

The Kelly Strickland Azaleas— An Exceptional Collection

Joe Coleman—Lithonia, Georgia

Editor's Note: Technically, the name R. speciosum is illegitimate. As stated by Kron, when Willdenow included Michaux's Azalea calendulacea (an, thus indirectly its type) in the description of Azalea speciosa, he made A. speciosa a superfluous name. Later, A. speciosa became widely associated with the plant correctly named R. flammeum.

The Kelly Strickland azalea collection is the result of a lifetime of searching out the very best forms of native azaleas and expanding their use for future gardeners. With this in mind, Kelly Strickland made sure that his work would survive him by bequeathing his azaleas to his good friend, Randolph Maphis, a noted internationally noted camellia expert in Tallahassee, Florida.

This was an inspired choice, for though the collection is far too large to move in its entirety, Randolph Maphis, after evaluating the collection, resolved to save it and attempted to propagate the azaleas in the collection. In researching the origins of the collection, he discovered that the roots of many of the plants went back almost 40 years, involving the friendship of three “good ole boys”—Kelly Strickland, Al Burke, and Pete Webb—whose work together over a period of time led to a fabulous collection of deciduous azaleas.

The problems associated with reproducing so many native azaleas and crosses made by Kelly Strickland and Al Burke required tissue culture techniques that are evolving, and fortunately Randolph Maphis was able to find help from Earl Sommerville, **Dr. Andy Whipple**, Vivian Abney, **Alan Cantrell**, and Mark Crawford in developing lines that will lead to the eventual release of major numbers of the Strickland azaleas.

To appreciate the collection, one must understand Kelly Strickland.



▲ Yellow seedling growing in the woods.

▼ SW 51—'Ilam Persian Melon' x 167S x 'Seashell'





▲ SW 54—*R. speciosum* HIH

▼ SW 41—'Illum Persian Melon' x 167S x 'Old Gold'



Born in Telogia, Florida, he grew up in the Marianna, Florida, area where his family owned property along the Chipola River. His love of nature was founded as his outdoor preoccupations were hunting and fishing in his youth. He was a Florida State University graduate with a Bachelor of Science degree in management in 1953. After a two-year tour of duty in the Army, Kelly returned to work for the Florida Department of Transportation rising to the position of Executive Secretary for the Board of Transportation. When he retired in 1985, he was serving as Director of Purchasing.

It was in his later years, before full retirement, that Kelly developed an interest in native plants. As he traveled extensively around the state of Florida, he developed a keen appreciation for wildflowers and was attracted to the native azaleas he had known since his youth. As he also had a family cabin in the vicinity of Franklin, North Carolina, Kelly was also attracted to the native azaleas in the mountain regions of North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia as well as the neighboring states of Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Often he was joined by Al Burke, another recent retiree from the Florida Department of Transportation, who shared his interest in searching the mountains for native azaleas. Al Burke was a Florida native—from LaBelle—just a year older than Kelly. He was the youngest of three children whose mother and grandmother could “make a broom stick break growth.”

His interest in plants came quite naturally. Al attended the University of Florida in civil engineering, starting work with the Florida Department of Transportation in 1958. Al met Kelly in 1960 when he was transferred to Tallahassee. A firm friendship began at lunch time and extended to both fishing and plant collecting.

Often while scouting for one hobby, they would combine their interest, especially when exploring together. Al would do the driving, and Kelly would serve as chief spotter for the flashes of color that they were seeking. According to Al, when making a sighting, Kelly would let a whoop that could be heard from a distance. To quote Al Burke, “Kelly and I burned a lot of rubber and a lot of time.”

Often they would make crosses with other flowers and come back in the fall to harvest the seed. Even before the advent of GPS, Kelly and Al had the knack of returning to the exact site of the plant they were seeking. It was primarily Al who planted seed and rooted cuttings with Kelly providing the discriminating eye for plant selection. His favorite saying was “you had to harden your heart and get rid of most

Photo Joe Coleman

Photo Joe Coleman

of the seedlings to get to the finest!” Kelly always got first choice of the hybrids.

Kelly was a family man, married to Norma Thomas Strickland for 56 years, until his death at age 77 in May 2007. His health had declined unexpectedly, but he provided for his close friends, leaving his fishing boat and equipment to his fishing buddies, the guns to his hunting friends, and his perhaps more valuable azaleas to Randolph Maphis.

