

Azaleas For the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION

When my father and I began our liner nursery in 1990, we produced a broad line of woody ornamentals and azaleas in 7.6-cm (3-in.) pots and rooted cuttings. As our business developed, we began to look for market alternatives to the general ornamental line. We began our search with the question of "What can we produce in this area which would fill a unique, marketable need in the industry?" Since Mobile County, Alabama produces more azaleas per square mile than anywhere in the United States, azaleas seemed like a reasonable starting point to look for an answer.

Quickly we found that we were dealing with a plant group which have been actively hybridized for the past fifty years with few commercial outlets in the market. While the wholesale industry at large was producing greater and greater quantities of azaleas, backyard enthusiasts were producing better and better quality plants. Typically, these new azaleas were traded among enthusiasts or released to specialty growers with limited markets.

If indeed we had found a unique product within our industry, then we needed to address the "marketable" aspect of our original question; "Will the public buy them?" This was simple enough to test. We set out our current "test" azaleas with the rest of our crop and paid attention to the reactions of our customers — typically wholesale growers and retail nurserymen. The results were surprising. The average retail customer was overwhelmingly enthusiastic. They were excited by the prospect of a unique and markedly better azalea. The wholesale grower on the other hand would inquire about the plants, what they were and where we found them, then proceed to buy the standard varieties.

Public reaction has reinforced our beliefs that a strong potential market exists for unique azaleas; much greater than for roses, particularly with the high cultural care required of roses. Marketing of new azalea selections has been lacking.

WORKING WITH AZALEA HYBRIDIZERS

My company has worked closely with three modern Azalea breeders: Ronald "Pete" Vines, and Charles and Wanda Hanners. We have intentionally chosen to introduce and propagate plants which are not easily available to the market. Several of these breeders' selections have just been released this year. In the remainder of this paper, I summarize the methodology and objectives of these breeders — and describe some of their selections.

RONALD VINES

Ronald "Pete" Vines, a retired Army Colonel who began breeding 'Holly Springs' hybrids in 1978 in the Washington, D.C. area. He currently resides in Amelia Island, Florida. From 491 crosses and 46,000 seedlings he has named 90 cultivars. These were closed-pollination crosses designed to produce azaleas with: (1) larger blooms,

(2) the sharp clean colors found in the Satsuki azaleas, (3) a dwarf to mid-size growth habit, and (4) increased cold hardiness [typically -20C (-5F) or below]. In making his selections, Col. Vines developed a matrix of azalea characteristics (i.e., color, habit, flower form) and chose the best representative from his extensive collection to epitomize each combination in his matrix. If a seedling was not significantly superior to his standard, it was discarded.

What follows is a selection and short description of his hybrids extracted from his 1990 catalog. Bloom times are for the Washington, D.C. area. Plant hardiness is -20C (-5F) unless otherwise indicated.

'White Peacock' (Glacier × Mother of Pearl). Flowers have a 6-cm (2.5-in.) white feathered hose in hose with light green blush, long tapered petals with space between sets. Blooms 5 May. Hardy to -23C (-10F).

'Rebecca Lynn' (RH Frosty × Easter Parade). Flowers have a 6- to 8-cm (2.5- to 3-in) soft peachy-pink semidouble with yellow-green blotch and lighter margins, white marbling, frilled lobes, and very floriferous. Blooms 10 May.

'Shenandoah' (Hotshot × Gloria Kessel). Flowers have 6-cm (2.5-in.) deep red hose in hose, frilled lobes, 2 to 3 per head and very floriferous. Blooms 29 April. Hardy to -23C (-10F).

'Peggy Vines' (Nancy of RH × Shinnyo no Tsuki). Flowers have 8- to 10-cm (3- to 4-in.) light pink variegated double with very dark red variegation, tips, and marbling, two to head with a flat face and ruffled lobes. Blooms 15 May.

'Doctor Fred Vines' (Chiyoda Nishiki × Juko). Flowers have 6- to 8-cm (2.5- to 3-in.) white single with green blush and very heavy red sanding, two to head. Blooms 5 June.

'Jeffrey Alan' (Nancy of RH × Shinnyo no Tsuki). Flowers have 8- to 10-cm (3- to 3.75-in.) strong reddish coral double with dark red blotch, beautiful urn shaped buds and frilled lobes. Blooms 18 May.

'Astronaut' (Amaghasa × Sekai no Hikari). Flowers have 10- to 13-cm (4- to 5-in.) variable white single with light green blotch and light pink wash, few pink to rosy red lines and dashes, six ruffled and imbricated lobes. Blooms 1 June.

'Becky's Blush' (Glacier × Mother of Pearl). Flowers have 6-cm (2.25-in.) light pink hose in hose with rosy red blotch and white throat, darker margins, very showy in bud form. Blooms 10 May.

HS 86-48-36 (Achievement × Winedrop). Flowers have 6-cm (2.5-in.) variable white single with very heavy lavender sectors, lines, sanding, and selfs. Blooms 5 May.

'Painted Lips' (Kamino yama Kirin × Dorothy Clark). Flowers have 6- to 8-cm (2.5- to 3-in.) very light pink bi-color single with strong red to hot pink margins, star shaped bloom of very heavy substance. Blooms 28 May.

