

Mary Henry (1884-1967) was a self-taught field botanist at a time when such exploits by a woman were extraordinary. She explored the deciduous azalea zone of the American Southeast many times, and amassed an amazing plant collection in Gladwyne, Pa. The 8,572-foot Mount Mary Henry in British Columbia was named after her in 1931.

Following are excerpts from her 1962 handwritten material for the book she intended to publish under the title *The Story of My Garden*. Ms. Treadway is preparing the full Henry manuscript for publication. This installment focuses on Mrs. Henry's 1930s quest for *Rhododendron flammeum* (then known as *R. speciosum*). These excerpts preserve Mrs. Henry's voice, knowledge, disdain for commas, and love of ampersands.

By Mary Gibson Henry

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Rhododendron speciosum

*Rhododendron speciosum*¹ will always hold a very warm place in my affections, for it is the first Azalea that I collected and for which a special journey was made. The vivid description of *R. speciosum* in William Bartram's famous "Travels"² was what gave me the incentive to look for it.

After failing in all my attempts to obtain this Azalea over a period of years by the ordinary methods of correspondence with the botanical gardens, arboretums, nurseries & specialists, both in this country & in Europe, & failing completely in every effort, it seemed to me that if I wanted *R. speciosum* & I did, it would be necessary to go to its native home and collect it myself.

Dr. Rehder³ told me there were none in cultivation in this country. From the other side of the Atlantic I was told that at one time it was in Europe where it had been sent by Bartram, but after utilizing it for hybridization, plants belonging to the original species had been lost.

The popular Ghent and Mollis hybrid Azaleas derived their handsome color from *R. speciosum*. Yes, they derived the color but the grace of growth of its flower laden branches with the lovely & picturesque tiered effect so characteristic of *R. speciosum* when it grows with its own wild sweet will in its native lair, still belongs to *R. speciosum* alone. The large flowered hybrids have none of it. It takes the myriads of small flowers growing so closely they form solid or flattened tiers of color, rising sometimes to 6 or 8 feet, arrayed gloriously in all the vivid colors.



Photo: Donald Hyatt

***R. flammeum*, garden of Sandra McDonald,
Hampton, Va.**

¹ Now classified as *Rhododendron flammeum*.

² *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country ...*, 1791, William Bartram (1739-1823), son of John Bartram.

³ Alfred Rehder (1863-1949), taxonomist and dendrologist, Arnold Arboretum.



Photo: Donald Hyatt

***R. flammeum* 'Hazel Hamilton', Polly Hill Arboretum, Martha's Vineyard**

Armed with all the information I could gather on the subject which was very little, I started south to try to cover a bit of the Bartram trail. The places that William Bartram had found it had been burned over or civilization's hideous improvements had completely obliterated all signs of the red Azalea.

I appealed to P. J. A. Berckman in Augusta, Ga, well known nurseryman & a friend of C. S. Sargent.⁴ Mr. Berckman knew the country well & said he would help me but he did not know where *R. speciosum* grew. I landed in Augusta. Mr. Berckman who followed in his distinguished father's footsteps in the plant world obtained for me knowledge of the whereabouts of a native red Azalea. Botanists need no introductions, even amateur ones like myself quickly learn the power of a common interest. After just about 3 minutes of conversation we started out in search of *R. speciosum*.

We covered miles of back roads but alas it was all too rare. The devastation that the people of Georgia have wrought by destroying their beautiful native plants is appalling. They have burned them up, they have ploughed them up & they have drowned them. The result is that some of their finest & rarest specimens of native trees, shrubs & flowers have

vanished. They are gone forever for they can never return.

After seeing *R. speciosum* in its own home range I was completely aware of the fact that here again was one of the very finest & most decorative of all our native Azaleas. It undoubtedly stands very close to the top of the list.

R. speciosum is only one of the many magnificent native plants that has been completely wiped out over most of its range. After a lengthy search we found a locality where it still existed on a dry hillside. Tall pines grew high overhead. There were few remaining specimens for all about in every direction were dozens of holes. Evidently this place has been found by a vandal, not too long before my visit.

The flowers on all the Azaleas here were a flaming orange, differing little in color. There was not a single plant that had real red or even light scarlet flowers.

It was indeed a privilege to see these gorgeous Azaleas. The tallest ones reached 6 ft in height but most of them ranged about 3 or 4 ft in height.