Kelly always traveled with a shovel, and Norma did say on occasion she would pop the trunk for him. Together, they raised a son and daughter, incorporating these duties with keeping a sharp eye out for attractive native plants. In preparing his own landscape, Kelly was exceptionally particular. Often he would keep numbers of candidates in containers for several years, evaluating the potential of each before deciding on planting it in his garden. Several friends were fortunate to have numerous potential Strickland plants in their gardens for years. Unfortunately, this came with the risk that someone might admire the azaleas too much and lift a few from time to time.

Kelly was always generous enough with his plants and constantly shared. He had a small greenhouse out back where he did some propagation though Al did the primary work at his place out in the country. As Kelly’s neighborhood was on a well that had an erratic chlorine distribution at that time, he preferred to grow his plants at Al’s property.

As they collected, Al concentrated on the native species and planted a number out. Kelly selected superior forms and literally farmed them out to friends to take care of until he was ready to plant them in his own garden. They both purchased several Exbury azaleas for their pollen to make crosses and raised them at Al’s greenhouse. Kelly purchased ‘Old Gold’, ‘Ilam Persian Melon’, and ‘Seashell’ from Greer Gardens in Oregon to expand his pollen base at least temporarily. Their goals were extra large blooms of all colors and heat and humidity tolerant plants that had exceptional bloom heads.

Al grew hundreds if not thousands



Photo Joe Coleman

▲ Brooke *R. canescens* Pink

▼ Pink seedling in woods.



Photo Joe Coleman

of seedlings and was very generous in giving away those that did not meet expectations. Even today, you can see his mature gifts in nearby gardens.

When it came to seedlings, Kelly was scrupulous in his selections, out of 100, only four or five were good enough to save for further evaluation. When Al’s primary interest drifted off into orchids, even though he kept his interest in just the native species that he had planted, Kelly stayed with native azalea work and his expanded crossing work by bringing in Exbury type deciduous azaleas in bud, to bloom, and cross with select natives.

He worked primarily out of a small greenhouse at his home as well as the larger greenhouse at Al’s home in the country. An entire side of his garden was



▲ *R. austrinum* x *R. atlanticum* x *R. austrinum*

▼ *R. austrinum* 'Yellow River Alabama'



planted with the result of these first-generation crosses, and Kelly wanted to continue to make more crosses to expand the range, flower size, color, and hardiness of deciduous azaleas for the Deep South.

We know that they can travel north, but having azaleas take the Florida heat is quite an accomplishment. This work has not ended. Randolph has taken seed that Kelly gave him from some of his crosses and grown them on. These are now flowering and being selected for further development.

It must be noted that Kelly, Al, and Pete Webb selected the most superior forms that they could find. Pete Webb, a native of Quincy, Florida, knew native azaleas from his parents' garden; when he met Kelly and Al at the Florida Department of

Transportation, he quickly established a friendship that originated on the quest for yellow evergreen azaleas. All three added to the growing collection, and for periods of time, Pete played host to the growing collection, until about 30 of the plants were stolen and it was thought they might be safer out in the country with Al.

It was Pete who found a second stand of *Rhododendron alabamense* at Capitola, Florida, after Kelly had found the first stand. Pete also found other colors and some *R. canescens* hybrids. Though Pete Webb passed away in mid-September 2010, his contribution to the success in collecting should not be underestimated.

The shovel was always in their hands, and they dug the very best they could find locally. All three of them made trips together, including one all the way to northwest Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee scouting for *R. calendulaceum*, bringing some selections back for hybridizing. Kelly and Al visited nurseries from Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia in that quest. They frequented the Varnadoe Nursery early in the morning every few days in order to be the first to see new blooms and make possible selections.

Over the years, Al came to know Aaron Varnadoe well enough to be sold a number of choice natives. 'Kelly's Red Speciosum' is a seedling from two Varnadoe plants, and 'Candy Striped Speciosum' is a straight Varnadoe plant. Al always believed that the real secret to Varnadoe's success in propagating natives had a great deal to do with the purity of the well water at his home where he did his propagation work. Varnadoe could root his native azaleas in sharp sand alone, but carefully monitored his babies the entire rooting time. Varnadoe was "the Dean of Native Azaleas" according to Al.

Kelly and Al took advantage during the construction of I-10 to join the "Upsie Daisy Plant Rescue." Their work for the highway department allowed for searches that found numerous outstanding plants—a few of which they rescued from encroaching road construction. A double *R. austrinum* in the path of I-10, or the find of 'Mac-

Photo Randolph Maples

Photo Randolph Maples

Millie', the reverse of the *R. austrinum* 'Millie Mac' were the results of many such searches. Knowing of his interest, friends would remark on a find and off Kelly would go to check it out. Some discoveries were pure accident; others were carefully plotted acquisitions.