HS 85-39-6 (Kotobukihime × Variegated Dogwood). Flowers have 6-cm (2.5-in.) variable white single with red lines, dashes, sectors and sanding, larger and stronger colors than Germanique. Blooms 1 May.

'Jill McDowell' (Kotobukihime × Crimson Queen). Flowers have 6-cm (2.5-in.) variable single. blooms include: coral with narrow white margin, coral with red sectors, white with red and coral pink sectors and sanding, red and white selfs, two to head, rounded lobes. Blooms 22 May.

HS 85-62-3 (Opal × Presto). Flowers have 6- to 9-cm (2.5- to 3.5-in.) variable white double/semidouble with purplish pink sanding, lines, sectors, and a light green blush, some purplish pink and white selfs, excellent fall bloomer. Blooms 5 May.

'Saint Moritz' (Nancy of Robin Hill × Shinnyo no Tsuki). Flowers have 6- to 8-cm (2.5- to 3-in.) formal white double with strong green blotch, rosebud form with 15 - 20 petals, two - three per head and very floriferous. Blooms 26 May.

HS 86-60-8 (Gyoko × Festive). Flowers have 6-cm (2.5-in.) variable white single with coral pink and strong red sectors, lines, sanding, blooms 2 weeks later than 'Festive' with strong Satsuki colors in the early Spring. Blooms 24 April.

CHARLES AND WANDA HANNERS

Charles and Wanda Hanners of Azalea Trace Nursery in Huntington, Maryland began their breeding program in 1982 "for fun". They germinated seed from over 200 open-pollinated crosses each year until 1990 — selecting out the strongest, most viable seedlings.

Additionally, some seed from the American Rhododendron Society and Azalea Society of America seed exchange programs were used. Seedlings were transplanted into 3.8 liter (1 gal) containers, and re-evaluated after 1 year. Approximately 3500 1-gal plants were planted at the nursery from over 10,000 original seedlings. From this group the Hanners anticipate they will register "probably no more than six or so". Their baseline for evaluation is their collection of more than 1700 cultivars.

The following are short descriptions from selections of their hybrids.

All plants are hardy in Zone 7 to 6. Bloom dates are for the Washington, D.C. area.

83-S-27, 99-01. Flowers have 6-cm (2.5 in.) deep rose red double, very low and floriferous. Blooms 18 May.

83-S-20, 03-56. Flowers have 5-cm (2-in.) light pink double with strap-like petals. Blooms 5 June.

NO ID, 99-419. Flowers have 6-cm (2.5-in.) light pink petaloid with rose pink margins, heavily ruffled and washed with white. Blooms 13 May.

83-S-1, 02-064. Flowers have 4- to 5-cm (1.5- to 1.75-in.) white single with crimson blotch and yellow-green throat edged in crimson, very floriferous. Blooms 12 May.

82-S-2, 99-470. Flowers have 9-cm (3.5-in.) dusty rose single, dark red-orange blotch, two to head, ruffled. Blooms 17 May.

82-S-2, 4-13. Flowers have 5-cm (2-in.) old rose single with pointed lobes, tyrolian blotch in a pink to white center. Blooms 12 May.

82-S-008, 99-272. Flowers have 5-cm (2-in.) blood red single, two - four per head, heavy substance. Blooms 10 May.

82-S-26, 99-353. Flowers have 5- to 6-cm (2- to 2.5-in.) single white with pink tints, prominent red blotch, light yellow throat, very heavy bloomer. Blooms 14 May.

82-S-28, 99-548. Flowers have 4-cm (1.8-in.) white single with strong lavender edges, cream throat, lobes pointed and long, very orchid-like effect. Blooms 18 May.

83-S-20, 99-551. Flowers have variable light pink single, occasional dark pink stripes, distinctive dark pink blotch, wavy. Blooms 18 May.

'Flat Face', 82-S-017, 99-242. Flowers have 6-cm (2.5-in.) strong red single, crinkly with flat face, short yellow stamens, very floriferous. Blooms 10 May.

83-S-30, 99-386. Flowers have 5- to 6-cm (2- to 2.5-in.) variable white single, deep red stripes and sectors, occasional white or red selfs, chartreuse blotch. Blooms 14 May.

84-S-35, 99-513. Flowers have 8-cm (3-in.) very light pink single, six rounded lobes, white picotee edges, dark red blotch. Blooms in August.

83-S-92, 99-285. Flowers have 3- to 4-cm (1- to 1.5-in.) pale pink single, pointed arched lobes with a very showy yellow blotch, three - four per head, long rose red stamens. Blooms 16 June

84-035, 99-512. Flowers have highly variable white, six rounded lobes, strong red and white selfs, light pink with strong red blotch, white with sectors and stripes of dusty rose red, stunning, Blooms in August.

SUMMARY

If any of my slide presentation captured your interest, then imagine the thousand-fold increased interest from your potential new customers. As the mass merchants continue to encroach on the retail nursery industry, the independent retailer will need to find and improve their niches. Two important options for the independent are service and variety.

Variety development in azaleas has been underexploited. As breeders across the country continue to improve the hybrids suitable to our climate, the stage is set for a commercial upheaval of the plants currently grown. We believe the time is now.