

Remembering Smitty, Auburn's R. O. Smitherman

A Champion for Native Azaleas

Patrick Thompson - Auburn, Alabama

Rexford Oneal Smitherman was a Southern man raised among nature, appreciating fish and flowers. He was known to all simply as Smitty, but he was no simple man. His career took him all the way to Washington D.C., and he took his hobby of azalea breeding no less seriously. Through the help of several green thumbed colleagues he was able to grow and select some spectacular varieties from more than 100,000 azalea seedlings. They came from both wild populations and from hundreds of hand-pollinated crosses. The efforts of Smitty and the gardeners of Auburn have left an ever growing mark across the South. They grow nowhere more densely than on the campus of Auburn University and in private gardens around East Alabama. At the end of his life, Smitty was comfortable in the knowledge that his efforts would carry on through the donation he gave to Auburn University's Davis Arboretum.

Smitty discovered the wonder of native azaleas early in life. One Easter he brought his mother, Gladys, a bouquet of what they called bush honeysuckle. It was fragrant, pink, and common in the woods of Bibb County Alabama where he grew up. The tradition of the Easter bouquet blossomed into a love for the deciduous azaleas that can scarcely be measured. Smitty went on to have a successful career in fisheries after he graduated from Alabama Polytechnic Institute, now known as Auburn University. His work in aquaculture and genetics led to advancements that helped bring catfish and tilapia to tables around the world. As a fisheries professor, Smitty spent time cruising the waterways of Alabama. On these trips he observed the beauty and diversity offered by the native azaleas.



▲ Smitty looking for *R. maximum* at Desoto Falls in North Alabama

Photo: Patrick Thompson

As a biologist, he enjoyed learning the azalea species. While it can be a challenge to find definitive characteristics on the 15 native azaleas, you could imagine that it would be a pleasant distraction compared to sampling fish populations in a state with 150 species of darters and minnows smaller than a finger. It was what he thought must have been hybrid azaleas that left him scratching his head. He was able to sort out some of the phenotypic plasticity when *Rhododendron colemani* was formally described 30 years after he first saw the plants in South Alabama. Efforts to understand azalea hybrids and speciation through controlled breeding trials left him with more questions than he had when he began. It has left the Arboretum with many of the same questions, but also the plants that comprise an incomparable asset for future inquisition into those topics.

After retirement, he grew into an intense hobby gardener as you can imagine. On more than a few occasions he drove over five hundred miles to accept a donated Alabama azalea and deliver it to the Arboretum. His understanding of genetics and experiences with wild azalea populations across the state instilled in him an appreciation for the existing forms and potential for

improved varieties. He collected and propagated deciduous azaleas from anywhere he could, and many of his favorite plants moved with him over the years. It was through the efforts of his fellow gardeners that his dreams of azalea proliferation were brought fully into bloom.

A Team Effort

Smitty's love of azaleas was infectious. While he did inspire plenty of folks to give a deciduous azalea a try in their gardens, he had also found other faculty at the university that shared his passion for azaleas. Quite a few folks around Auburn already had really fine azaleas established in their gardens. There were two in particular who had the space, dedication, and the green thumbs to help him begin a truly ambitious breeding program. Tom Corley and Dennis Rouse spent countless hours alongside Smitty, and on their own, tending tens of thousands of individual azaleas. Many of these now populate public and private gardens in the region. Though these three were the heavy hands in this breeding program, they shared both the work and the benefits with other gardeners. Too many people were involved to list them here, but a great deal of knowledge of these efforts and plant material resides within the Auburn family. To this day, Tom Corley nurtures young plants that have amazing floral character.

▼Heat tolerant, complex hybrid *Rhododendron prunifolium* x *R. 'Gibraltar'*

Breeding

These three gardeners set out to stir the gene pools of the deciduous azaleas in an attempt to create beautiful plants that would grow in the hot humid and occasionally punishingly dry conditions of central Alabama. Auburn is a college town with no shortage of team spirit. The team colors are orange and

blue. Both colors are in short supply in the Southern garden, but among the native azaleas, they saw the potential to provide both the heat tolerance and orange hues that could inspire local gardeners. They may have been local pioneers, but their goal was accomplished through techniques that have been practiced by generations of azalea breeders.

Smitty began growing azaleas from seeds in the late nineteen seventies. In 1984, he began keeping records of which plants he hybridized, and/or from which collected seed. In the winter of 1984 and 1985 with the help of his garden partners, approximately 6500 seeds were sown. These seeds resulted from 78 hand-pollinated crosses and collections from five wild populations. There were several more equally ambitious years scattered through the next couple of decades resulting in about a thousand recorded seed lots.