Their collecting searches were carefully researched by Kelly by reading all the relevant material he could find. They often traced the travels outlined in Henry Skinner's work. After reading earlier articles in ARS publications, they journeyed to Fort Gaines to visit the Coleman Nursery. Al can recall extensive travels across north Georgia in their searches for natives. From George and Mary Beasley at Transplant Nursery, they obtained their original plant of 'Mille Mac'. Down the interstate they purchased 'Hazel Hamilton' from Willis Harden at Homeplace Nursery in the mid-80's, a plant they later used for crossing with Varnadoe's 'Lemon Drop'. East of Athens, Georgia, was a particularly good area for collecting *R. speciosum* and its hybrids. Particularly taking the truck routes around populated areas, they could spot azaleas. Kelly's hunting and fishing instincts would come to the fore.

Once while cruising along a logging road, Kelly noticed a stand of color in the distance and set out to examine the azaleas. He got to see the azaleas, but also upset a yellow jacket nest and had to hightail it back to the car, with a few injuries inflicted. It didn't sit well with him.

Trey Mountain offered a forest service road to the top with a brilliant display of natives in mid-June. In the Madison, Georgia, area they found a "best red speciosum" and they also encountered a rather large rattlesnake in the process. The dwarf speciosums were rescued along Firetower Road, outside of Madison. They enjoyed the Hamilton Rhododendron Garden at Hiawassee and the azaleas in the Blue Ridge area. Wayah Bald was another favorite site, often collecting pollen or seed in season.

Once they started out in shirt-sleeves, but by the time they reached the top of Wayah it had started snowing and they barely got back down. In

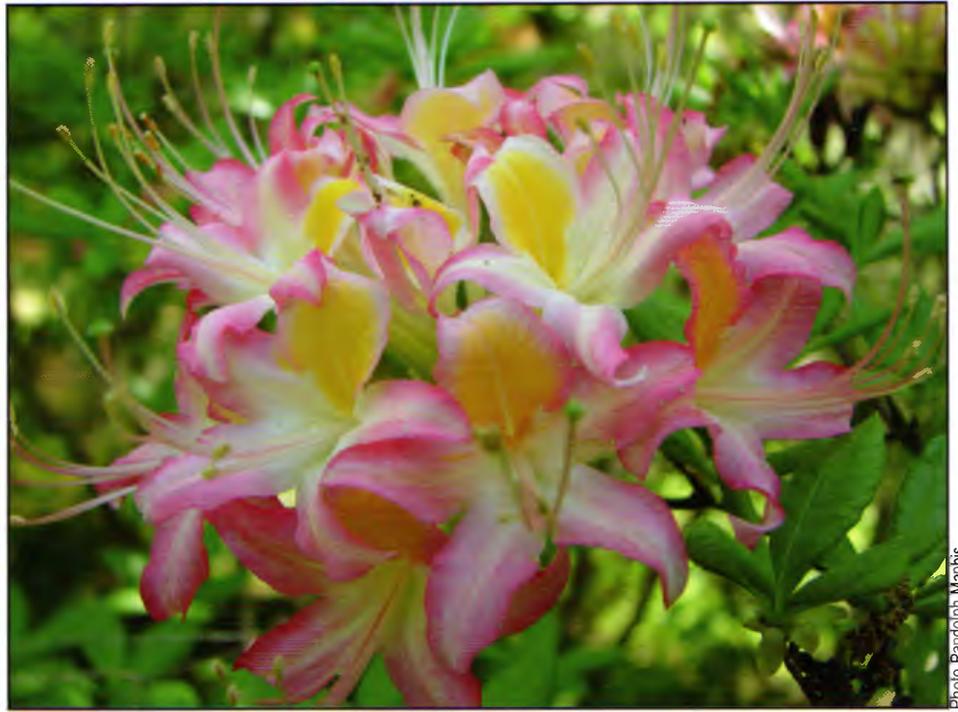


Photo Randolph Maphis

▲ Candy Stripe Speciosum

▼ Speciosum Pinkish Red



Photo Randolph Maphis

their travels near Brevard, North Carolina, they visited the Wells Nursery, which specialized in deciduous hybrids at that time, to obtain several plants for pollen usage, particularly 'Coccineum Speciosum'. South Georgia was not neglected in their travels either. Just east of Providence Canyon they discovered a nice area on Continental Paper property, with spectacular *R. prunifolium* at the bottom of a steep ravine. In Lee County, above Albany, Georgia, they discovered a yellow form of *R. canescens*. 'Varnadoes' Moonbeam', a selected form of *R. austrinum* that they used in several crosses, came from the lower Flint River. Varnadoe was also the source of 'Yellow Alabamense'.

