

A Map for the Road Well-Traveled

Barry Sperling — Alexandria, Virginia

It is always frustrating to open a reference book in a field that is new to you. The information is overwhelming and many facts seem disconnected and arbitrary. Until you spend enough time building a framework with the data, it is just a sea of random statements. This is where I found myself with Galle's *Azaleas* a few years ago.

A prior article in *The Azalean* covered my stumblings into the field. Starting with some legacy plants, I looked them up in the book, only to find their origins buried in crosses from other plants I didn't know. Looking up those plants carried the origins further back, with some names coming up among several trails of ancestors. The criss-crossing was confusing. As a math teacher I was trained to make sketches of situations to clarify them. Hmmmm.

Going back to the figurative "drawing board," I started writing the names of plants and their ancestors using lines to connect them. Running this data back far enough led to a set of species that seemed to be the likely origins of the azaleas we now have.

The first tries to make the proper connections led to a rat's nest of lines, so I tried other arrangements until I

found a setup that could minimize the crossings. Satisfied that I faithfully represented the origins of my plants, I used the Microsoft Paint program, included with most PCs in the Accessories folder, to make a legible version: ellipses to circle the names, lines to connect them. Printing this out, then cutting and pasting the pages together led to a version that, I thought, others would be willing to look at.

I brought the map to a meeting of the Northern Virginia Chapter and showed it to Don Voss for verification. I was sure that he had something like it in his head, programmed for instant recall. He agreed to look at it, took it, and mailed it back with red marks all over it.

What happened? Well, it seems that since Galle's publication, botanists have been busy rethinking these relationships. OK, that's one thing that computers can do well: allow an edit! So out came Paint and I redid the chart. A few months later I showed Don the changes. He thought some more, did some reading, and made a few more changes. After a couple of times through the cycle, he pronounced it acceptable. Of course, the

specifics were limited to plants that I, myself, had (e.g., no Robin Hills at the time), but it did show the origins of the cultivars (See Figure 1). You might want to take some of your plants and add to the map.

So now, while the arrangement is still not "perfectly" clear, I do have a reference point. The next step is to find out what characteristics these early plants have so that I can see how these traits have gotten passed on and mixed together. It's complicated, but with a roadmap I'll be able to follow the story as it develops!

Reference

Sperling, Barry L. 2000. "Expert Opinions: And That's the Truth!" *The Azalean*. 22 (1): 10.

Barry Sperling taught high school mathematics and computer science in Fairfax County for 33 years. He retired in June of 1999, and hopes to be able to put more time into learning and disseminating knowledge on the azaleas@azaleas.org e-mail list and the ASA Web site. He has been a member of the ASA since 1997 and is the new president of the Northern Virginia chapter.

The Start of Something Good

Bob Stelloh — Hendersonville, North Carolina

I had begun working with Dr. August Kehr, at his urging, and shortly before his death in September 2001, on forming a Research Foundation for the Azalea Society. He was instrumental in establishing a Research Foundation for the American Rhododendron Society and another one for the Magnolia Society. Both of these foundations have been remarkably successful in attracting funds for much-needed plant research.

Even though the ASA does not have a Research Foundation yet, we now have

some money earmarked for it, thanks to the generosity of a sister society and a member. Recently, Ian Donovan donated \$250 in memory of Dick Brooks and another \$250 in memory of Augie Kehr. In both cases, the donors specified the money be put into our Research Foundation fund when it comes into being.

If you agree that the funding of azalea research projects is a good idea, please urge your chapter president to express your views when the concept is discussed

at our Board of Directors meeting in Chattanooga. And let him know, or let me know, if you are interested in serving as one of the directors of a Research Foundation when we get it set up. We are looking for people interested in its finance aspects, as well as people interested in soliciting and reviewing research proposals. And, finally, consider adding to the modest beginning we now have. Just specify "research" on the memo line of your check.