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NYTimes.com Article: Cuttings: Putting Azaleas' Vivid Colors in Their Place

This article from NYTimes.com
has been sent to you by mikistebb@aol.com.

Sue Biderman called this morning to tell me about this article. Thought you'd be interested. Miki

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Cuttings: Putting Azaleas' Vivid Colors in Their Place

GARDENING

By ANNE RAVER

ZALEAS really need to be in a woods, that's all there is to it.
When you see them massed up a wooded hill, as I did last week, at
the National Arboretum in Washington, you can almost like them.

I grew up with a bad impression of azaleas, because my father
planted one of those hot pink varieties on the edge of the grass,
way too close to a golden rain tree. Picture bright yellow
cascading over bubblegum pink. Placement might not be everything,
but it's a lot.

"It was probably Coral Bells, one of the kurumes brought in with
Wilson's stuff," said Barbara Bullock, the curator of the azalea

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collection, as she led the way up a path with great mounds of pink, salmon, white, lavender and dark-red blossoms, whose colors were beautifully softened by the dappled light coming through the oaks and sweet gums.

She was referring to E. H. Wilson, the plant explorer who brought in a number of kurumes, hybrid azaleas developed by avid Japanese hobbyists in 1919, contributing to a craze for the vividly flowered shrubs that had been sparked by their first appearance at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco in 1915.

The kurumes — imported from a village of that name in southern Japan — soon poured into this country via the Domoto Brothers, California nurserymen who introduced about 30 cultivars in 1917, and Wilson, who brought in about 50 cultivars in 1919. So American yards were soon aflame with salmon, pink and orange bushes and some, poor things, were pruned to multicolored hedges.

But on Mount Hamilton, a 240-foot hill at the National Arboretum, the azaleas are allowed to flower freely over the May apples. Ms. Bullock led the way through the Glenn Dale Azalea Walk, which contains more than 15,000 azaleas planted in 1946. They are the offspring of 454 hybrids developed by Benjamin Y. Morrison, who started breeding azaleas back in 1929 at the Agriculture Department's plant introduction station in Glenn Dale, Md.

We stopped at one of his crosses, a huge shrub covered with pale pink trumpet-shaped flowers with hot pink stripes and a spattering of hot pink freckles, on its top petal. It looked a little blowsy to me, but then, I like quieter species of azaleas, like the Pinxterbloom azalea (*Rhododendron periclymenoides*), which has one-and-a-half-inch flowers ranging from white to pale pink to violet. The coastal azalea, *R. atlanticum*, which has very fragrant white to light-pink flowers, and is native to the area from Delaware to South Carolina, is another subtle beauty. These, and many others, may be seen blooming among the Glenn Dales.

I couldn't believe my sudden crush on a blood-red Glenn Dale, one of the many unnamed varieties, which had the richness of a velvet opera curtain. These reds were massed by the dozens next to whites and pale lavenders, and maybe it was the filtered light coming through an old Kousa dogwood, but the combination was more luscious than jarring. Some shrubs were full of sports, or mutations, so that bushes that were primarily white would have branches of lavender blossoms, or white ones with lavender stripes.

I even liked some of the orange azaleas, like Balls of Fire, which has flowers the color of a Creamsicle, and Ben Morrison, a pink with white edges and a scarlet-red freckles.

The National Arboretum was established by an act of Congress on March 4, 1927, and Morrison, who served as director from 1937 to 1951, started planting his favorite Glenn Dales along the slopes of

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Mount Hamilton in 1939.

"People had heard about the azaleas, and there was such a clamor, they opened up the gates to the collection in 1958," Ms. Bullock said. Many of the Glenn Dale hybrids, which were developed to stand up to Washington's humidity, are hardy as far north as Connecticut, but gardeners in climates colder than that would do better to consider hardier types, like the Girard azaleas, developed by Peter Girard, in Geneva, Ohio, some of which are hardy to minus 20 degrees.

By the time Ms. Bullock arrived in 1990, with a master's degree in horticulture and 10 years' experience as a wood plant propagator, the Glenn Dale collection had fallen into neglect, its plants buried under soil that had eroded down the steep slope, and smothering under English ivy and honeysuckle.

Ms. Bullock and volunteers undertook a restoration project. The crew also renovated the Morrison Garden, a formal planting of azaleas and clipped box, which is surrounded by towering dawn redwoods. A magnificent Chinese fringe tree inside the garden was in full bloom last week.

Azaleas are shallow-rooted shrubs that regenerate by putting out shoots from the base of the plant, so a mulch of oak leaves, rather than ivy or any other thick ground cover, is much more to their liking. They don't like wet feet, either, or heavy clay, and they like acid soil, with a pH between 4.5 and 6.5.

For more information on azaleas, and the best species or cultivars for your area, you can visit the National Arboretum (information: 202-245- 4523), or try its Web site, www.nationalarboretum.usda.gov. For more specific information on azaleas best suited for your area, you can join the local chapter of the Azalea Society of America, P.O. Box 34536, West Bethesda, Md. 20827, or try its Web site, www.azaleas.org (\$25 annual membership).

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