I selected a few suckers with roots attached & Ernest dug with care. They traveled home on the "running board" of my car, for in those days we had "running boards". Nowadays probably most of those who read this will not know what a running board is, for modern cars do not have them.

It often takes an Azalea about 3 years from a sucker to obtain blooming size. After a winter in the cold frame the Azaleas, as usual, spent two seasons in my small, fenced-in Trial Garden in a special sand & peat soil mixture. After that they were planted out in our native soil where they

⁴ Charles Sprague Sargent (1841-1927), founding director of Arnold Arboretum.

had to shift for themselves. However until they are tall enough to escape rabbit damage, a wire fence is placed around them during the winter season when rabbits are especially voracious. Rabbits must be classed as pretty but obnoxious pests. If the rabbits really required the Azaleas for food, one would not mind so much, but it is truly maddening to find the bloom buds of a choice Azalea bitten off for fun as so often happens & then left lying on the ground.

These specimens of *R. speciosum* from Southern Ga. have not proved to be very hardy in Pennsylvania. Of the 3 original plants only 1 remains [in 1962].⁵ Partly the fault was mine for planting them on such a dry bank & where they were fully exposed to winter's bitterest winds. They should have been planted in a more congenial situation, where they could have had some shelter by evergreens from north winds.

Years later ... I came across some of these Azaleas in central Ga. These were even better because the flowers came in richer shades of medium red. These too probably because they were in somewhat richer soil, were taller, up to 7 & 8 ft. These Azaleas are hardier & are thoroughly satisfactory in every way, even in sub-zero temperatures.

After that I again found *R. speciosum* in N. Ga and these specimens left nothing to be desired as far as color was concerned. Red as blood, describes the color, but mere words on paper are totally inadequate to describe *R. speciosum* when covered with its enveloping mantle of blood red flowers. As leaves do not appear on a mature specimen until after the flowers expand, they have only their twigs to hide to make a picture that is ultra lovely.

Georgia was building one of its superhighways & that destroyed most of these marvelous Azaleas. The few plants I have were cut over ones before the highway was built.

R. speciosum is one of the most floriferous of all native Azaleas that I have ever seen and I have seen all the sp. in their own home & in my home, too, even *Rhodo. albiflorum*.⁶ Yearly they make a display that for profusion of bloom perhaps excels that of any other Azalea.

R. speciosum is an early flowering Azalea. It blooms simultaneously with *R. nudiflorum*⁷ & *R. alabamense*.

R. speciosum is a rather slow grower. The tallest of those which I collected in 1939 are only about 6 ft. high after 23 years. They are growing on the W. edge of the woods, in rich soil with moisture nearby. Some of the other ones, as old or even older, are less than 3 ft in height.

Rhododendron speciosum hybrids

One day when in Ga & still on the track for *R. speciosum*, I stopped at a small town hotel. It was late & I needed a room for the night. There, right on the desk, was a bunch of beautiful orange colored Azaleas. The manager did not know where they came from but he said "a lady who roamed the woods", Mrs. Mildred Huie, might know.

I promptly phoned Mrs. Huie & just as promptly had a new friend. Yes, she knew where the orange Azaleas were & would go out with me the next morning at 9. Excitement & noise in the street awakened me before dawn. No more sleep so I attended to my daily dozen & took a stone cold bath as was my custom. I had time to explore the country in my car before the appointed

⁵ Mrs. Henry installed many plants collected from her explorations in her Gladwyne garden. As of 2023, a number survive, but definitive identifications are few due to the loss or deterioration of tags over many decades.

⁶ *R. albiflorum* is a rare, small-flowered deciduous species of the Pacific Northwest mountains. It is rarely cultivated and is significantly more successful above 4,000 feet. It is all but ungrowable in eastern North America.

⁷ Now classified as *R. periclymenoides*.

9 o'clock with Mrs. Huie. She was deeply interested in native plants. She said there were both yellow & red ones in the woods not far off.

In less than an hour we slowed down for we could see flaming spots of red & orange ahead & on both sides of the highway. My fears were well founded & shocking to say, huge bushes of red and yellow Azaleas devoid of soil & almost rootless were being peddled along the highway. Worse yet, there were many bushes, torn up ruthlessly that were cast aside in the gutter where they were already dead or dying.

The colors of the flowers of these Azaleas were far & away the most beautiful and the most varied of any I ever saw anywhere in my life before.