Though *R. austrinum* has its eastern border only a few miles from Al's house,

they traveled west along I-10, finding superior forms along the way. A double form of *R. austrinum* was found near the Yellow River in Alabama. Several more superior forms came from around Faceville at Lake Seminole. At Falling Waters State Park at Chipley, Florida, the striking *R. austrinum*, 'Harrison's Red' was selected. Further along I-10 near Mobile, Alabama, they discovered a small valley with a mixture of natives which they worked over. Together, they hit nurseries all the way to Louisiana, where they found some very unique *R. speciosums* at the C&T Nursery that they brought home.

Kelly's love of wildflowers and companion plants insured that they always brought back items for his garden's natural area. Local areas were never neglected, whether it was visiting Salter's Native Plants in Madison, Florida, or the old Yort Nursery at Thomasville, Georgia. They admired a stand of *R. alabamense* and *R. austrinum* at the Chemonie Plantation, but as Al pointed out, they were asked to leave properties on several occasions and were always very discreet about collecting seed, pollen, plants or photos.

Looking back on their hybridizing efforts, Al stated that they both felt that crossing Ilam hybrids with superior native selections should yield large flowered, heat tolerant plants with rich colors with a continuing breeding program. In selecting parents, 167 N & S were thought to be outstanding and grew well in Florida's heat and humidity. Hopefully, they could work toward plants that required little or no fungicide sprays so necessary with Exbury hybrids.

In all, they found that only *R. canadense* and *R. occidentale* could not be kept alive for a while, and the parentage indicates that they were successful in spreading pollen from very diverse sources. Pete Webb had also done some hybridizing from a small greenhouse that Al had built for him. Though his interest had waned somewhat over time, Pete still has an extensive collection of species and hybrids at his home in Tallahassee.

Although Al's interest is centered on orchids today, and he has won awards for his specimens, his garden still has plants of his original section of prized natives. Indeed, it was Al's work and experimentation in propagation with seed and selection in the tough Tallahassee environment that allowed Kelly Strickland to progress into the first phase of his hybridization efforts. For 40 years these three friends collected, shared plants and ideas, developed and refined their propagation techniques. Their united search for the best in native species remained the cement that held Kelly, a hunter, fisherman, and naturalist, with Pete Webb, practically a gardener from birth, and Al Burke, a natural plantsman and superb grower, together.

When Randolph Maphis inherited the azalea collection, he was confronted with a problem in that Kelly knew his plants very well, and although he had kept good records, often naming plants after their source, there was no systematic naming of the plants. To bring a sense of order to this situation, the plants were divided by their location in relation to the house resulting in four quadrants of plants. Each section was numbered consecutively making it easier to find the

plants. Thus the 'N' plants were on the north side, 'E' plants on the east side, 'S' on the south side and the 'NE' on the northeast side of the property.

Although Kelly listed only 127 plants, a number of plants that he did not feel up to his standards are present in the garden. He thought these might be useful in hybridizing in the future. In time, even these may be included in the full listing. To prevent future confusion, Maphis also attached single numbers to the plants as they were parceled out for propagation, so that there will be only one of each number.

For future commercial reasons, names will be applied as they come on the market. The intent is to follow Kelly's original names where possible as often they record the location or source of the plant. The following represents the full listing of the Kelly Strickland collection at this time:

- R. canescens* dark pink
- R. canescens* with yellow blotches from Georgia #1
- R. canescens* with yellow blotches from Georgia #2
- I-10 *R. austrinum* salmon
- R. speciosum* good red (Varnadoe)
- R. nudiflorum* double white
- R. canescens* Gadsden County (big and ordinary)
- Yort cream *R. canescens* from Thomasville, Georgia
- Brooke (named) Northern *R. canescens*
from North Carolina
- Dark *R. canescens* Freshwater Farm
- R. speciosum* from Lee County, Georgia (great)
- R. austrinum* (very good)
- R. alabamense* x *R. canescens* Leon County
hybrid (very early)
- R. speciosum* from NeSmith Nursery (red)
- R. austrinum* light yellow with gold blotches
from Sneads, Florida
- R. austrinum* from the Yellow River (yellow
with lavender tubes)
- R. austrinum* (extra large yellow; said used to
hybridize)
- R. austrinum* Ribbon Stripe from I-10
- R. austrinum* Varnadoe's Buttercup
- R. austrinum* Varnadoe's early orange
- R. austrinum* Chipola River #1
- R. austrinum* Chipola River #2
- R. nudiflorum* x *R. calendulaceum*
- R. speciosum* dwarf orange #1
- R. speciosum* dwarf orange #2
- R. speciosum* dwarf orange #3
- R. speciosum* multicolored with yellow petioles
- R. speciosum* orange red
- Hybrid *R. arborescens* x *R. calendulaceum*
- Kelly's Double
- Seed of Hunge seedpod from Al Burke,
R. atlanticum x *R. japonicum* x *R. speciosum*
(red orange)
- R. canescens* x Exbury (pink and white)

