult to tell apart, but one distinguishing characteristic is that *R. canescens* usually has

sticky glandular hairs on the back of the floral tube, whereas *R. periclymenoides* usually has plain fuzzy hairs without the sticky glands. Both species have long flower tubes and are fragrant. There are a number of excellent forms of *canescens* being offered in the trade now, including the pale pink *R. 'Camilla's Blush'* and *R. 'Varnadoe's Pink'* with its red tubes and pink flowers.

R. prinophyllum is usually darker pink than the previous two species. It has a shorter flower tube and a distinctive cinnamon spice fragrance. One of the finest native stands is at Dolly Sods Wilderness Area in West Virginia where the entire top of the mountain turns rose pink in early June. This region was virgin forest prior to 1770, but then severe logging by lumber companies devastated much of West Virginia near the turn of the 20th century. By 1920, severe forest fires had ravaged the area [1]. The fires were so fierce in places that even the soil burned. Peaty soils built up by centuries of organic litter burned all the way down to bare rock such as that now seen exposed on Dolly Sods. This region is slowly recovering, and the *R. prinophyllum* that is reclaiming the mountaintop is a sight to behold.

All of our East Coast native azaleas have exactly five stamens except for *R. canadense* and *R. vaseyi*. These two species are not closely related to the other natives and are not known to cross. However, they may be more closely allied with certain Asian species such as *R. albrechtii* and *R. pentaphyllum* from Japan or even *R. schlippenbachii* from Korea, since these all have 10 stamens and also show similarities in flower form.

R. canadense is generally a more northern plant, preferring cooler temperatures than we can provide in our southern gardens. Its upper three petals are fused into a separate lip, and it has 10 stamens. At one time *R. canadense* was considered to be in a

separate genus, *Rhodora*.

R. vaseyi, on the other hand, seems to be a very adaptable plant, even though its original range was only four counties in the mountains of North Carolina at elevations from 3,000 to 5,000 feet. *R. vaseyi* usually has six or seven stamens and comes in shades of deep pink to white. There is a superior pure white form called *R. 'White Find'* that is readily available in the trade. Along the Blue Ridge Parkway in the Pisgah National Forest there is an exceptionally deep rose form of *vaseyi* that people just refer to as "419.2", signifying the mile post by which it is located. However, nurserymen will probably need a more marketable name if this plant is successfully propagated and offered to the general public.

The Blue Ridge Parkway from Cherokee to Grandfather Mountain is a magnificent drive whether or not *R. vaseyi* or the many other native azalea species growing along the roadside are in bloom. There are many excellent side hikes, including the spectacular rock outcroppings at Grandfather Mountain where *R. vaseyi* also grows wild. The Native Americans considered the area at Grandfather Mountain sacred land, and so it should be with us.

There are many other places in the Appalachian Mountains that evoke similar feelings of inspiration and awe. Clingman's Dome, the highest point in the Smokies, is one such place, although combined effects of acid rain and a foreign spruce adelgid introduced to the area have devastated the evergreen forests. The visitor's tower on top of Clingman's Dome does not fit with the natural beauty either. However, in 1000 years it will probably no longer exist, though I hope the beauty of the surrounding mountains will still be there for people to enjoy.

The Orange Group

The remaining five species belong to the "Orange Group," although their

flowers are not always orange, but can range from shades of clear yellow, through gold, to deepest red. The early blooming *R. austrinum* is the only fragrant native of this group, and its flowers are typically gold or yellow with a long red flower tube. There are some excellent forms of *austrinum* already on the market including *R. 'Lisa's Gold.'*

R. flammeum (formerly *R. speciosum*) also has long flower tubes. It is early blooming too, but the flowers are usually orange or red with a prominent blotch, and there is no fragrance. The clone *R. 'Hazel Hamilton'* is a nice yellow form of *R. flammeum*, but is reportedly difficult to propagate and has limited distribution in the trade.