Impatient to see them growing, I asked one of the women to show us where they grew. We motored up a back road through pine trees and there were the Azaleas, shimmering like fire thru the black tree trunks. I got out of the car, dazed and scarcely believing my eyes, for I found myself in the midst of a collection of Azaleas that for a spectacular & varied display, I firmly believe could not be excelled. I visited these Azaleas on several subsequent occasions in the several years that followed and am more than ever convinced that the display was a unique one.

All of the Azaleas appeared to be more or less the same size. Evidently the whole woodland had been lightly burned over, perhaps some 4 or 5 years ago. It was enough to burn the tops off the Azaleas but not enough to kill the pine trees. Most of the Azaleas were about 3-4 ft tall & all were heavily laden with large heads of flowers. The effect was electrifying. The magnificent condition of the Azaleas showed how bravely they had risen from the ashes! But fate is cruel & now they have an enemy far more wicked than fire & their whole existence is threatened.

The flowers of some of these Azaleas were an intense red in color & undoubtedly these were pure *R. speciosum*. Many others bore flowers of pale scarlet & there were plenty of in between colors & oranges of every fire-like tint.

Then to my surprise I came across some that had carmine flowers splashed with orange, these were remarkably showy with a pagan wildness. Then there were other pinks in deep & pale shades & most of them had a yellow or orange flare. There were many shades of yellow, peach & apricot pink, also lovely pale pinks & pure snow whites, too. The variety in color was positively bewildering. What was the secret of all this magnificence in color? The pinks & whites were greatly in the minority here and I began to wonder where the "better halves" of these Azaleas were situated.

Suddenly the truth dawned on me, bees had been at work & perhaps for thousands of years or maybe even millions of years, & had been carrying pollen from one flower to another. After all, the bees cared little or nothing what color the flowers were.

There were three distinct species here: *R. speciosum* in reds and oranges, *R. canescens* in pale and deep pinks and *R. alabamense*, the ultra-beautiful and fragrant pure white.



Photo: Donald Hyatt

***R. flammeum* at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden,
Richmond, Va.**

An infusion of *R. alabamense* could be detected in just a few of these hybrids, not only by fragrance alone but also by leaf characters, glaucous undersides, glossy upper surfaces, etc. Later on when I showed Dr. Rehder my pressed specimens, he said I was correct in my deductions and that it was the first time this hybrid had been reported.

About half a mile away from the predominantly red & orange flowered group of Azaleas I found the answer, for there among the pine along the edge of a swamp was a collection of *R. canescens*. Among the typical pinks were plants with orange, yellow and coral pink flowers & also a very few with pale scarlet blossoms. It was extremely interesting to note that these color forms were all on the *eastern* side of the *R. canescens* group of Azaleas, which was the nearest to the *R. speciosum* group. Evidently the bees had pollinated the first flowers that they reached after their flight from the *R. speciosum* group of plants. Seeds of this union fell to the ground near the female parent & I was looking at the resulting offspring! ...

Again I returned to the *R. speciosum* hybrids & wandered among them as in a dream, still scarcely able to believe my eyes. I made sure I had either rooted suckers or small pieces of the best and most distinct of the Azaleas. I got in the car again after paying the woman twenty-five cents for each one I took which was what I had promised her.

The foregoing happenings took place twenty-three years ago, & the Azaleas seem contented in their new home. Their second winter was a record breaking cold one but they never lost a bud.

Those that I planted with no ado along the east edge of a woods are now some 7-10 feet tall & each year make a marvelous display. Those that I planted on an exposed, dry hillside made little growth during that period and I plan to move them.

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Next issue of The RhodoGravure: Mary Gibson Henry's observations on *Rhododendron chapmanii*.

Annual banquet set for April 15

Anthony Aiello of Longwood Gardens will be the presenter

April 15 is an important day, right? No, it's not the deadline for filing income tax returns – due to the weekend and a District of Columbia holiday, the tax deadline this year is April 18.

What makes April 15 special for local rhododendron folk is the Greater Philadelphia Chapter's annual banquet, which also serves as the Valley Forge Chapter's April meeting. Time is short for placing reservations – see the last paragraph of this article.

The speaker this year will be Anthony Aiello, associate director of collections at Longwood Gardens. His presentation is "The Role of Botanic Gardens in Tree Conservation."