The simplest form of selection results from crossing superior specimens within a species to each other. *R. flammeum* offered endless fascination as they worked down a few of the possible selection paths for the Oconee azalea, resulting in impressive selections in red, purple, multicolor, and even chromatic shades. They also separate the Oconees into early and late blooming forms. The scope of possibilities widens once you begin hybridizing two species together. For example:



Photo: Patrick Thompson

a tall red summer bloomer: *R. prunifolium* was bred with a white stoloniferous spring bloomer *R. atlanticum*. This was followed by the reciprocal cross: *R. atlanticum* x *R. prunifolium*. The potential to see new forms increases when you have hybrids that can then be hybridized resulting in an F2 generation of plants with four parent species. Another technique is the use of existing cultivars. *R. 'Gibraltar'* and *R. 'Klondyke'* were two of Smitty's favorites.

One of Smitty's initial inspirations for hand pollinating azaleas was to recreate naturally occurring hybrid possibilities in an attempt to help verify his suspicions about the likely parentage of wild plants that defied the plant keys and field guides available at the time. With wild azaleas blooming through the entire growing season, there was no shortage of curious hybrids to investigate. Though some helpful observations were made, the potential understanding offered by these hybrids is still developing as new laboratory techniques continue to shed light on our azaleas' genes.

Selections

The task of growing thousands of seedlings up to flowering size was spread over multiple gardens. Even with the most promising plants pushing past the competition, thousands of plants had to be culled. These were shared with friends, neighbors, and the compost pile. Even these less desirable plants made a splash in this small agricultural town. Since the project was working

▼ *Rhododendron colemanii* x *R. 'Klondyke'*



Photo: Patrick Thompson

towards multiple goals, no one expected a single plant to meet all the expectations of the project. Instead, a group of plants was being developed that would offer a full bloom calendar rich in color, growth forms, and fragrance.

Superior plants emerged and Smitty left a list of what he thought were the best twenty-seven crosses from the first twenty years. Two cultivars have been registered with the Royal Horticultural Society. *R. 'Patsy's Pink'* is named after his wife, and it is a hybrid whose mother was a white form of *R. colemanii*, and the pollen was provided by *R. 'Gibraltar'*. The other variety he registered was *R. 'Corley's Cardinal'* which was a cross combining two fine specimens of *R. calendulaceum* from Georgia. Smitty named several other varieties from the breeding program that he hoped would get registered or at least make it into production one day.

Spreading the Word

As awareness and interest grew in the community, a formal organization grew too. Corley, Rouse, Smitherman, Caroline Dean, and others formed the Chattahoochee Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society (ARS). By this time Smitty was producing the F2 generation of hybrids. Having told most of the interested parties in Auburn about the wonderful native azaleas, he began speaking at regional garden clubs. He started a small business called the AzaleaSmith. He would show up with a truckload of plants to sell after

▼ *Rhododendron 'Patsy's Pink'*

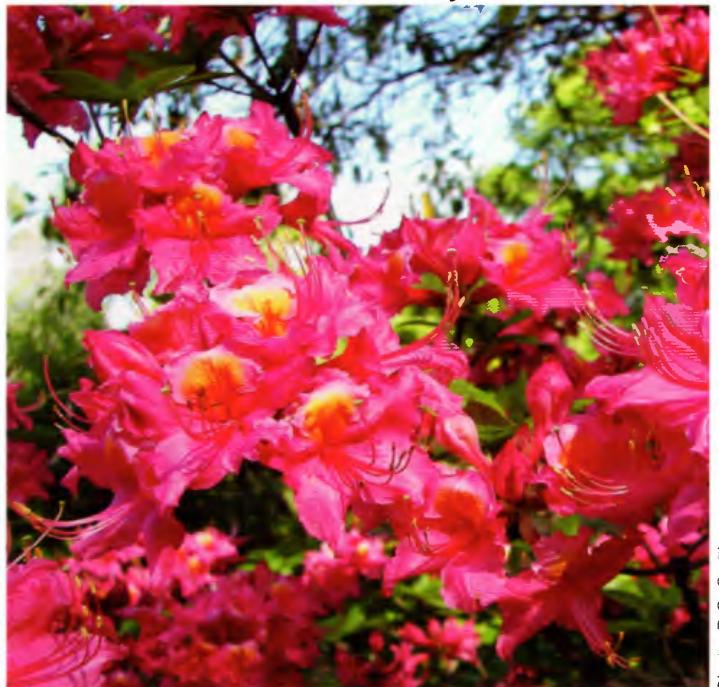


Photo: R.O. Smitherman

he had shown them colorful slides and informed them on his preferred garden techniques.

A renewed period of propagation ensued, and during the mid to late 1990's the azalea gardeners gave back to the community. They began donating azaleas to the city of Auburn, and Auburn University. The largest installation consisted of a hundred azaleas planted at the Bent Creek exit on Interstate 85. They were *R. austrinum* 'Escatawpa' and *R. canescens* 'Varnadoe's Pink' that had been rooted and grown in Rouse's backyard greenhouse. When the exit was expanded in 2005 the city dug the large azaleas with a backhoe and many were gifted to the Arboretum.

