

Newest Azalea City—Brookings, OR

By Teri Davis—Brookings, Oregon

[Brookings, with its 77-year history of celebrating azaleas, received its ASA Azalea City designation February 2017, Ed.]

Around 1943, State Park Historian W.A. Langille wrote of Brookings Oregon's Azalea State Park that "No one traveling this portion of the Oregon Coast highway in flower season, should miss the opportunity for a short diversion into this Azalea Park for a glimpse of its floral splendor. The flowers are well worth [your] while and the peaceful restfulness of the surroundings is an added inducement to tarry in the presence of their sweet scented loveliness."

Be that as it may, Azalea State Park actually got off to a rocky start in 1937 when local chamber of commerce president W.L. Crissy initiated correspondence trying to pique the interest of state officials in Salem to designate the area as a state park. The reception to the idea was lukewarm at best. But Crissy, refusing to be outdone, sought the support of the Portland Garden Club. Through a series of visits to the area, he garnered the backing of garden club member Mrs. Henry Cabell, whose husband, fortuitously, was the chairman of the State Highway Commission. With his support, and because of an impassioned speech given by Mrs. Cabell, the motion to develop the state park carried.

By the time Langille penned his report, he was able to declare that Azalea Park in the middle of May had "...been pronounced by competent authorities to be the handsomest and most impressive showing of native azaleas anywhere within the whole United States." Much the same can be said about the park in these modern times.

However, that wasn't always the case. In the years between Langille's report in 1943 until the State of Oregon conveyed it to the City of Brookings in 1992, the park and its riotously colorful indigenous inhabitants had been mostly neglected. It had, in fact, reverted to its "natural" overgrown state. It was this hefty burden of maintenance that prompted the state to transfer ownership to the city.

After the park was turned over to the city, a group of dedicated citizens, mostly seniors, began clearing away the years of accumulated debris, freeing the native azaleas from the stranglehold of berry vines and invasive brush. The trees and shrubs were pruned and the ancient native azaleas were freed from the smothering undergrowth.

From this grassroots effort, in November of 1994, came the idea of forming the Azalea Park Foundation in order to raise the funds necessary to create a three-acre garden at the western corner of the park for the benefit of the community and all the many visitors to the area. The effort was led by Academy Award winning filmmaker Elmo Williams, his wife Lorraine, and an assembly of volunteers. In 2008, Williams funded construction of the "Capella by the Sea" at Azalea Park, which has become a popular respite for park visitors.

Since the founding of the Azalea Park Foundation, a vast array of plantings and improvements have been done



Photo Dennis Triglia

▲ *R. occidentale* in full bloom in Azalea Park, taken May 2017 by new ASA member, Brookings City Councilor Dennis Triglia.

▼ This very fragrant, colorful deciduous azalea ('August Sunrise' x a large double *R. occidentale*) bloomed the last week of July 2017, in Sherwood, OR.



Photo Dick Cavender

inside the garden, including the mounting of a monument memorializing the World War II bombing in Brookings executed by Japanese pilot Nobuo Fujita. The bombing was the only time in history that bombs were dropped on the American mainland.

With its medley of enhancements, Azalea Garden serves as a gateway to the park and to the city as well. Brookings Azalea Park, with its enchanting bedlam of color, is the catalyst that drives all-things-azalea within the most-recently recognized ASA Azalea City in the US.

Brookings Oregon is an incorporated city on the southernmost coast of the state with a population of about 6,550 people, but boasts a population of azaleas that is estimated to be almost a third of that. In fact, Azalea Park and sister park, Stout Park, have nearly 1,000 azaleas alone.

"They're everywhere," said Brookings City Manager

Gary Milliman with a laugh. "Including all over my front yard."

The Brookings azaleas include a species known as *Rhododendron occidentale*, which is the only variety native to the Pacific coast. According to Langille's report, some authorities assert that these native azaleas have "... weathered sun and storm for at least one hundred fifty years. Others [assert] they have attained to even four hundred years of continuous life." In either case, it is firmly agreed that "not a single azalea in the park has been planted by man. Every plant is just as it occurred in nature," according to a July 1960 report by E.P. Breakey.¹

The City of Brookings likes to garnish the story with another tidbit which contends the azaleas have been around since Lewis and Clark wintered in Oregon in 1805-06. City officials won't be so bold as to suggest Lewis and Clark actually walked through the park however.

Other endeavors to celebrate the vibrant, sweet scented azaleas include an annual Azalea Festival each Memorial Day weekend. This three-day event, now in its 77th year, features a parade, the crowning of the Azalea Festival Queen and Court, musical entertainment, and a variety of other activities. Besides Azalea Park, the azalea is also lauded in the City of Brookings through monikers such as Azalea Middle School and Azalea Gardens Senior Living.²

In an effort to encourage even more azalea excitement, City of Brookings City Council recently passed a measure to offer funding assistance to businesses in town which opt to include azaleas in their landscaping. The resolution further

establishes a policy in the city to use azaleas in all its landscaping.

The City of Brookings invites azalea enthusiasts to visit at the height of the blooming season in May, but points out that with its mild climate, a visit to Brookings is a savory delight year-round.

► Closeup of *R. occidentale* in Azalea Park showing the species' tendency for variation in color.



Photo Dennis Triglia

References and Notes

1 Breakey, E. P., "Notes on Our Western Azalea *Rhododendron occidentale*." *Journal American Rhododendron Society*. July 1960. 14(3): 1-8.

2 For much more information, visit the city website: www.brookings.or.us/

Teri Davis has been the City Recorder for the City of Brookings since March 2016. One of her many passions is promoting tourism in the city.

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