In this era of climate change and other threats to the plant kingdom, botanic gardens can do more than simply display lovely flowers. Mr. Aiello sees them serving as repositories of tree species at risk and as a network preserving and exchanging germ plasm in the quest to preserve imperiled species. His presentation will include knowledge he has gained on plant exploration trips over the

years. Many ARS members know Tony Aiello from his long tenure at Morris Arboretum as curator and director of horticulture.

We gather at 6:00 p.m. at Sunnybrook Golf Club in Lafayette Hill, Pa., for cocktails (cash bar) and Sunnybrook's excellent hors d'oeuvres spread, with dinner at 7:00 p.m. followed by the program. Table favors will be chapter-propagated rooted cuttings.

The evening will conclude with the avidly anticipated plant exchange we call Rhododendron Roulette. For each reservation, please bring a rhododendron, azalea, or companion plant for the exchange. Please put your name on the tag in case the recipient wants to get more information. (Never done this before and unsure? Contact chapter president Ron Rabideau at myricaria@gmail.com or 856-456-2344.)

Sunnybrook Golf Club is at 398 Stenton Avenue, corner of Joshua Road, Plymouth Meeting, PA 19462 (closest Pennsylvania Turnpike exit is Exit 333). If lost en route, call the club at 610-828-9617 for directions. Note: Per club rules, no denim or jeans, "soft spikes only."

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Deadline for reservations: April 10. At this date, reservations must be made by email with Linda Hartnett: lindaharnett@gmail.com. Those without email may call Linda at 215-287-0731. Entree choices are beef tenderloin (\$55), seared ahi tuna (\$47), vegetarian (\$45). Payment by check ("Greater Philadelphia Chapter ARS") will be required at the club.

Update from committee on the future

In late March, the committee formed by the Greater Philadelphia and Valley Forge Chapters to study and make recommendations for the chapters' future resumed its work after a pandemic-related hiatus.

A full report was unavailable in time for this newsletter, but members will be informed in timely fashion of proposals to the two boards of directors. It is probable that merger will be recommended and it is possible that significant decisions will be part of the chapters' annual meetings at the June 18 joint picnic.

An uncommon garden visit

Perhaps the last chance to see a collection of hundreds of rhododendrons

Local ARS members have a special opportunity to view a remarkable rhododendron-azalea garden in west-central New Jersey on May 20.

Richard Ziadie is inviting Greater Philadelphia, Lehigh Valley and Valley Forge members to a potluck lunch and garden visit at his two-plus acre garden in Warren County, not far from the Delaware River between Easton and Stroudsburg, Pa.

Lunch will be at 12:30 p.m., with the garden open until 4 p.m. Being north of Philadelphia, Rich's garden is 10 to 14 days later in the bloom cycle than the immediate Philadelphia area.

Rich began planting the 2.2-acre garden in 1991 and "completed" it 20 years later. It sits on a 15-degree slope and has nine levels of meandering paths.

There is a prodigious collection: about 375 rhododendrons, 325 azaleas, 20 magnolias, 25 Japanese maples, plus hydrangeas, peonies, viburnums and more. Karel Bernady has been able to collect cuttings of hitherto unavailable cultivars for the chapter's propagation program.

A regional magazine, the Milford Journal, published this article about the Ziadie garden two years ago: <https://issuu.com/publisher-milfordjournal/docs/journal>

This garden visit is a once-and-only opportunity, since Rich will be listing the property for sale soon.

The address is 24 Free Union Road, Belvidere, N.J. 07823, Saturday, May 20, 12:30-4:00 p.m. An email reminder will be sent in mid-May.

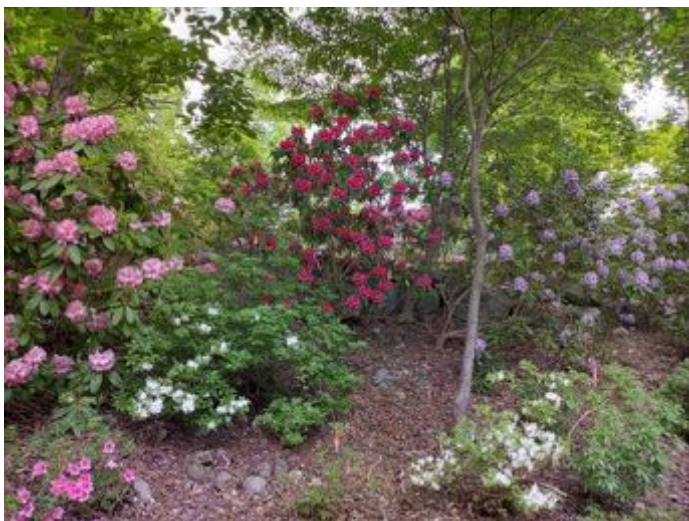


Photo: Amy Bridge, Milford Journal

A glimpse of the Ziadie garden

Where sophisticated gardeners shop for rhododendrons The chapter teams up with Tyler Arboretum

