

In Memory: Emile Antoine Deckert, 1922-2011

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In the Fall 2011 issue of the Brookside Gardens chapter news, I reported that Emile Antoine Deckert had passed away on June 23, 2011. A founding member and the first president of the ASA, Emile was considered to be the “Father of the Azalea Collection” at Brookside Gardens.

With that in mind, I asked Phil Normandy, Plant Collections Manager at Brookside Gardens, whose employment there overlapped with Emile’s from September 1979 to September 1980, to offer a few comments:

“Emile Deckert came to Brookside Gardens in the early 1970’s and immediately set himself to the task of rescuing its original azalea/rhododendron garden, which had been improperly installed between 1967 and 1969. Not only did he bring it back to life, primarily by dealing with its poor drainage, but he also began to contribute uncommon and even historic azalea cultivars propagated from his own collection. By 1975, in keeping with Brookside’s burgeoning formal garden development, Emile and his crews began clearing a wooded slope across the road from the original “Azalea Walk” (as it was called) and developing azalea beds and circulation paths. This effectively doubled the extent of Brookside’s azalea plantings to the acreage they occupy today. Again, the majority of cultivars were supplied by him and were commercially unobtainable.

“In the course of his propagation and development work at Brookside, Emile compiled an extensive photographic slide library of its azalea cultivars to be used as an identification record. This has been most useful to the proper curation of Brookside’s collections as even today no comprehensive reliable published photographic catalog of azaleas is available.

“Always restless to develop new gardens, Emile jumped at the opportunity provided by the 5-acre McCrillis Gardens property donated to Brookside Gardens in the fall of 1978. Mr. McCrillis had amassed an impressive labeled collection of azaleas, rhododendrons and rare companion trees and shrubs, but plantings were too crowded for best health and

maintenance access, and a portion of the property remained undeveloped. Over the course of the next year and a half, Emile and his crews thinned woods, laid out expansive trails to accommodate visitors and maintenance vehicles, and moved hundreds of specimen azaleas from both the property and Brookside to fill the newly-created beds. At McCrillis’ public dedication in May of 1980, Emile was formally recognized by Montgomery County’s executive for this pivotal role in transforming a private estate into the beginning of a premiere public garden. His layout remains in place to this day, and many of his identification tags can still be found throughout.

“Emile left the Parks Department in September 1980 to travel and return to private business.”

Emile was born on August 28, 1922 in Alsace, France — a region known for its vineyards, fruit orchards, and magnificent medieval villages. He was named after his uncle who had been killed in Russia on the eve of the signing of the Armistice that ended the First World War. Emile’s mother was a midwife and his father was a German trained polymologist who encouraged his interest in plants. While Emile’s grandmother wished that he become a priest and his mother wanted him to become a doctor, it wasn’t to be. Just before his 18th birthday Emile was taken to Germany by the Nazis where he worked four years in a labor camp that produced German aircraft. After doing what he could to sabotage many of the aircraft engines, he eventually escaped and joined the French Underground. Soon after the end of World War II, he realized his dream and came to America in 1947. He became a citizen ten years later and having settled in Silver Spring, Maryland, he further developed his interest in horticulture and made many contacts at the University of Maryland and the Department of Agriculture in Beltsville. At one point, he met Ben Morrison which perhaps influenced his interest in azaleas.

In the 1970s Emile dabbled in the breeder’s art and developed the (evergreen) Deckert hybrid azaleas. Galle lists only eight of the twenty-five cultivars. Descriptions and images of the Deckert azaleas can be found at: http://naturesreign.com/EAD_Azalea_Culture_Info.html or <http://tinyurl.com/7pr9tjm>

Of the Deckert azaleas that I've seen, my favorite is *Rhododendron* 'Alpenrose' (syn 'Jutta'), a 3.5 inch, single flower, pale salmon pink with a lighter center (not a well defined border); shades vary from flower to flower.