Smitty worked with Auburn University's landscape facilities to incorporate impressive plantings of his azaleas in iconic locations around campus, including the president's house, the Memory Garden, and Samford Park. Samford Park is the University's property that stretches from the notorious oaks at Toomer's Corner to the iconic clock tower at Samford Hall. Towards the end of this period, Smitty had to shift his focus to his parent's failing health. The Rhododendron Society chapter had several dedicated members, and I even received my first rhododendron in a raffle at one of their meetings. Around 2004, the ARS chapter became too small to maintain activity and dissolved.

Joining the Arboretum Team

We met Smitty in 2007 when he came to the Arboretum office to ask if we needed any azaleas. The Arboretum's collection focus is Alabama's native woody plants, so I showed him what we had and we discussed what the collection needed. We explained that wild collected specimens of documented origin were what we were interested in. It was agreed that *R. alabamense*, the Alabama azalea, would be

the species of focus.

Over the three years that followed, Smitty donated about 400 azaleas and rhododendrons of wild origin. He worked tirelessly to acquire permissions to collect specimens and seeds from landowners across the South. He arranged the rescue of large groups of plants in the way of development and destructive management practices. We even visited his former residences asking to dig decades old plants that Smitty had left when he'd moved years before. He tracked the Alabama azalea wherever it grew, visiting plants he'd met over 40 years of azalea treks, following old herbarium vouchers, and tapping his former students for help in his quest. Arboretum staff joined him on several excursions. When he caught a whiff of a fragrant azalea, he became fantastically animated. First a wide smile would split his face, then his eyes would grow wide, and he would tap his nose nodding his head in approval. Then he would tromp off through the brush bloodhound style, sniffing the air aggressively till we found the plants he loved.

Some days, looking for azaleas did not end with smiles. One trip found that more than half of the locations that once had historical occurrences of *R. alabamense*, the plants just weren't there. Timberland had crept over the ridges, roads had been expanded, or houses sat where the azaleas once were. He was revitalized by the

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▼ How Smitty usually arrived at the Arboretum



Photo: Patrick Thompson

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national ASA convention in 2008. Shortly thereafter, he wrote an article for *The Azalean* titled “The Star That Fell on Alabama.” Smitty did an impressive amount of networking trying to gather enough specimens of the Alabama azalea to preserve a significant representation of the genes present across the range of the species. As he traveled, he began the discussion about revitalizing the Alabamense Chapter of the ASA. He even began an initiative to change Alabama’s state flower from the exotic *Camellia japonica* to the azalea that shares our state’s name.

Smitty was a huge Auburn fan, and he believed the Arboretum’s message of understanding and appreciation could improve the character of not only the campus and town, but even its graduates and residents. In the years he worked with us, it became apparent to him that the Arboretum would be able to meet its potential sooner if it were less dependent on money from grants and the University. So he decided to donate as much of his azalea collection as we could host. Though these were not exactly native plants, they certainly could not claim a native range anywhere besides Auburn. The breeding program he had spent more than half his life on could finally have a permanent home at his alma mater. He gave his favorite cultivars names like ‘War Eagle’, ‘Aubie’, and ‘Plainsman’—names that have inspired Auburn fans for generations. In 2010, Smitty and I made over 100 hybridizations using much of the wild collected material and selections from the F2 hybrids he made in the 1990’s. Some of this F3 generation will flower for the first time this spring.

Smitty donated hundreds of hours of effort, thousands of miles of travel, and a lifetime of experience to the Arboretum’s azalea collection. Just three days before he passed away on April 14, 2011, Smitty gave us his precious breeding records, his library of azalea

reference materials, and specific instructions about which plants in his personal garden would most benefit the Arboretum’s azalea display. The following winter we returned to his home for his final donations, in the end totaling over 1,000 azaleas, none of which were unimportant to him. The most lasting part of his gift will hopefully be the tradition of selecting superlative plants to share with gardeners. If the Arboretum can make the most of these gifts, even those who aren’t gardeners or azalea enthusiasts will appreciate these wonders of nature, and perhaps instead of stopping to smell the roses, people will more often stop to smell the azaleas.



▲ *Rhododendron 'War Eagle'*

Photo: Patrick Thompson

Patrick Thompson is a naturalist employed at Auburn University’s Davis Arboretum since 2001. He wears many hats including certified arborist, conservation horticulturalist, photographer, and stone mason. The conservation work has been accomplished through five years of efforts with the Alabama Plant Conservation Alliance. He is the current president of the Alabamense Chapter of the Azalea Society of America.