

The Cosby Garden

Richard Bauer, Yorktown, Virginia

Twenty-two miles to the northwest of Richmond, Virginia, is a beautiful, private garden on 79 acres of rolling countryside in Rockville, Virginia. This idyllic property is the home of **Elizabeth, Madeline, and Roy Cosby**, and it is where they created their beautiful azalea garden.

These siblings grew up in a family of eleven children in eastern Henrico County, near Richmond. They had an early interest in azaleas; the first azaleas were planted at this family home.

At that time it was difficult to find unusual cultivars as there were few commercial listings of azalea varieties. They also found it difficult to find and purchase Japanese varieties after WWII.

In 1958, Elizabeth and Madeline purchased a home near Oxford. They began their garden with transplants from the family home in Henrico County, to which they added a number of different cultivars, primarily *Kurume*, *kaempferi* and *poukhanense*. In the late 70's, after having exhausted space on the available land at their home in Oxford, VA, Elizabeth and Madeline were anxious to expand their small collection.

In 1980, they wanted to move to a more tranquil environment which would provide a better home and more land for their plant collections. Joined by their brothers Andrew and Roy, they purchased 59 acres in Hanover County, Virginia, and completed their beautiful



home in 1983. They also developed and expanded their garden. Many of the initial plantings were the azaleas moved from their home of birth and their home in Oxford, where they had resided for twenty-five years. They experimented with different ways of preparing plant beds and found that transplanted azaleas thrived in raised beds prepared with peat moss and deteriorated

oak leaves. An additional purchase in 1984 added 20 more acres to this property. Their younger brother Algar joined them later, after the death of his wife.

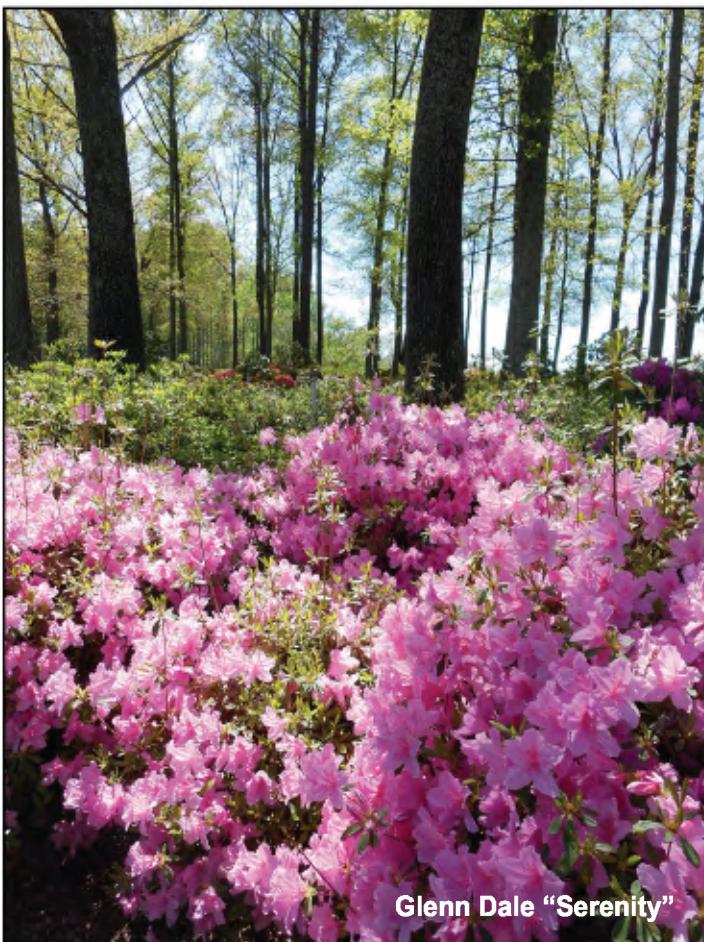
Somewhere around 1983, their brother Roy, a Catholic priest started St. Patrick's Parish in Chancellorsville, Virginia. Two of his parishioners were Don and Alvera Hager, who were operating Hager Nurseries, Inc., an azalea propagating company. The Hagers increased Roy's interest in azaleas and donated many plants to the church landscaping. Later, Roy started St.