R. prunifolium is easily distinguished from the first two because of its very late season of bloom. *R. prunifolium* is typically coral orange to deep red with a long flower tube and begins its floral display at the end of July or August. There are excellent stands of *R. prunifolium* in Georgia's Providence Canyon as well as extensive plantings at Callaway Gardens.

The other two species in the "Orange Group," *R. calendulaceum* and *R. cumberlandense* (formerly known as *R. bakeri*), have shorter flower tubes than the first three species mentioned in this group, but are difficult to distinguish from one another. Genetically, *R. calendulaceum* is a tetraploid having twice the number of chromosomes as *R. cumberlandense* or any other native azalea species. However, one cannot tell this fact from casual inspection. The flowers of *R. calendulaceum* are usually larger than *R. cumberlandense* though, and the former usually blooms before the leaves have fully expanded. With *R. cumberlandense*, next year's flower buds are often forming as the current season's blooms open.

There are superior forms of *R. cumberlandense* already in the trade, including *R. 'Camp's Red'* that was introduced by Dr. Henry Skinner in

1964. Members of the Middle Atlantic Chapter ARS Species Study Group would often travel down the Cherohala Skyway from North Carolina into Tennessee to see *R. cumberlandense* in bloom. In June of 2000, we were particularly disappointed to find that someone had recently dug up a favorite deep red form of *R. cumberlandense* from its site along the roadside. Theft from the wild is a very serious problem with native azaleas as well as many other wildflowers.

R. calendulaceum is widespread and quite variable. There are many excellent forms being introduced into the trade, such as *R. 'Cherokee'* or *R. 'Kelsey's Flame'*. Travelers are amazed at the beautiful forms growing right along the roadside, but I wonder what variation exists throughout its natural realm. At a recently opened trail to Hooper Bald, our species study group has documented some of the largest flowered forms of *R. calendulaceum* that we have ever seen. One superior form we call *R. "Hooper Copper"* because of its coppery-orange flower color. The flowers of this selection are in excess of three inches in diameter, huge for representatives of the species. The flower edges on *R. "Hooper Copper"* are plain without any frill or ruffling. There are some nice gold, orange, and orange-red forms at Hooper Bald, but we have not noticed any clear yellows. Unfortunately, these plants are becoming overgrown by trees and shrubs, so unless proactive measures are taken to give them some growing room, they could easily be lost. Another concern is that feral pigs on Hooper Bald are also causing significant damage to the environment by burrowing for roots and grubs.

Favorite Locations

There are wonderful examples of *R. calendulaceum* all along the Blue Ridge Parkway from the Roanoke, south to the Smokies, and beyond. I have seen excellent forms of *R. calendulaceum* at a number of places in Virginia, includ-

ing Mount Rogers and Grayson Highlands. In North Carolina, the mountainside at Wayah Bald can turn orange when the *R. calendulaceum* in the woods has a heavy bloom. The *R. calendulaceum* at Andrews Bald in the Smokies is beautiful too, but the deer have been grazing this area rather heavily in recent years.

R. Calendulaceum and the Appalachian Trail Near Roan Mountain

For me, the best place to see *R. calendulaceum* in all its glory is along the Appalachian Trail near Roan Mountain at the North Carolina-Tennessee border. The combination of the native azaleas, wildflowers, and the mountain scenery make this special site one of the most beautiful places on earth. Starting up the Appalachian Trail at Carver's Gap, the path ascends several hundred feet to the top of Round Bald, elevation 5,826 feet. The trail has recently been rerouted to discourage erosion, making the climb a bit longer and more scenic, and certainly less strenuous. From the top of Round Bald the view is spectacular. As the trail descends to the right toward Engine Gap, a magnificent display of *calendulaceum* begins, continuing all the way to the next ridge at Jane Bald. The peaks in this region are all from 5,000 to 6,000 feet in elevation, and because of variations in bloom time, this impressive native azalea display lasts through much of June, with peak season probably the second or third week, depending upon the year.

