



## QBARS - v27n2 Gable Azaleas in the Olive W. Lee Memorial Garden

### GABLE AZALEAS IN THE OLIVE W. LEE MEMORIAL GARDEN

**Edward W. Weingartner, Westport, Conn.**

To those who knew him Joseph B. Gable of Stewartstown, Pennsylvania, was a slight, shy, gentle man with thinning grey hair, weather beaten and unpretentious in his gardening clothes; not much of a business man, but totally consumed by the desire to create new, better-colored strains of azaleas and rhododendrons hardy in the colder parts of the country. To the professional plantsman, able to appreciate his genius for making successful crosses, he was the first and probably the foremost breeder of rhododendrons in America.

In the early days of his nursery some of his seedlings were distributed to other nurserymen for testing, and unfortunately some of these were named and listed in various catalogs without his approval. Many others he ruthlessly discarded because of some imperfection or weakness he could not accept. But by the time he died last July at the age of 84 he had named and introduced some 35 evergreen azaleas and nearly as many rhododendrons which met his own exacting standards of color, plant habit, and hardiness.

It is a melancholy fact that some of Gable's best introductions are now in danger of being lost before they have had a chance to get a root-hold in American gardens. The reasons for this are entirely commercial: the trade is reluctant to replace the standbys which fill its channels of distribution - such as 'Hinode-giri' and *R. mucronatum* (usually sold in the form known as 'Delaware Valley White') - even though there are far superior varieties; a large part of the market is devoted to such forcing varieties as 'Pink Pearl' and 'Coral Bells' which are absorbed by the million for Easter and Mother's Day; economic conditions are forcing nurserymen to replace evergreen azaleas with the more spectacular and more expensive deciduous varieties even though they are far less attractive when out of flower; and finally there is pressure to replace azaleas with rhododendrons which command still higher prices. Under such market conditions new evergreen azaleas have small chance of gaining the distribution they deserve. Not more than three or four Gable hybrids usually are found in even the better nurseries - generally 'Stewartsonian,' 'Louise Gable,' or 'Rose Greeley,' admittedly among Gable's finest. To gain distribution a hybridizer must merchandise his own plants, and as has been suggested, Gable was not much of a salesman.

But now this picture has a new and happier aspect. A complete collection of mature authentic Gable azaleas has been opened to the public, and serious gardeners interested in the propagation and enjoyment of these great plants are now free to come and see them at their best, and within reason, to take cuttings. The collection is in the garden of George S. Lee, Jr., past President and currently Executive Director of the American Daffodil Society.

Two miles west of the attractive New England residential village of New Canaan, Connecticut, in rolling wooded country blessed with magnificent oaks, tall tulip trees, and stands of cedar, sweet gum, hemlock, shadbush, and flowering dogwood, the three acres of the Olive W. Lee Memorial Garden are well known to gardeners throughout the area. They come every spring to stand before the astonishing sea of color that stretches beneath the canopy of new foliage and dogwood blossoms and to walk the winding paths between the fragrant and beautiful blooms of more than 1400 varieties of perennials, bulbs, and flowering shrubs. For in this shallow valley, strewn with the huge boulders of an ancient glacial stream, are plants collected over a lifetime of study and devotion by one of the most knowledgeable amateur horticulturists in the country.

His catalog (which he has prepared, together with a detailed map, to add to the understanding and enjoyment of his visitors) lists the botanical and common names of 451 herbaceous plants, many of them wildflowers native to the region, displayed in the situations where they will best thrive. It lists 385 named varieties of daffodils, over 160 varieties and species of

rhododendron (including all the better Gables), dozens of varieties of ferns ... and so on and on. And out in the garden itself, to the tremendous satisfaction of the serious-minded guest, every one of these varieties has its label, clearly and permanently printed on galvanized metal, and placed where it can be easily read without being conspicuous.

The azalea collection embraces many varieties besides Gables, including magnificent specimens of *R. calendulaceum* up to 18 feet tall, and many Kaempferi, Knap Hill, Exbury, and Ham hybrids. But it is the Gables that are the spectacular feature of the garden: an almost unbelievable riot of red, pink, salmon, orchid, apricot, rose, purple, and white. Here is recurring proof, every May, of their superiority over other evergreen varieties for northern climates, and here are both the reason and the reward for George Lee's special interest in the plants of Joe Gable.