Soon after leaving Brookside Gardens in 1980, he and Jane spent 18 months in France. Upon their return, they established Azalea Hortico Gardens & Nursery on a 3.88 acre property in Hampstead, Maryland which they transformed into a show place with many azaleas, perennials, vegetables, fruit trees, maples, and dogwoods.

In 1998, having grown weary of specializing in the "high maintenance" azaleas, they changed the name of their business to "Nature's Reign" and realigned their focus to hostas, garden art, and European crystal, china, and jewelry. They transitioned out of the azalea business and started selling the most sought after Hosta cultivars including their own introductions, e.g., *Hosta* 'Templar Gold', *H.* 'Irish Moss', *H.* 'Incoming', and *H.* 'Majordomo'. Perhaps Emile's most notable introduction is *H.* 'Blue Mouse Ears' (a sport of 'Blue Cadet'). It was an odd individual that he received in an order of *H.* 'Blue Cadet' tissue culture. He planted it out and forgot about it for several years. Finding that the slugs ignored it, that it developed a mound-like growth habit, thick leaves and attractive flowers, he concluded it should be named. At a glance, he thought the newly unfurling spring leaves resembled the round ears of a little mouse, hence 'Blue Mouse Ears'. It was well received by the Hosta community. It won a blue ribbon and Best-in-Class in the Cutleaf Show at the 2001 Hosta convention. A specimen went for \$250 at the 2001 plant auction.

Emile and Jane registered 'Blue Mouse Ears' in 2002. Additional recognition came in the form of: the American Hosta Society Blue Leaf Award for 2004; the American Hosta Society Benedict Garden Performance Award Honorable Mention in 2006; the American Hosta Growers Association Hosta of the Year for 2008; and the American Hosta Society Benedict Garden Performance Award of Merit for 2008. Sadly, Emile passed away two days before he was to receive the highest recognition that the Hosta Society can bestow — the 2011 Benedict Garden Performance Medal.

I don't remember when I first met Emile, but I visited him in Hampstead on two occasions, and I got to know him through the Brookside Gardens chapter's annual azalea flower show. Emile always managed to be available when I needed judges, and the reader will forgive me when I say that good judges don't grow on trees. I suspect Emile enjoyed the collaborative and cooperative effort that inescapably involves judging azaleas. In my capacity as a flower show official, I had many

opportunities to observe the dynamics between the judges. Keeping judges focused and on track can be like herding cats. Emile had a marvelous balance of confidence and experience that smoothed the deliberative process and facilitated the judges reaching consensus. He was a good listener, he spoke softly, and he never steamrolled the other judges. At the same time, he was very generous with his knowledge, and he took the time to help the less experienced judges.

A personal note — Emile was intensely private, but he had a sense of humor. When I sent him an E-mail (December 2, 2009) inviting him to judge our chapter's 2010 azalea flower show, he promptly responded: "Hi Bill,— Well considering I just successfully underwent open heart surgery with a valve replaced, one bypass graft replaced, and an additional one added, looks like I might be alive and willing to participate as judge in May. — See you then, Emile." Without any outward manifestation of illness and lacking any hint of self pity or withdrawal, he truly had a positive perspective that I had to admire.

Emile Deckert's contributions to the development of the ASA, Brookside and McCrillis Gardens, and his beautiful azalea and hosta introductions will be living reminders of his many personal achievements.

Invitation to be Involved in Azalea Ploidy Research

Sally and John Perkins invite all of you who visit a wild collection of native azaleas this fall to send us samples.

Instructions for Fall 2012 Collection of Samples for Ploidy Testing from Wild Populations of Azaleas

Select typical plant from wild azalea population.

Collect 3 flower buds from the same plant. These 3 buds are considered a single sample.

Place each sample of 3 flower buds in its own Ziploc bag.

Label each bag with suspected species name and location of collection.

Mail bags with samples to the home address of Sally and John Perkins at your expense.

Email Sally and John Perkins at sjperk@comcast.net for more details on collection, storage, and shipment if you have an interest in collecting samples for our fall 2012 ploidy research.