On the balds in this area there are also rare wildflowers such as the red Gray's Lily (*Lilium grayi*), and great masses of the lavender-purple rhododendrons, *R. catawbiense*. On a good year (and on a clear day), a side trip out to Grassy Ridge Bald affords one of the most dramatic sights imaginable. As the elevation rises gradually to a height of 6,189 feet, a 360-degree view reveals the entire mountainside has turned purple from the rhododendron blossoms. Even when not in bloom, the majesty of this setting is an

inspiration to all who walk along the trail. Words cannot describe the awe one feels standing on the top of the world surrounded by such incredible beauty. The US Forest Service has placed a plaque on the mountain to honor the memory of local resident Cornelious Rex Peake (1887-1964). It reflects on the beauty of this spot and how much this man and his forefathers loved the Roan Mountain region. I hope there are people in our generation who will be similarly remembered as caring forefathers who loved and protected such solemn grounds.

One of my favorite forms of *R. calendulaceum* sits boldly near the ridge at Jane Bald. We refer to it as *R. "Molten Lava"* because of its brilliant golden orange color that contrasts so beautifully with the blue mountains in the distance. The flowers of "Molten Lava" are relatively large, usually over two inches across, and the edges are beautifully ruffled and frilled. Choosing a favorite form of *R. calendulaceum* is hard to do because there are so many lovely forms scattered along the edge of the bald from Engine Gap to Jane Bald. They come in all shades from clear yellow and gold, to blends of orange and deep orange-red. Dr. August Kehr reported seeing a double form of *R. calendulaceum* at Jane Bald, but I have looked for that plant many times with no success. I fear that it may have been overgrown, lost, or possibly stolen.

In the past few years there has been noticeable damage from deer browsing on Roan. The deer are not only eating the native azaleas, but also the rhododendrons and rare wildflowers on the bald. Even more alarming is news that North Carolina is apparently trying to establish elk populations in the mountain regions. This will put even further stress on the native plants unless some natural balance is secured. In addition to animal damage, invasive plants are causing concern too, since alder, blackberry, and various trees are crowding out the native azaleas and wildflowers. Each

year, though, I see evidence that admiring visitors have tried to break back branches of the encroaching shrubs and trees giving these wildflowers another year to share their beauty with us. One interesting note is that *R. calendulaceum* plants tangled in blackberry and alder seem to show less deer damage than those in the open.

The Hybrid Swarm on Gregory Bald

The very finest display of native azaleas that I have ever seen, though, is on Gregory Bald, another open bald of about 10 acres on the North Carolina-Tennessee border in the Smokies. At an elevation of 4,949 feet, Gregory Bald is noted for its "hybrid swarm" of native azaleas. Four native azalea species are believed to be present on the bald (*R. calendulaceum*, *R. cumberlandense*, *R. arborescens*, and *R. viscosum*), and over the years they have been cross-pollinating to create azaleas in almost every conceivable color. The display lasts many weeks, with peak bloom usually being near the end of June.

I remember Fred Galle and others talking about this unique spot many years before I made my first trip. According to one story, Fred was working on his doctoral thesis while on Gregory Bald when a bear attacked and carried off his research notes. Unfortunately, he never completed his degree because of that loss. I made my first trip to Gregory in 1995. Now I make an annual pilgrimage, but I keep a close lookout for bears.

There are two trails up to Gregory Bald, both originating in Cades Cove; but neither one is an easy hike. The longer but more scenic trail via Forge Creek to Gregory Ridge begins along rushing stream waters and winds through a magnificent virgin forest of hemlocks and thickets of *R. maximum*. The trail eventually gains elevation as it ascends through drier forests of hardwoods, *Kalmia*, and beds of galax, finally reaching the bald. The hike takes about three and a half hours,

with an elevation change of approximately 3,000 feet. The alternative route via the Parson's Branch Road and Hannah Trail cuts off about 45 minutes and 1,000 feet in elevation, but requires that one travel by car on a one-way, primitive road from Tennessee into North Carolina. This road has numerous fords and is often closed due to bad weather. There is also limited parking where the Hannah Trail starts.