Matthew's Parish in Spotsylvania Courthouse, which was closer to the Hager's nursery. So they once again became members of his parish and once again donated azaleas to plant around the church.

By this time, Roy was spending his vacation time with Elizabeth and Madeline at their home and improvising irrigation for the first raised beds of azaleas. Don Hager shared his experience with the use of spinners for sprinkling and propagation of azaleas



by cuttings. Fortunately, when the Cosby home was built in 1983, a 12' x 24' greenhouse was attached to the house by a walk-in lower level. This began years of shared cuttings from Don Hager's vast collection of 3,000 different cultivars. The Cosbys wanted to ensure that in their garden, Glenn Dales especially would be available for the next generation to enjoy, as well as other hybrids that would not be available commercially. They planted a number of varieties from early bloomers such as Glenn Dale 'Serenity' to late bloomers such as the Satsukis. This provided them with an extended period of beautiful blooms in their garden. They originally started propagating ten of each cultivar and planted them in groups of ten. As beds were completed, they began new beds, growing the garden to its current size of 11 acres.



Glenn Dale "Serenity"

Sadly (according to the Cosbys) when Don Hager retired, the Cosbys, after years of propagating, had collected only about 1,600 different varieties of azaleas in 90 raised beds.

Elizabeth and Madeline Cosby retired in 1998 after 45 years running Lighting and Supply Company, Inc., which Elizabeth founded, and Madeline helped grow

into a successful business. This gave them more time to spend on their azalea gardens.

In 1999, they began a collection of rhododendrons, mainly from rooted cuttings purchased from Van Veen Nursery in Portland, Oregon, and other nurseries. These rooted cuttings were planted in the center of the azaleas beds, requiring meticulous care prodding them on to survival. The rhododendrons are now large and showy.



North Virginia ASA members touring the Cosby Garden

By the time 2009 came around, they began to develop trails in the woody section of the property on land used by Thomas Jefferson and George Washington as a road to Charlottesville, Virginia. Remnants of the old road can still be found on parts of this land. Along these trails, they planted native azaleas. Visitors are often treated to a tour by golf cart through the gardens, including the wooded trails. The members of the Northern Virginia Chapter of the ASA have enjoyed the garden during the blooming season.

The Cosbys have done an excellent job of cataloging the cultivars in their collection. While they don't have an accurate count of the total plants, they estimate the number to be over 10,000. These include over 1,800 different varieties of hybrid azaleas, 50 different native azaleas and over 300 types of rhododendron.

Roy Cosby received his degree in Electrical Engineering from Virginia Tech in 1944 (among several degrees he has earned). He used his engineering skills to implement many creative features on the property, including the irrigation system, system for opening and closing the main gate, and an open geothermal system for heating and cooling the home.

In 2013, in support of the Legacy Project, the Cosbys created five new beds dedicated to the cultivars of hybridizers, many of whom are/were members of the



ASA and the Northern Virginia Chapter in particular. In developing these beds, the Cosbys deviated from their previous practice of planting 10 of each variety to increase the number of different varieties in the beds. They currently host McDonald, Holly Springs, Stewart, Bowie Mill, Klimavicz, Marshy Point, Harris and Aromi azaleas and continue to add plants to their collections.

Elizabeth, Roy and Madeline **Cosby** have no children to inherit the property and no family members interested in maintaining it. They have ensured that their beautiful property will be maintained and available to the public in the future by donating it to the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden. It will be known as the Lewis Ginter Nature Reserve. ASA members will also have the opportunity to visit this beautiful garden during a 2016 ASA/ARS Convention optional tour.

Richard (Rick) Bauer is retired from the US Army and private industry and has been a member of the ASA since 2002. He is an ASA Director and President of the Northern Virginia Chapter. He and his wife **Susan** live in Yorktown, Virginia where they are expanding their azalea gardens with emphasis on Legacy hybrids (<http://www.nv-asa.org/legacies>).



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