Azaleas in Brazil

Gerson Borges — Dois Irmãos, Brazil

[This article is dedicated to his "little buddy Bobby II," a red-breasted robin who used to keep Borges company when he was tending his azaleas and rhododendrons in the garden and in his greenhouse, Ed.]

I am a Brazilian-American, born in Brazil but took American citizenship of my own desire. I live in the extreme south of Brazil (state of Rio Grande do Sul). My state has borders with Uruguay in the south and Argentina on the south and west. My latitude here is 30° South. If one wanted to compare with the Northern Hemisphere, the zone here would be similar of that of south Texas to south Georgia. However, due to the prevailing winds, cold fronts from Antarctica come up from Argentina and Uruguay and smack through our area, making temperatures a lot colder in winter and cooler in summer. Combining that with the rainfall that we normally have here, it makes it much cooler in summer and more balmy in winter than the area at the corresponding latitude in the United States. This is a paradise for azaleas and rhododendrons!

The thing is, I don't know why, but there were no rhododendrons to speak of here in Brazil, very few forms of evergreen azaleas, and no deciduous azaleas at all. I set up to be the one who would introduce them in Brazil, and I am doing just that. I must say first of all that I have had wonderful help and incentive from marvelous people in the United States. Jim Barlup, from Bellevue, Washington, has been tireless in sending me lots of rhododendron cuttings and loads of seed. He is the one who really got me going and still does to this date. Then there are Bob Stelloh who sent me seed and good advice and has also given me a lot of incentive; Bonnie and Duane Bodin-Johnson; the late Ian Donovan; Fred Minch and his late wife Jean; Bob Kelly of Mississippi; and Dr. Herb Spady and his late wife Betty who were wonderful to me, as were many more fantastic people. It would take too long to mention all of them, but I thank them very much for having helped me.

I am writing a book about azaleas and rhododendrons, which is entitled, O Mundo Maravilhoso das Azaléias e Rododendros (The Wonderful World of Azaleas and Rhododendrons.) It is almost finished, and I hope it will go to press this year. Of course it will be written in Portuguese, for Brazil and all other Portuguese-speaking countries. My objective is to get the subject of azaleas and rhododendrons sufficiently known here to generate an interest in propagating them here in Brazil. I started out with five azalea plants, eight years ago. Now I have about 1,500 evergreen azaleas, a handful of deciduous azaleas, and about 600 rhododendrons in sizes of 2" to 3'-4' tall. Some are already forming their first flower buds.

My years of retirement are very busy: my new love for azaleas and rhododendrons keeps me working frantically and also happily. I honestly don't know what I'd do if it weren't for them. Maybe I'd be spending most of my days in front of a TV set, which would be awful.

Gerson Borges is a retired English teacher who lives on a hill in Dois Irmãos. Gardening has been his favorite pastime, and he says being close to nature has been his addiction.

'Carnival Dancer'

'Mystic Song'

'Madame Butterfly'

(All photos by author Gerson Borges)