

Azalea Gardens

Reclaiming the Clouds' Garden

Martha Derthick — Charlottesville, Virginia

In the spring of 1992, I bought 2/3 acre of a mature but neglected garden in Charlottesville, Virginia, that had been planted by the late Warren and Virginia Cloud. Five years later, I bought another piece of it, so that I now own 1.2 acres of what was originally a 2-acre garden of azaleas, rhododendrons, English boxwoods, forest trees, and wildflowers, along with dogwoods, hollies, hemlocks and a smattering of camellias, mountain laurel, *Pieris japonica*, and *Leucothoe*. There are also indigenous remnants of a rural past: cedars, short-leaf pines, and persimmon trees.

I bought this property because I was looking for a construction site. With a long-standing interest in architecture, I aspired to build a distinctive house. I did in fact build the house, a major undertaking in itself, but before long reclamation of the garden began to claim priority. Demanding as was the house, that project was at least finite. Reclamation of the garden will go on for the rest of my life.

The Clouds, then in their early 30s, bought the land from a dairy farmer, P. H. Gentry, in 1936. They must have known exactly what they were doing, for they selected a bowl with a spring at the bottom. Perhaps they saw Mr.

Gentry's cows drinking from the spring. Perhaps Mr. Gentry had a pond there. At any rate, the Clouds must quickly have envisioned a pond as the focal point of their garden.

On the rim of the bowl, overlooking the pond site, the Clouds built a modest, well-proportioned house that was characteristic more of New England than of Virginia. With a foundation of native



In 1936 this area was a pond and became the focal point for the Clouds' garden. Since 1992, Martha Derthick has been restoring the area, now drained, to the rich mix of azaleas, rhododendrons, and ornamental trees the garden contained during the 1970s. The mass of lavender on the right is 'Corsage'. (Photo by Martha Derthick.)

stone, brown shingle siding, painted white trim, and a granite chimney, it was as sturdy as it was unassuming.

Unfortunately, the Clouds' garden book does not survive, but it is said that the garden contained approximately 400 varieties of rhododendrons and azaleas. The rhododendrons were mainly Dexters and Gables, with a relatively late addition of Shammarellos; the azaleas

were Gables and Glenn Dales, with later additions of Robin Hills and Linwoods. It has been possible to reconstruct much of the contents from three principal sources: tags, both affixed to plants and fallen; an incomplete yet valuable collection of 35 millimeter Kodachrome slides, dating from the late '60s and early '70s, and kindly made available by the Clouds' nieces; and a likewise valuable yet incomplete audiotape created by neighbors, Ginny and Ted Davenport, in 1982. While the Davenports circulated in the garden, Mr. Cloud recorded the names of specimens as they passed.

The pond was surrounded by azaleas, which in turn were surrounded by boxwoods at spaced intervals. This central area was in deep shade, cast by tall sycamores and tulip poplars. The shade also made it possible to grow a wide variety of woodland wildflowers. At the far end of the pond (far from the house, that is), there was a dam, and beyond the dam an arched wooden bridge—graceful, hand-hewn, unpainted—that connected parts of the garden that otherwise would have been separated by a streambed. On the slopes of the bowl, leading down to the pond, was a dense, gently curving profusion of boxwoods, azaleas, rhododendrons, wildflowers, and trees, with

paths carefully laid to facilitate descent into this ordered wilderness from the outside world.

The garden probably reached a peak in the 1970s. The azaleas around the pond were fully mature as of the late '60s. Virginia Cloud died in 1979; her husband, in 1986. There followed a period of neglect that, given Charlottesville's climate, quickly turned the place into a jungle by the time I saw it in 1992. There were many dead and fallen trees. Honeysuckle, wild grape, smilax, and Virginia creeper smothered and distorted the azaleas and rhododendrons. Poison ivy stood in waist-high thickets and formed thick ropes around trees, broadcasting seeds as it ascended. Several of the big trees that had shaded the pond were going or completely gone. *Ailanthus* and other weed trees had sprung up. The bridge had rotted, and the dam had been breached. The pond was derelict, with dirty water only a few inches deep. Azaleas of advanced age, covered with fungus, reached far over it. The place was a desolate sight in February, when I first viewed it, late on a Sunday afternoon with hardly any light remaining, yet one could discern that something wonderful had been there.

