Robbinsville, North Carolina, Named Azalea City

By Charlie Andrews—Cumming, Georgia

Robbinsville, North Carolina, is the newest ASA Azalea City, recognized for efforts promoting native azaleas. The Graham County Native Azalea Festival was held in Robbinsville, North Carolina, June 15-16, 2018. The Native Azalea Festival in Robbinsville should be the first of many. The festival is based upon our native azaleas. Graham County and its county seat, Robbinsville, are surrounded by locations for observing these plants. Nearby are not only Hooper Bald but also the Blue Ridge Parkway, Wayah and Wine Spring Balds, Gregory Bald, Andrews Bald, and the Roan Highlands. Robbinsville is promoting native azaleas, encouraging people to see them in their native habitats, as well as encouraging government entities, businesses, and residences to use native azaleas in their landscaping. For their efforts, President Rick Bauer on behalf of the Azalea Society of America recognized and certified Robbinsville with the prestigious designation of Azalea City on June 15, 2018. Mayor Steve Hooper and County Board Members Connie Orr and Dale Wiggins received the award. [Photo 1]

Hooper Bald, high on top of the Cherohala Skyway, was the center of attraction on Friday, June 15, and both the weather and the flame azalea performed to perfection. Early morning clouds and fog gave way to bright blue skies. The magnificent flame azalea (Rhododendron calendulaceum) was at peak bloom. Hooper Bald is special because the azaleas here have very large flowers and come in a wide variety of colors. Volunteers improved the quarter-mile path to the bald and made it easy to wander through paths to see the many plants. Guides led groups of visitors around the bald to see the special plants. First-time visitors left astonished at the raw beauty.

Organizers held a reception Friday evening at the Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center, a former school built out of native rock in 1926. After hors d’oeuvres so plentiful that the delicious morsels served as dinner and dessert, provided by
Community food establishments and local cooks, all moved to the auditorium for presentations. ASA President Rick Bauer presented three ASA Distinguished Service Awards. The first was to Jim Brant, recognizing his efforts over a 10-year period to restore Hooper Bald. Jim also opened his garden for the 2016 Williamsburg convention. George McLellan also received an award primarily for his work on Hooper Bald. He was also a key member of the 2016 convention planning committee. Finally, former ASA President J Jackson and his wife Lindy Johnson, chair of the seed exchange and a former director, received an award for their service to the society and the board and for contributing hundreds of plants for the restoration of Hooper Bald. [Photo 2.] All of the work on Hooper Bald was the impetus for Graham County holding their first Native Azalea Festival. Also key to this effort was the work done by Revonda Williams from the Graham County Travel and Tourism Board, who has supported and helped coordinate the local native azalea effort from the initiation of the Hooper Bald restoration effort 10 years ago to the present. Revonda has a personal interest in Hooper Bald since it was once owned by her ancestors. [Photo 3.]

The reception concluded with a slide presentation, “Graham County Azalea Festival” by Don Hyatt. This presentation, told in Don’s typical clear but humorous style, was prepared by Don and George McLellan. [Photo 4.] It told the story of the restoration efforts, initiated by Jim Brant and supported by Duke Rankin of the National Park Service and many volunteers, to save and protect Hooper Bald’s and Gregory Bald’s azaleas.¹

Robbinsville held festival activities on Saturday, June 16, around the courthouse square. Many vendors and organizations participated, offering crafts, antiques, local history, plants, foods, children’s activities, and music. Azaleas were in high demand and sold out early. Flavored shaved ice was also a best seller as the temperature soared into the 90’s.

ASA members provided azaleas, information, and recruited new members at a festival booth. [Photo 5.] Supporting were Rick and Susan Bauer, J Jackson and Lindy Johnson, Jim and Pam Brant, Don Hyatt, George McLellan, Jan and Joe Nicholson, Buddy and Dixie Lee, Joe Miller and friend Halit Kardak, and Charlie Andrews. Thanks also go to Daniel Allison from the Graham County Travel and Tourism Office for his work in coordinating and supporting the ASA participation in the festival.

References


Charlie Andrews is ASA Vice President.