Once on the top of Gregory, the difficulties of the hike are forgotten as one becomes enthralled by the color, fragrance, and sheer floral beauty of the native azaleas there. The predominant azalea color is typically orange-red, similar to *R. cumberlandense*, and the flower size is about one to one-and-one-half inches in diameter depending upon the clone. Growing throughout the bald though are whites, creams, yellows, golds, pale pinks, deep pinks, fuchsias, corals, reds, and wondrous blends. There are larger flowered forms, and many have distinctive foliage qualities too. Unless chased off the mountain by fierce thunderstorms or the threat of nightfall, I usually stroll for hours through acres of azaleas as though I am judging some enormous flower show. I keep trying to decide which are the best of the best, but there are so many from which to choose.

Members of our study group have given many of the best forms special names, some of which are very descriptive while others are more whimsical. In an article I wrote for the *Journal American Rhododendron Society* in 1998 [5], I discussed my "Top Ten" on the bald. I gave names to some of the favorites, like *R.* "Gregory Christmas Red," one of the older plants on the bald with deep red flowers and dark green leaves that reminded me of Christmas poinsettias and holly leaves. Another favorite is *R.* "Gregory Blush," a large-flowered white brushed with pale pink that carries a bold yellow flare. The plant is on the right to greet visitors as they enter the

bald from the Forge Creek Trail. Another showstopper is an enormous plant we call the *R.* "Hannah Trail Coral," a brilliant coral orange that grows on the other side where the Hannah Trail enters the bald. Images of these and many other selections can be seen on my website.

In the middle of the bald are so many wonderful plants that it is really hard to choose the best forms, but each year I try. *R.* "Gregory Candy Stripe" has a large rose pink flower with a yellow flare and beautiful bluish green foliage. We gave it the name because the pink flower buds are striped with white before they open, giving a striking floral effect. It blooms later than many of the others, but it is surely one of the best on the bald. Another one of the top plants we call *R.* "Salmon Balls" because the round trusses reminded us of balls of poached salmon. Perhaps we should change the name to *R.* 'Gregory Salmon', if it is ever registered or introduced. Two other favorites that grow side by side are *R.* "Gregory Cover Girl," so named because a picture of this plant with its deep pink flowers and broad yellow blotch was printed on the cover of the *Journal ARS* in 1996 [9]. Right beside this plant is another striking azalea we call *R.* "Gregory Goldilocks," a brilliant golden orange. One of the best plants on the bald is surely *R.* "Gregory Fuchsia" with two-inch flowers of fuchsia pink with a yellow flare. The plant has wonderful glossy green foliage, too.

There are many other plants on the bald that we have identified as excellent forms. We have been calling them by strange names. For example, one is *R.* "Far Side Pink," because it is a nice lavender pink on the far side of the bald away from most of the other favorites. There is *R.* "Fasti Pink," so named because it has an upright or fastigiated plant habit and soft rose pink flowers. A huge plant growing right along the path in the center of the bald we call *R.* "Pink by the Path."

It has deep rose pink flowers with an orange blotch. Finally, there is an exceptional plant with creamy white flowers brushed in pink we call *R.* "Rattlesnake Cream." We gave it the name because it grows next to a place where we spotted a huge rattlesnake one year. We look out for rattlesnakes as well as bears on Gregory now.

There are other exciting hybrid swarms of native azaleas, such as along the Appalachian Trail near Copper Bald in North Carolina or at Audra State Park in West Virginia. The catalyst behind hybrid swarms is not clear, though. *R. calendulaceum* seems to be involved in these swarms; but, being tetraploid, it should produce sterile offspring in primary crosses with the other diploid natives. Perhaps when several diploid species such as *R. viscosum*, *R. arborescens*, and *R. cumberlandense* cross with one another first, then these primary hybrids produce unreduced gametes that will allow fertile progeny when crossed with *R. calendulaceum*. That would imply that many of the stunning hybrids in these swarms could be tetraploid. Of course, cytological studies would be needed to verify such a conjecture.

