

In Memory

Dr. August Kehr

(Contributors to this eulogy include John Brown, Ray Head, Mary Lou Kehr, Bob Stelloh, and John Weagle, Ed.)

Dr. August E. Kehr died peacefully in Cedar Falls, Iowa, on September 27, 2001, never waking up from a nap as he was making plans to attend the upcoming convention of the American Magnolia Society in Maryland. While it is comforting to know he died as gently as he lived, he leaves a great void in the world of azaleas, rhododendrons, and magnolias.

It is impossible to adequately document who and what made up the life and times of the man who quietly led, advised, and was a large part of the success of the American Rhododendron Society, the Azalea Society of America, and the American Magnolia Society. Please accept the limitations of space and competency as we make this group effort.

First and foremost, Augie was a genuinely nice person. Gentle, kind, thoughtful, giving, and sharing all come to mind to anyone who was fortunate enough to have been in contact with him. When a dozen people were asked for input for an earlier article, each reply had the phrase, within a word of two, "Augie was the kindest, most gentle person I have ever met." In their correspondence, he and Ernest Yelton had mentioned how much enjoyment plants had given them over the years, and even more important, the enjoyment they had received from the people that grew the plants.

He always had too many new ideas to worry about crosses not made or goals not met. Ray Head mentioned, "I realized several years ago that Augie was operating on a different level than anyone I had known in the field of plants. He would spend hours sharing information with others and make them feel comfortable and welcome while they were there."

Born in Frankfort, Kentucky, and moving to Unadilla, New York, at a very early age, Augie was a much-published researcher with sterling credentials. His Doctorate in Genetics from Cornell University with minors in Plant Pathology and Cytology led him to positions on the faculties of Louisiana State University and Iowa State University. Beginning in 1958, he served at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in the Agricultural Research Service as scientist and administrator, including two overseas programs under the Agency for International Development.

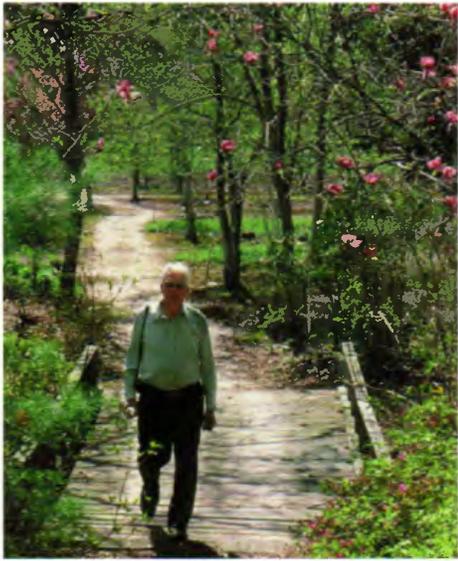
When he retired from government service in 1978, he and Mary Lou moved to Herdersonville, North Carolina, living, appropriately, on Tranquility Lane. There, with Mary Lou's active support, he continued his plant research activities, including the use of colchicine and pre-emergent herbicides to induce polyploidy in rhododendrons and magnolias. He also continued his sharing of information and plants. John Weagle wrote "When I attended the ARS Convention in Asheville in 1994 he invited me to visit his magnolia plantation when the crowds had dissipated. We spent the morning going through his collection and he explained exactly what he was up to with his project and the parentage of everything. He held the ladder while I climbed up to photograph many of them. When I was leaving, in typical fashion, he presented me with some of his best that he had grafted for me well in advance of the convention. This I didn't realize until I got home and read my name on all the original labels."

Hybridizing was a large part of Augie's life after his retirement. Among his goals were the development of a yellow evergreen azalea and a yellow magnolia. He named only a few of the many hybrids he produced and evaluated. His registered rhododendrons include *Rhododendron* 'April

Pink' (fragrant, early light pink); *R.* 'Mountain Marriage' (indumented pink, very hardy); *R.* 'Southland' (floriferous dwarf salmon elepidote); *R.* 'Carolina Gold' (pale yellow, and otherwise similar to *R. carolinianum*); *R.* 'Double Gem' (deep yellow, double-flowered elepidote); *R.* 'Pink Magic' (deep pink dwarf); *R.* 'Augie Kehr' (deep yellow, double-flowered elepidote); *R.* 'Blue Target' (deep blue); and *R.* 'Epoch', a white tetraploid *R. carolinianum* widely used in hybridization efforts. His azaleas included *R.* 'White Rosebud', *R.* 'Anna Kehr', *R.* 'Mary Lou Kehr', *R.* 'Janet Flick', *R.* 'Great Expectations', *R.* 'King Red', and *R.* 'Terry'. Since these cultivars were only a very small percentage of his crosses, you might think he would have been satisfied. On the contrary, his work on magnolias produced 31 beautiful named hybrids that are just now coming onto the market, including *Magnolia* 'Sunspire', a deep yellow magnolia featured on the cover of the August 2001 Wayside Gardens catalog.