The azalea garden had its beginnings in 1940 in a dozen Gable hybrids, a house-warming gift from the other garden-minded member of the family, Frederic P. Lee, author of "The Azalea Book." George Lee and Gable met shortly thereafter, when Lee made the first of many trips to Stewartstown to get Gable's latest introductions, to check on those which Gable wished to bear his name, and to talk about his experience with these and other azaleas. Over the years he became a good friend of the Gable family. The Gables have always been aware of the integrity of George Lee's collection, knowing that it contains all of Gable's acknowledged introductions obtained directly from the Nursery, and gives sanctuary to none of those he disowned. In a recent letter Caroline Gable, Joe's oldest daughter and an azalea and rhododendron authority in her own right, gave the family's approval to the distribution of cuttings from this collection of authentic Gable plants.

About 1,500 of the approximately 2,000 azaleas in the Lee garden are Gable hybrids and the oldest are now more than 30 years old. Maturity has revealed the ultimate characteristics of each variety. Thus the original 'Mary Dalton' is 15 feet high, although many of its branches are pendant from the burden of its salmon-pink flowers over the years. 'Forest Fire' is not a large plant but is said to be the only existing hybrid with *R. tschonoskii* as a parent, and its sheets of blossoms are so densely packed that most are unable to open beyond the bud stage. There are a number of highly regarded but as yet unnamed seedlings in the garden. The most interesting of these is T-4-G, a very dwarf, dense, dome-shaped plant covered with double salmon-pink flowers. 'Stewartsonian' is probably the purest red of any azalea, and that feature has been exploited by a mass planting of some 125 specimens, now mature, on a slope back lighted by the afternoon sun. Another area has been given over to 35 specimens of 'Mary Dalton' which at blooming time block the path they line under the weight of their flowers. After the original 'Mary Dalton,' probably the most admired specimen is a huge plant of 'Big Joe' which towers over and seems to shelter other varieties in the same color range. (One frequent visitor makes it a practice to curtsy as she passes 'Big Joe'.)

The introduction of Gable rhododendrons has probably not yet ended and Caroline Gable continues to screen the seedlings remaining in the famed Gable woods, exercising the same disciplined judgment which made the original Gable label assurance of the highest quality. In general the rhododendron plants in the Memorial Garden are not as old as the azaleas, but two Gable hybrids which are greatly admired are specimens of 'Cadis' and 'Caroline,' secured in 1952, some years before they were introduced. 'Cadis' is now 8 feet high and 11 feet wide and has carried as many as 535 trusses.

Slowly acquiring the fruits of one plantsman's life work and bringing the plants to maturity has been an exercise in determination and patience, not readily to be repeated. To assure the preservation of a virtually complete and authentic collection of Gable's introductions as well as the preservation of the garden for its own sake, the entire Memorial Garden has been willed to the Garden Center of New Canaan, Inc., a large group of civic minded women who will undertake the maintenance of the property, using the house as their headquarters.

A list of the Gable plants in the Lee Garden appears below. Seedlings and varieties still under number have been excluded.

The membership of the American Rhododendron Society are particularly welcome to visit this lovely place to take cuttings of the Gable azaleas, and so to contribute to the preservation and dissemination of some of the finest plants available to the northern gardener. The address is 89 Chichester Road, New Canaan, Conn. Most of the azaleas bloom in mid-May, and the rhododendrons from mid-April to early June.

#### **The Lee Collection of Gables Azaleas**

**'Barbara Hille', 'Big Joe', 'Campfire', 'Carol', 'Caroline Gable', 'Cherokee', 'Corsage', 'Elizabeth Gable', 'Flame', 'Forest Fire', 'Gillin's Red', 'Glow of Dawn', 'Herbert', 'J. C. Bowman', 'James Gable', 'Jessie Coover', 'Jimmy Coover', 'Kathleen', 'La Lumiere', 'La Roche', 'Lorna', 'Louise Gable', 'Margie', 'Mary Ann', 'Mary Dalton', 'Mary Francis Hawkins', 'Mildred Mae', 'Miriam', 'Polaris',**

'Purple Splendour', 'Rosebud', 'Rose Greeley', 'Springtime', 'Stewartstonian', and 'Viola'.

**Rhododendrons**

'Albert Close', 'Annie Dalton', 'Atroflo', 'Beaufort', 'Cadis', 'Camich', 'Caroline', 'Conestoga', 'Conewago', 'Conewago #2', 'Conewago Improved', 'County of York', 'David Gable', 'Freckles', 'Henry Yates', 'Katherine Dalton', 'Kentucky Cardinal', 'Ladifor', 'Marcat #1', 'Mary Belle', 'Maxhaem Salmon', 'Mucram', 'Pink Twins', 'Pioneer', 'Robert Allison', 'Skylark', and 'Strawberry Swirl'.

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