At the time, I elected to buy only one parcel of the three that were on the market, the garden having been subdivided by an intervening owner into nearly equal parts of 2/3 of an acre each. I resisted a real estate agent's advice to buy the house, inasmuch as I had the absolutely fixed idea that I would build one. Deterred by the fungus and general decay, I elected not to buy the site that included the pond. Instead, it and the lot that contained the original house were bought by a young man who would be my neighbor until 1997. I bought a piece of the bowl that included many rhododendrons and azaleas and a barely feasible building site. Later, when the young man left—along with, by then, a wife and child—I bought the pond site.

The reclamation has been an incredible amount of incredibly satisfying work, worth the time, the tick bites,

and repeated outbreaks of oozing, violently itching blisters of poison ivy. ("If I were you, I would hire someone else to clear that garden," the head of dermatology at the University of Virginia Medical Center, said.) Looking back, the reclamation progressed in more-or-less inevitable stages: 1) a rapid, furious clearing of the vines and underbrush in the first summer, in the hope of keeping as much as possible of the garden alive; 2) removal of dead trees and pruning of live ones to elevate their canopies; 3) major pruning of azaleas and much gentler pruning of rhododendrons to renew them and restore shapes that had been distorted by the overgrowth; 4) continued work on the understory, to get unwanted vines out and encourage the return of bulbs and wildflowers and the spread of preferred ground covers—*Vinca*, *Euonymus*, and *Pachysandra*, all of which the Clouds had planted. They had also planted English ivy and giant *Vinca*, which I fought to remove. 5) continued pruning of the azaleas, which take some years to achieve health and a good shape; and 6) refined weeding, to get out one generation after another of ground ivy, potato vines, wild strawberries, garlic mustard, and chickweed, in addition to the persistent poison ivy, honeysuckle, Virginia creeper, wild grape, and wild blackberry. Happily, the succeeding owner of the original house, arriving in the fall of 1997, quickly proved to be an obsessive enemy of weeds.

Virtually all of the English boxwoods had died a natural death, which must have been a great blow to Mr. Cloud, who lived long enough to see it begin. I have not undertaken to replace them, as the garden promises to be quite full without them, and I prefer the informality of what survived. When I acquired the second lot in 1997, I assumed that I would restore the pond, but after a series of meetings with excavators and landscape architects, I decided not to. The heavy equipment that would have been required to do the work would have been too damaging, and there was no good place to put the many cubic feet of muck that would have had to be removed. More-

over, it would probably have been much harder to keep the pond clean today than it was for the Clouds in the 1940s and 1950s. They built their pond and garden in a rural setting. By the mid-1960s, the development of urban and suburban Charlottesville had engulfed them, bringing automobile traffic and run-off from paved streets. I decided that the pond should become a bog garden, and it is showing promise as such, with cranberry bushes, pitcher plants, and an island containing *Ilex glabra* and *Clethra*.

Not until 1998-99, when I finished the house and then retired, was I able to study the garden and published works on azaleas and rhododendrons in order to figure out what I had been frantically seeking to save. When I retired, several of my students very kindly gave me a copy of Galle's *Azaleas*, which has been invaluable. From my parents, who were avid gardeners in northern Ohio, I had inherited a copy of David Leach's *Rhododendrons of the World*. More recently, I got out of the University of Virginia library a copy of *Hybrids and Hybridizers*, which produced a breakthrough. All of a sudden, with the help of these books and the other sources on the Clouds' garden, I began to be able to piece together what they had done, more or less in what order.

Most of the first plantings around and approaching the pond were Gable azaleas and early introductions from Japan such as 'Flame', 'Snow', 'Bridesmaid', 'Amoenum', 'Sweet Briar', 'Hinomayo,' and 'Hinodegiri'. The Gables are very old, with thick, woody trunks, and have been harder than later plantings to revive. Still, they have a will to grow. My original neighbor, who had a chain saw and a passion for neatness, cut some of them right down to the ground, but most came back even from that assault.

