Designing with Native Azaleas

Steve Brainerd — Rowlett, Texas

Nature is a wonderful teacher, displaying components of landscape composition for the perceptive landscape designer who is sensitive to the instruction. A talented landscape designer is able to duplicate nature's lessons that evoke human responses through the enlightened placement of constructed amenities and plant materials. The placement of the components of the landscape composition has everything to do with the human body, human mind, and the physical needs of the composite plant material.

Riding on the Blue Ridge Parkway and hiking to Copper Bald during the 2001 convention, delegates were treated to the beauty of the native azaleas, *Rhododendron calendulaceum*, *R. vaseyi*, and *R. arborescens*. The extent of color in the blooming azaleas varied from wispy displays, almost star-like in presentation, to robust, full-bodied spectacles that captured and held the viewer's eye. In analyzing the azalea displays, it was apparent that the sun was a contributing factor to the volume of blooms in any given plant. Azaleas growing in sparse sunlight conditions were sparsely flowered. Heavily blooming azaleas were often seen in exposed locations where sunlight was ample. Nature's placement of native azaleas in a variety of shady and sunlit locations can be mimicked in humanly scripted landscapes to be visually appealing.

Color tends to dominate in our culture's landscape design over other considerations including form, texture, and line, design elements that will be explored later in this article. Color sells, as any retail nurseryman will confirm. It is interesting to compare our culture's focus on color with Japanese garden design, which emphasizes form and tranquility, manipulates texture in combination with a variation of green, and minimizes the use of extreme color contrasts. Our culture's preference as it pertains to the native azaleas will often dictate enhanced color with increased exposure to sunlight that affects the extent of flower bloom and the vibrancy of fall leaf color.

Color wheels are useful in understanding the use of color in the landscape. Cool colors (greens and blues) contrast with the warm colors (yellows and reds) occurring opposite each other on the color wheel. Green is the dominant color in vegetated landscapes, serving as the background for most extensive outdoor spaces. The warm colors are useful in providing focal points, eye-catching elements in landscape design. The warm colors can be seen at long distances and appear to advance in the landscape (appear closer to the viewer than the cool colors). As in painting, landscapes can be designed to catch the viewer's eye (a warm-colored, advancing focal point) in contrast to the predominant green background (a cool-colored, receding frame). The native azaleas can be utilized as focal points while in flower and may serve as frames for other focal points when out of flower. By manipulating the amount of light, a native azalea planting may provide a crescendo of flower color in a sunny area, framed by a feathering of the color into shadier areas utilizing plantings of the identical species.

Form is the physical presentation of the landscape design. An evergreen form may be utilized to screen an objectionable view, block the winter wind, define the perimeter of an outdoor room, or serve as a groundcover to allow viewing and circulation within a space. Sharply vertical forms contrast with horizontal forms and catch the eye when prominent on the horizon. Sculptural forms when contrasted and framed by the background can serve as centerpieces for gardens. Specimen native azaleas may be considered sculptural forms particularly when in bloom, and if displayed properly, when in leaf and defoliated in winter months. *Form should be a primary landscape design consideration before color.*

Texture is the appearance of the structure and detail of the surface of objects. Coarse-textured plants contrast with fine-textured plants and are often effectively used as focal points when framed by fine-textured plants. Coarse-textured plants appear to advance visually towards the observer in the landscape. By manipulating texture, the human perception of spaces can be altered. By providing a coarse-textured plant material in close proximity and fine-textured plant material at a distance, a view may be perceived as more extensive than it is physically. The adroit manipulation of texture in a landscape is high art and is not understood by the general public in the United States. Native azaleas vary from fine to medium in leaf texture and most frequently can be used as the common texture that holds the landscape design together, much as thread holds a cloth together.

Line catches and holds the human eye. Line today is primarily a characteristic of the constructed environment as seen in such examples as roads, bridges, buildings, and railroad tracks. Nature also provides line where water meets soil at a riverbank or ocean beach. Mountain ridges will often display a linear quality. The horizon while at sea and on grasslands in the North American Southwest is linear. Line guides a person along a path. Line can create a mysterious effect, sometimes even frightening, when turning along a path where the view is limited. Line can create a panoramic view when concave and viewed along its edge, often seen in promotional pictures of Hawaiian beaches as the sand extends in an arc away from the camera. Line organizes the landscape, directing the eye, mind, and physical movement of humans in the landscape.

