

The Schroeder Azalea Hybrids: A Brief History and Update

Stephen L. Schroeder and David R. Schroeder — Evansville, Indiana

During the spring of 1973, the late Dr. H. Roland Schroeder, Jr., set out to develop a series of hardy hybrid evergreen azaleas. The main purpose was to develop a hybrid that would withstand our climatic conditions here in southern Indiana, and still display a variant array of colorful blooms. In order to accomplish this, it would take several thousand azalea seedlings from various crosses, as each plant would differ, even with the same parent crossings. After careful evaluation, 37 evergreen azaleas were selected, potted up and later set out to test their hardiness. In the spring of 1984, the azaleas produced blooms for the first time, and all 37 were named and registered in the following year.

Plant Production and Propagation

Propagation and growing of our hybrid azaleas began in the spring of 1986. At first, due to the lack of sufficient numbers of any named azalea, we sold very few and these were sold to collectors and members of the ASA. As time went on, we were able to produce enough of our hybrid evergreen azaleas to sell locally and by mail order. Up until 1990, we sold many of our azaleas through mail orders, but decided that we really needed to concentrate on local sales to other nurseries and to the local public interested in our hybrids. So, in March of 1990 we discontinued our mail order service to better serve our area, for which the azaleas were developed.

For a number of years we grew most of the selected 37 azaleas; but later, when we knew which were more popular locally, we settled on four of our most popular azaleas including: 'Mrs. Henry Schroeder' (syn. 'Mrs. H.R. Schroeder'), 'Schroeder's White Glory', 'Scarlet Frost', and 'Purple Pride'. These were available in two sizes: the larger 18" to 24" plant and a smaller-sized one of around 12" to 15". Another thing we discovered is that azaleas, regardless of variety, are best grown in shallow but wide flats rather than in conventional nursery pots of gallon size. We also discovered that azaleas grew better in pine bark mulch rather than in peat moss, as the bark mulch allowed better drainage. This growing method worked very well for us, and we were able to salvage the metal flat by selling each azalea in burlap or in a plastic bag. Our customers also appreciated the fact they were able to plant their azaleas sooner and would not have to throw away a good nursery pot.

As time passed, from the years of 1990 to 1999, we started noticing that sales of our azaleas to wholesalers were dropping significantly. Our regular retail sales showed some drop, but not as much as the wholesale section of

business. Around 1997 we once again thought about reviving our mail-order service; but due to cost of shipping and slow sales we once again dropped the mail-order service idea. Also, at this time, the larger chain outlets were starting to sell azaleas and other plant material at a much lower cost than we could have charged and still make a profit and meet operating expenses.

Unexpected Problems

Then we started noticing that our retail customers were becoming fewer and fewer each year. In order to better serve those still interested in our evergreen azalea hybrids, we started growing the 12" to 15" sized azaleas in the most popular colors. However, in 2002 our water department, to better serve its water customers and to maintain a clean and healthy water supply, switched from just adding chlorine to the water supply to adding chloramines, a more stable compound. At first we did not think this newly added compound would affect our propagation and growing, but we soon found out that it prevented the azalea cuttings from producing roots, and the chloramines also tied up fertilizers and other chemicals we used to grow our azaleas. We did find that we could propagate our azaleas using rainwater, but the area that we could use was really too small to produce enough plants to carry on business. After extensive research into a solution to our problem, we came to the decision that it would not be feasible to continue. After some 30 years in the nursery business and developing our own hybrid evergreen azaleas, we decided to discontinue our nursery business and retire. We continue to receive many calls concerning ours and others' plants, and we always provide any help and assistance we can.

Other Sources For Our Azalea Hybrids

As for the Schroeder azalea hybrids, there are several other nurseries that are currently growing and selling them. Many have contacted us stating that they have done very well with our azaleas, and just like our experience, there are those particular colors that are the most sought after. We believe that currently the Schroeder azalea hybrids are being grown in gardens and arboretums in all 50 states. We are still very proud of our father's work with evergreen azaleas and other plants, and seeing them listed in catalogs is very rewarding. Also knowing that our nursery in Indiana was the only one to date to develop and propagate their own azalea hybrids was equally rewarding.

Stephen Schroeder and his brother David Schroeder both graduated from Murray State University in 1974. Stephen received his BS degree in Agriculture specializing in

Horticulture. David received his BS degree in Biology. They were co-owners of Holly Hills Nursery, located in Evansville, Indiana, started by their late father Dr. H.R. Schroeder, Jr., MD.



This photo shows the open shrub habit of 'Doctor Henry Schroeder', taken in the private garden of the late Fred Sievers. (Photo by Greg Wedding)



Not only are Schroeder hybrids cold-tolerant, but they also display a variety of flower forms. Shown here are three very attractive variations: Photo 1. 'Mrs. Mildred Kinder', a double lavender with pointed petals; Photo 2. 'Margaret Hyatt', a lovely pink double with frilly edges; and Photo 3. 'Schroeder's Pink Perfection', a double with rose strap-like petals. (All photos by Jackie Cottom)



Azalea Gardens Hillwood Museum and Gardens

Kelly Wilson — McLean, Virginia

Each May, the soft pastels, friendly corals, and vivid reds of layers of azaleas remind us why they are one of the biggest attractions at Hillwood Museum and Gardens. To large numbers of Hillwood's visitors, May is the best and most favored time to see the thousands of colorful azaleas and take in the rest of the gardens.

This past spring was no exception. An early warm spell followed by cooler-than-average temperatures gave way to four weeks of spectacular blooms. Korean rhododendrons kicked off the season, followed by Glenn Dale, Kurume, Girard, and Satsuki hybrids. Towering old elm trees, flowering dogwoods, and illustrious camellias created a perfect backdrop for the mature 1950s and 1960s azalea cultivars.

Brian Barr, Hillwood's deputy director for horticulture, describes the estate's azaleas as "tried and true." Many of the azaleas are "still in the nursery trade, with probably a few that have been lost." He notes that 'Koromo-shikibu,' one of many azaleas repeated in Hillwood's 14 acres of cultivated landscape, recently took Best in Show at the local Brookside Gardens Chapter of the Azalea Society.

Hillwood, the former home of Post cereal heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post, was purchased with the philanthropist's intent to showcase her French and Russian decorative and fine arts collections. Located adjacent to Rock Creek Park in northwest Washington, DC, Hillwood houses the largest collection of Russian decorative arts outside of Russia. Imperial Russian portraits, including of Catherine the Great and Nicholas II, flank the grand staircase of the estate's 36-room mansion. French furnishings and tapestries dominate the French Drawing Room, and Fabergé Easter eggs occupy center stage in the Icon Room.

While appreciating 18th century French furniture, Mrs. Post also delighted in her landscape and was especially fond of the azaleas. She took such pride in the azaleas that she scheduled her spring garden parties around their peak bloom period, which usually falls around Mother's Day. Earl Loy, a full-time gardener for Mrs. Post, explained in an interview that she would call from her Palm Beach estate in December to inquire about the peak date so she could plan her parties accordingly.

Following Mrs. Post's death in 1973, the gardens experienced a slow decline. Long-time Hillwood horticulture staff member Bill Johnson recalls how huge and overgrown the azaleas became: "Lack of sunlight created a terrible case of