Some of the Glenn Dales likewise appear to have been planted early, but their planting apparently extended over a longer period of time. They are planted up the slope, farther from the

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Society News

Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Azalea Society of America Marriott Hotel • Atlanta, Georgia • April 19, 2002

President Joseph E. Schild opened the meeting at 7:14 PM with a call of the roll of chapters and a report of the activities of the board of directors meeting. He noted that the projected deficit was being addressed by looking at increased membership to reduce the outflow of cash. Membership in the Society had increased during the early 1990s, topping out at 941 members in the year 1993. The year 2001 had a large increase of new members due in part to the formation of the Vaseyi Chapter and 57 new members who signed up on the ASA Web site. Total membership for the year, however, was only 775, due to non-renewals over the years, although this is up from 680 in 2000. Hopefully, the upward trend in new and renewing memberships will continue, but does not solve our current budget problem. The board is working on ways to reduce costs and increase public relations for the Society.

The secretary reported the results of the elections. The new directors, who

will serve until 2004, are Margie Jenkins, Robert Hobbs, and Donald Voss.

A very closely contested race for best article in *The Azalean* resulted in a tie for first place. Several other articles received almost as many votes as did the winners. The winners are **Don Hyatt**, for his article "Best of the Best: In Search of Native Azaleas" and **Roger Duvall**, "A Family Reunion—Joint ARS/ASA Convention Preview." Congratulations are in order to these and all contributors for their excellent articles.

An open discussion period on the budget deficit followed with ideas from the floor for consideration.

1. Chapters should look into why their members are not renewing.
2. Annual membership dues are payable as of January 1. We will continue to send a list of non-renewals to the chapters so they can contact the non-renewing members for their concerns. The idea of person-to-person contact would seem to be better than an overdue notice. We are sending the renewal notices by e-mail, when pos-

sible, to save costs.

3. Chapters should be able to get their own members back. Chapters can generate mailing labels by chapter by going to the ASA Web site roster. This might help in the retention effort.

4. The Board Action Item List (see *The Azalean* 24(2): 39) addresses ways to increase membership: more person-to-person contact with new members, more recruiting, more reliance on chapters for recruiting and member retention, and several ideas to increase public recognition.

5. The two key causes of the budget shortfall are the increased cost of *The Azalean* and lowered interest rates on CD investments. There was unanimous agreement that the quality of *The Azalean* was well worth the cost, and that maintaining the color printing and quality would help draw new membership.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:37pm.

Respectfully submitted,
John Brown, Secretary

pond. Among the Glenn Dale varieties that I have reason to believe were in the garden are: 'Ambrosia', 'Ballet Girl', 'Boldface', 'Caress', 'Carmel', 'Cavalier', 'Copperman', 'Dayspring', 'Delight', 'Dream', 'Echo', 'Fakir', 'Festive', 'Frivolity', 'Glacier', 'Greeting', 'Isolde', 'Louise Dowdle', 'Lyric', 'Modesty', 'Morning Star', 'Mother of Pearl', 'Nocturne', 'Picotee', 'Quakeress', 'Refrain', 'Surprise', 'Treasure', 'Vespers', and 'Wavelet'. Undoubtedly, there were/are more. There were also at least five Back Acres azaleas: 'Debonaire', 'Friendship', 'Margaret Douglas', 'Pat Kraft', and 'Red Slippers'.

I would welcome the help of anyone who would care to take up the challenge of identifying the garden's contents. Or come just to celebrate the beauty and durability of these survivors of neglect and abuse. And also, of course, to honor the memory of Warren and Virginia Cloud, as well as the hybridizers whose plants they chose and tended for half a century.

Note

The Clouds were amateur yet expert gardeners. He was a native of Charlottesville and worked for the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, holding various jobs in its station in Charlottesville.

Reference

Livingston, Philip A. and Franklin H. West, eds. 1978. *Hybrids and Hybridizers: Rhododendrons and Azaleas for Eastern North America*. Newtown Square, Pennsylvania: Harrowood Books.

Martha Derthick, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, is a retired professor of American government at the University of Virginia and a member of both the ASA and the American Rhododendron Society. Her best known books on government are Policymaking for Social Security (Brookings, 1979) and Up in Smoke: From Legislation to Litigation in Tobacco Politics (Congressional Quarterly Press, 2001).