Good landscape design provides both **simplicity** and **complexity.** Nature provided a simplicity and abundance to early explorers of North America who often expressed such ex-

periences as awe-inspiring; however, the mind becomes bored and tired with sameness and demands choice and variety. Early settlers described the great tall-grass prairies of the Midwest as oceans. The Passenger Pigeon flocked in numbers that astounded the observer. Pine forests in the southeastern United States have this abundant quality today that is simple in its presentation, texturally consistent, and unified in color. Good landscape design provides a simplicity and order to the observer. The human mind seeks clarity in perception. Simplicity in design is soothing. Landscape design is enhanced when simply presented at a distance and when the viewer is traveling at high speeds in relation to the landscape.

Complexity should be introduced to the landscape design when the viewer is stationary and is in close proximity. Small details and variation are not perceived at a distance; only when the observer advances close to the landscape planting does the variation become noticeable and available for study. Native azaleas occurring in swarms exercise both aspects of human perception. Amassed from a distance, native azaleas in flower provide appealing color that can be awe-inspiring. Upon close examination, however, the variation in flower color becomes the collector's quest.

Nature demands the attention of successful gardeners. Being a student of nature will enhance the placement of native azaleas in our gardens and contribute to the enjoyment of our North American heritage.

***Steve Brainerd** is a former president of the Azalea Society of America. He is completing a Master of Landscape Architecture degree at the University of Texas at Arlington. He was recently the recipient of a Certificate of Merit from the American Society of Landscape Architecture for scholastic achievement; was inducted into Sigma Lambda Alpha, a national scholastic honor society; and was awarded a Richard B. Myrick scholarship. He is the Parks Development Superintendent for the City of McKinney, Texas.*

Research Notes

Ben Morrison Chapter — US National Arboretum Project: Conserving Old Azalea Varieties

Bob McWhorter — Gambrills, Maryland

Barbara Bullock, Curator of Azaleas and Rhododendrons at the U.S. National Arboretum (USNA), was the featured speaker at a Ben Morrison chapter meeting on February 4, 2001. Her presentation was about her efforts to restore USNA azalea gardens, to identify as many of the azaleas as possible, and to perpetuate the oldest varieties in the collection. As part of this effort, she distributed a list of the oldest varieties at the USNA and offered the chapter an opportunity to obtain cuttings from them.

Barbara's plan was to have chapter members become registered sources of these azaleas for the USNA as a backup source in the event the USNA plants died out. She asked that good records be kept of the names of the members who took the cuttings, the varieties they took, and that quality labels and coated wire be used to identify each cutting and subsequent plant.

On July 13, two days before the Ben Morrison chapter cutting picnic, Bob and Rosa McWhorter, Dave and Eileen Holm, and Joe Miller met with Barbara Bullock at the USNA and obtained cuttings from the list that she had provided. A list of the cuttings taken by the chapter is shown on page 86.

Bob and Rosa McWhorter have one complete set of the cuttings that have been started. Dave and Eileen Holm, who run a wholesale azalea business from their home, have a misting system that yields a high percentage of plants from cuttings. They generously offered to take the remaining cuttings and start them.

Chapter members will meet at the Holm's residence next year to pot up all the new plants. Following this, additional chapter members will "adopt" plants they want and register themselves as auxiliary sources with the USNA. In addition, some of the excess plants propagated in this way will find their way to the 2004 ASA National Convention that will be hosted by the Ben Morrison Chapter.

This project would not have been possible without Barbara Bullock's detailed knowledge of the USNA collection. She provided a great overview of the history of the arboretum azalea gardens and her work with them. She knows the gardens like the back of her hand. This is perhaps made easier by a very good database that she has established that is cross-referenced to garden maps. Because of these records, Barbara was able to go to the precise spots and find all the plants that the chapter had selected in advance. She also let us do some "inspiration shopping" and to take some additional cuttings not previously requested.

We had a wonderful day and obtained an excellent group of cuttings that will yield plants that will enhance chapter gardens in years to come, meanwhile ensuring the USNA will have sources for its azaleas for the indefinite future. The chapter has already discussed the possibility of returning next year to work with Barbara on this project. We regard both the US National Arboretum and Barbara Bullock as national treasures and are grateful for her professionalism, kindness, and friendship.

***Bob McWhorter** is the current president of the Ben Morrison chapter.*