Exbury x *R. austrinum*
R. speciosum x *R. austrinum* (VD)
R. speciosum hybrid x native (Kelly's Hybrid)
 Hybrid on Hybrid Early Red Orange
R. austrinum x Exbury (outstanding)
 Kelly's Hybrid *R. austrinum* x *R. speciosum*
 Kelly's Hybrid *R. speciosum* hybrid x native #2
 'Coccinea Speciosum' x *R. austrinum* 167- North
 Seashell (Kelly named)
R. austrinum x *R. atlanticum* x *R. austrinum*
 'Old Gold' x *R. austrinum* (pure yellow)
 'Coccinea Speciosum' hybrid x *R. austrinum* 'Persian
 Melon' (hybrid on hybrid)
R. austrinum x 'Seashell' hybrid
 'Coccinea Speciosum' x 167-North
 'Persian Melon' x *R. austrinum* 167-South
 'Old Gold' x Escapata River #1
 'Old Gold' x Escapata River #2
 'Old Gold' x Escapata River #3
 'Old Gold' x Escapata River #4
 'Old Gold' x Escapata River #5
 'Old Gold' x Escapata River #6
 'Old Gold' x Escapata River #7 (small plant)
R. speciosum hybrid (pinkish)
R. austrinum 'Old Gold' x Escapata
R. austrinum two tone yellow petioles from
 Martin Road in Gadsden County
R. austrinum I-10 redish
R. austrinum I-10 bronze
R. austrinum I-10 extra large with yellow petioles
R. austrinum I-10 small to medium (may be double)
 YP yellow petioles
R. austrinum Yellow River Alabama
 Yellow *R. alabamense* (VD)
R. speciosum Firetower from Madison, Georgia
 (WaterMelon)
 Yellow with pink petioles and stamens
R. speciosum red # 66
R. speciosum red multipetal
 Hybrid *R. austrinum* x hotspur yellow
R. canescens yellow
R. speciosum pure red #77
 Kelly's Red (He named) (The best red)
R. speciosum firetower from Madison, Georgia

Salmon *R. speciosum*
R. nudiflorum x *R. austrinum* (light)
 'Candy Stripe Speciosum'
R. austrinum x *R. calendulaceum* hybrid
R. prunifolium average
R. speciosum red #55
R. austrinum 167 - south from Hosford, Florida
 on State Road 167 South of I-10
 Escapata
R. austrinum 167 - north from Hosford, Florida
 on State Road 167 North of I-10
 Paxton Blue (*R. nudiflorum*)
R. alabamense #77
R. alabamense #2 pink
R. alabamense good white with blotch
R. alabamense small plant under #21 (has a big bloom)
R. alabamense x *R. canescens* Apple Blossom
R. alabamense pure from Capitola
R. speciosum pinkish red
R. speciosum orange red Varnadoe
R. speciosum multicolor
R. alabamense from north Georgia
R. arborescens x *R. serrulatum* (July bloom)
R. austrinum x *R. nudiflorum*
R. speciosum salmon Varnadoe
R. speciosum red good dwarf (same as the ones in
 the East Section on the fence)
R. viscosum Lemon Drop
R. prunifolium Red Petiole
R. prunifolium S. D. Coleman
R. arborescens (July Bloom)
R. prunifolium Best Red
R. prunifolium faded orange
 Plant not named could be *prunifolium*
R. prunifolium #1
 Summer Lyric
R. prunifolium #3
R. prunifolium #2
R. prunifolium bright red (pretty)
R. speciosum extra good red (almost dead)
 Mac Millie (not Millie Mac)
R. prunifolium Coral Red Kelly's Best
 Hybrid *R. speciosum* x *R. austrinum* orange yellow
R. austrinum good
R. austrinum white with pink filaments
 White from Native Nurseries - Canes x Alba?
 Unknown parentage
R. austrinum different
R. austrinum great big (use for crosses #9)

Joe Coleman served as a national Director for the ASA
 from 2005-2007.