For the fourth year, the Greater Philadelphia Chapter will be an integral part of the annual plant sale at Tyler Arboretum.

Friday, May 5, is restricted to Tyler members (11 a.m.-7 p.m.), and both Saturday and Sunday, May 6-7, are open to the public, 8 a.m.-2 p.m.

The rhododendrons and azaleas available will be a diverse lot, with many of the evergreen and deciduous azaleas from the chapter's wholesale suppliers.

For elepidotes, connoisseurs will be able to choose among rarely offered cultivars that the chapter has propagated from rooted cuttings over the last few years. Under the direction of Karel Bernady, the propagation team ferrets out the choice and uncommon, from private gardens that hold special gems and from hybridizers of the region. There's really nowhere else that some of these cultivars are for sale.

The non-rhododendrons that Tyler offers are likewise a rarefied collection, with emphasis on natives, both woodies and herbaceous. There is typically a good selection of tomato varieties as well.

The history of the Tyler affiliation starts with the fall 2019 decision by Morris Arboretum to stop having its plant sale. There's no causal relationship here, but just a few months later the Covid pandemic shut down any such activities for the spring of 2020.

But by autumn of 2020, the Greater Philadelphia Chapter had teamed up with Tyler Arboretum for a semi-online plant sale – all orders were placed and paid online, then plants were taken to Tyler for customers to pick up. It was an efficient and safe pre-vaccine endeavor.

Come spring of 2021, the chapter joined the standard, on-site sale at Tyler, in an arrangement similar to that the chapter had with Morris. There was one notable difference: the GP plant sale team found working with Tyler to be most amiable, friendly, professional and proficient. Our collaboration continues.

Setup day for the sale is Thursday, May 4, starting at 10 a.m. Members available for setup should contact Karel Bernady at 484-888-8244.

Volunteers are also needed to staff the rhodo sales area Friday through Sunday. Please contact Linda Hartnett to volunteer: lindahartnett@gmail.com or 215-287-0731.

Truss Show at Jenkins is coming up This year it's on a Saturday

One of the curiosities that only a rhododendron geek would tease out of climate change is the prospect that cultivars in the “late midseason” category might push aside classic middle-of-May bloomers and win top awards.

The only way to find out is to enter – and win ribbons and trophies.

This year's joint Greater Philadelphia-Valley Forge Cut-Flower Competition will take place Saturday, May 13, at Jenkins Arboretum, with a deadline for entries of 9:30 a.m. Repeat: It will be on Saturday, the day *before* Mothers Day. The switch to Saturday was at the request of Jenkins, where the sizable Mothers Day crowd and the modest parking lot are a serious enough headache without a wad of people stuffing flowers into test tubes on the front porch.

Brochures with rules, regs and categories will be available at the April 15 Greater Philadelphia Banquet. The brochure and the catalogue of previous entries will be circulated electronically in early May. Physical copies may be requested by contacting the show's co-chairs, Perc Moser (610-635-8290) or Michael Martin Mills (215-844-6253).

Greater Philadelphia Chapter, American Rhododendron Society

www.gpchapterars.org

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The American Rhododendron Society is a horticultural organization devoted to the genus Rhododendron – which includes azaleas. At the national level, the society holds annual conferences, publishes the quarterly Journal of the ARS, and fosters plant research and conservation. Its website, www.rhododendron.org, is a trove. The Greater Philadelphia Chapter typically gathers eight times a year. Sunday afternoon meetings are held September, October, and January. February through August we are mobile, with a banquet, plant sale and picnic at various sites. Several events are held in conjunction with the Valley Forge Chapter of the ARS. Dues are \$40 per year, for chapter and national membership and a subscription to the Journal. Contact the president or treasurer (see above) for a form or go to www.GPChapterARS.org; click on “Join us.”