

The Linwood Hardy Azalea Story

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In 1951 Charles Fischer Jr., present owner of Fischer Greenhouses in Linwood, New Jersey, started crossing tender azaleas with hardy varieties. His goal was to develop hardy azaleas that could be grown in the field, since over-wintering in greenhouses of Belgian Indicas, etc. was becoming too costly. With more than 40 varieties of Indica, Rutherford, Pericat, and Kurume azaleas to work with, he obtained many seeds. If it bloomed, he pollinated it. At the end of four years, however, 75 percent of the grown-on seedlings had been winter-killed, and the rest produced plants that didn't meet Fischer's standards.

In 1953, G. Albert Reid joined Fischer Greenhouses and was given the assignment to continue what Charlie had started. Al worked hard, kept excellent records, and since that time the breeding and production of the Linwood Hardy azaleas became "his baby." Al worked for Fischer's for 15 years and during those years many crosses were made and thousands of seedlings were grown on. The largest crop numbered over 6,000 seedlings resulting from crosses of just one year. Al made the comment that as a result of Fischer's goal to establish plants good enough for the floral trade to sell (that is, plants with better flowers, fast growth, compact bushes, easily forced, good keepers), many plants that were discarded were ones that he wished he had kept.

One of Charlie's earlier crosses (A3) proved very valuable in later crosses as a seed parent. The one azalea most responsible for putting hardiness in the Linwood hybrids was in a group purchased from Bobbink and Atkins of East Rutherford, New Jersey, identified only as K28. A Mr. White, who was part of the Bobbink and Atkins organization, thinks that K28 is the same as 'Mrs. L.C. Fischer', but their

breeding records are blank on this. Many people who have seen both azaleas believe that K28 is the same as the one Nancy Gartrell found in a roadside market and that Robert Gartrell called "Oakland" and used to put hardiness in his crosses. *[The latter has been named and registered as R. 'Oakland', according to Don Voss, Ed.]*

When Al retired from Fischer's in 1967, he decided to produce better garden type azaleas with larger flowers that would last longer in bloom. This program automatically eliminated all single-flower plants. All Linwood Hardy azaleas are either double, semi-double, or hose-in-hose flowers. These more complicated flower types extend the blooming time of individual plants to three, and in some cases, four weeks.

Another plus for the Linwoods is the diversity of plant types. For example, there are prostrate growers, tall growers, and compact growers. There is a fall-bloomer, a red-white variegated, and early summer bloomers. There are no common ancestors in the Linwoods. They are a conglomeration of crosses of Belgian Indicas, Rutherfords, Pericats, Gables, Kurumes, and others followed by back crosses, sibling crosses, crosses on crosses, and even selfs, all with the underlying goal of trying to get something better.

Due to poor health, Al discontinued his nursery operation in 1983. One of his goals before retiring was to develop additional fall bloomers such as 'Opal'. Crosses that were made prior to his retirement, which make up the S, T, and V Series, have not proven to be fall bloomers. Plants of the T and V Series are under evaluation at my nursery. A few plants of these series are turning out to be real eye catchers. On February 17, 1986, Al died af-

ter his long bout with emphysema. As a close friend of Al's who wanted to see the Linwood "Hardys" widely distributed and given acclaim, I have set up my nursery to grow all the Linwood Hardy plants. With my son and two granddaughters to help, I will continue to make them available to the public, maintaining the high standards that Al initially set up, to enable his plants to live on.

Note: Stecki showed slides of many of the Linwoods. A sampling of names that are very well known are: 'Hardy Gardenia', 'Garden State Salmon', 'Garden State Pink', 'Linwood Lavender', 'Linwood Pink Giant'.

Ted Stecki has been a part-time nurseryman at his Hill House Nursery for over 30 years, propagating and growing rhododendrons and azaleas. He worked closely with Al Reid, evaluating his new crosses and compiling his data, including plants he used for breeding and crosses, the naming/numbering methodology, and what Al envisioned for the future. A long-time member of the ASA and ARS, Ted is a past president of the Pine Barrens ARS chapter, and past chair of the ARS exhibit at the Philadelphia Flower Show for many years. He is now the Budget and Finance Committee chair for the ARS.