A few years ago he entered a spray of *R.* 'Blue Target' at the Southeastern Chapter-ARS flower show and won Best in Show. He was both pleased and somewhat embarrassed, confiding, "Actually, I have an even better blue I've been working on."

Augie had pursued the elusive goal of a yellow evergreen azalea for many years. It was one of the few projects he continued to work toward when he and Mary Lou moved to a retirement home in August 2000, and again after their most recent move to Iowa. There, just days before he died, he was quite excited about a deciduous-evergreen polyploid cross, which had budded yellow and may be fertile. Mary Lou Kehr commented, "During that week he saw the azalea bloom and it still is beautiful. However, he was somewhat disappointed. It is more pink than yellow. He decided it needed more work on it. As the beautiful little



Dr. August Kehr, seen leaving his magnolia garden, was always a horticulturist with a project and a man of action. Magnolias were among his many collections that he studied, cared for, and shared with his many friends in the horticultural world. (Photo kindly supplied by Jan Flick, August's daughter.)

blooms mature, more yellow does appear, but it may not be the answer. We can be sure he would have continued to work on it."

Perhaps less well known was the very broad range of his plant hybridizing activities. Some of the other goals he had worked toward were seedless paw paws, heat tolerant rhubarb, and most recently, self-fertile hollies. He considered his discovery that pollen could be frozen for later use to be his most important contribution.

A few of his positions within the American Rhododendron Society include National President-ARS, founding committee of the ARS Research Foundation, first chairman of the ARS Research Committee, and organizer of the International Rhododendron meeting in 1978. He was awarded the Pioneer Award-ARS, one of only seven ever awarded, all to giants of the plant world, including Joe Gable and most recently, Lionel de Rothschild. He was also awarded the Gold Medal-ARS. At the local level, he had been president of the Southeastern Chapter-ARS, a recipient of the Bronze Medal, and the leader and supporter of many efforts within the chapter,

including the complete revamping of their flower show scheduling along genus/species lines.

He was also quite active in the Azalea Society of America, and was a founding member of the new Vaseyi Chapter in Hendersonville, North Carolina, in 2001. He mentioned once that he would have liked to be a founding member of the Azalea Society at the national level, but since he was the president of the ARS, he did not join at the time because he felt it could be considered as being disloyal to the ARS.

Augie's work in establishing the ARS Research Foundation was just a beginning. At the Southeastern Chapter-ARS picnic and auction on July 2000, he donated a part of his collection of books, artworks, and papers to the Magnolia Research Foundation he had recently help to found. Bidding was fast and furious and resulted in a donation of almost \$1,000 to the Magnolia Society. And he didn't stop there. Just before moving to Iowa in August 2001, Augie began working with Bob Stelloh on the formation of a research foundation for the Azalea Society, and had agreed to serve with Bob as the co-chairman of the Foundation Committee. He firmly believed that ongoing plant research was an essential part of the role of any plant society.

The Azalea Society does not yet have a Research Foundation. However, it may be fitting to make a donation in his honor to the Azalea Society of American to be used as "seed money" when it is established.

Nathan Fitts

With sadness we mourn the loss of one of the Society's founding members, Nathan C. Fitts, who died at his home in Potomac, Maryland, on September 27. Alice Johnson Holland, who was the founding secretary of the Azalea Society of America and knew Nate Fitts as a member of the organizing committee and the original Board of Governors remembers: "Nate was part of the original group that met at

the Brookside Gardens Library to form the Society. He did much of the original work on the aims, purpose and By-Laws, but had to drop out for health reasons. His work was completed by Bill Parsons (also deceased)." Nathan was a CIA Intelligence Officer from 1953 until 1978, when he retired. His retirement hobby was propagating azalea cuttings with his wife for their garden.

Mr. Fitts was born in Springfield, Massachusetts. He was a graduate of Amherst College and Harvard University Law School. He also received a Master's degree in law from Georgetown University. Survivors include his wife of 59 years, Isabel P. Fitts, two sons and two granddaughters.

Shirley Grant

Ben Morrison Chapter regretfully reports the passing of member Shirley Grant on November 8, 2001.

Donald W. Hager

Northern Virginia Chapter reported the passing on October 8 of Donald W. Hager. He was 82. Dave Nanney described him this way in the November issue of "The Azalea Clipper": "Don was very active in the early years of our chapter, hosting meetings, running plant sales, and generally encouraging all of us to collect and enjoy azaleas. I still use and enjoy his catalog from 1984. Leslie and I acquired so many of our Satsuki azaleas as one-year cuttings from Don. Don established his nursery in Spotsylvania, overcoming various obstacles, including a severe drought that exhausted his well with obvious consequences. Don was one of the key people in getting Leslie and me deeply into this collection mess. He will be missed." Don worked with azaleas for 45 years; besides developing and running the nursery in Spotsylvania County, he hybridized and named 40 or 50 of his hybrids; 24 are listed in Galle. He was a past chapter president and a major supporter of the Society. He is survived by his wife of 59 years, Alvera, and three daughters.