Conclusions

We often hear environmentalists voicing concerns over the destruction of the rain forests in remote regions of the world, but we must realize that the rich biological diversity here in our own eastern forests is also at risk. We constantly upset nature's balance, yet we are often unaware that we have done anything wrong. We build roads, malls, shopping centers, and new homes in the name of progress, yet replace the rich native flora with masses of ordinary plants such as Leyland cypress or Bradford pears. We must not lose the beauty and diversity that has evolved in our eastern forests over millions of years by using mass-market substitutes for the richness that was once all around us.

As members of the Azalea Society of America, we must protect our na-

tive azalea heritage, not only the many species we admire, but also the special places where these plants grow. We need to identify the best forms of our native azaleas, propagate them, and distribute this plant material to arboreta and commercial nurseries so that rare and superior forms are not lost forever. We also need to encourage commercial sources to propagate the natives and make them widely available so that there will be less pressure to steal plants from the wild. The general public is beginning to become aware of the native azaleas and will be looking for places to buy them.

We certainly must not forget that there is a very delicate balance in nature. Environmentalists of all kinds must look for solutions to the burgeoning populations of deer and other destructive animals that are colonizing as rapidly as we are. They pose a risk not only to our suburban gardens but also to many rare plants in wilderness areas that we don't often see. Technological advances have allowed us to travel easily around the world, but we have often brought back foreign pests that have become plagues in our local regions. We must be extremely careful not to introduce such pests or diseases into native populations, for they could devastate our native azaleas. How sad it would be if petal blight became established in the Appalachian Mountains, melting the glorious azalea display just as it opened.

There is much more to our native azalea heritage than an occasional orange flower in someone's garden or a glimpse of color along the Blue Ridge Parkway. We need to educate the general public so that others appreciate the wonderful diversity that exists in nature. They must also become stewards of our cause. If we can teach others to see the beauty that we see, perhaps there is a chance to preserve such treasures for future generations to enjoy. Mankind has been the cause of much destruction, but through education we can also bring a cure.

Don Hyatt has been an avid hybridizer of azaleas and rhododendrons for over 30 years, with a particular interest in deciduous azaleas, and has been teaching mathematics and computer science for 32 years. His exceptional web pages at <http://www.tjhsst.edu/~dhyatt/gardencenter.html> demonstrate his ability to combine his work and avocation. Don is a former district director of the ARS, and is now a director of the ASA and the president of the Potomac Valley ARS chapter. He can be reached by e-mail at dhyatt@tjhsst.edu.

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In Memory

The Society mourns the loss of Dr. August Kehr, September 27, 2001, at his home in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He had been a member since 1979, was active in hybridizing azaleas, and was recently working to establish an Azalea Society Research Foundation. Contributions in his honor can be sent to the Pincrest Presbyterian Church, PO Box 191, Flat Rock, North Carolina 28739 or to the ASA, c/o Mr. Bob Stelloh, Treasurer, 585 Ransier Drive, Hendersonville, North Carolina 28739-7820. A more complete memorial article is in progress for the winter issue of THE AZALEAN.

Position Opening

Full charge Horticultural Director needed at Quaker Hill Native Plant Garden. Duties include the training and management of a large staff of gardeners, maintenance of computerized plant record systems, design of tree, shrub and groundcover plantings, oversight of nurseries, development of research materials and horticultural library. Requirements include a deep knowledge of eastern U.S. native woody and forb plants, their cultivars and care, experience in large scale garden plantings management, and the ability to design and realize highly naturalized designs. This is an exciting opportunity with excellent salary and benefits. Please reply by letter to:

Director of Design
 Quaker Hill Native Plant Garden
 PO Box 667
 Dewey Lane
 Pawling, NY 12564