THE RHODODENDRON STORY
200 Years of Plant Hunting and Garden Cultivation
Edited by Cynthia Postan
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RHODODENDRON, CAMELLIA & MAGNOLIA GROUP

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Chapter 12

Deciduous Azaleas: the Hybrids

Renaud de Kerchove

Until recently azaleas were a separate genus, but they are now classified as a subgenus of Rhododendron called Pentanthera (see chapter 2).

The hardy deciduous azaleas were mostly derived from North American species (R. calendulaceum, R. periclymenoides, R. prinophyllum, R. viscousum, R. canescens and R. speciosum syn. R. flammeum), introduced into Britain in the 18th or early 19th centuries, but also from one other species (R. luteum, the Pontiac azalea), introduced from the Caucasus in 1792. Two other asiatic species, not introduced until the mid-19th century, later played their part in the process. They are R. molle (1823), once known as Azalea sinensis, from China and R. japonicum (1861), once known as A. mollis, from Japan. This change of name has caused considerable confusion. In 1850, another North American species, R. occidentale, was also used by Veitch (UK) as a parent for a distinct group of hybrids.

The history of hybrid deciduous azaleas goes back to the early 19th century. The first plants to be sold commercially were probably different forms of the wild species from North America and the Caucasus already mentioned.

Ghent Azaleas

It appears that in Ghent Mortier, a baker by trade and a great plant enthusiast, had by 1825 started to cross the available North American species mentioned above with R. luteum, already available. His genius lay in retarding the flowering season of the early blooming species whose petals were susceptible to frost damage by crossing them with the later-flowering species. These hybrids were named ‘Mortieri’ by Sweet in 1831.

In 1834 Mortier sold his azaleas to Louis Verschaffelt of Roygem, who continued to cross the better cultivars. In the Annals of the Royal Agricultural and Botanical Society of Ghent for 1846 Spae told the early history of the Mortieri azaleas and listed 12 cardinal varieties. In 1847 Morren added eight more. He claimed that the azalea nectar was poisonous,
noting that some of Xenophon’s troops had died after eating honey from *R. luteum*.

In 1849 Louis Van Houtte bought 25 of Mortier’s cultivars from Verschaffelt, and later, in 1873, he bought another collection of six hardy azaleas from Louis Hellebuyck. In Van Houtte’s opinion, Mortier, Verschaffelt and Hellebuyck, and one other, Van Cassel, were the most important hybridizers.

In 1855 Charles Lemaire published a list featuring 16 cultivars. They were pink with yellow tinges on the upper petals but none are known to have survived.

Ambroise Verschaffelt’s catalogue of 1855 listed for the first time 11 double-flowered cultivars, including ‘Bartholo Lazzari’, ‘Graf van Meran’, and ‘Narcissiflora’, of which more later, acquired in Germany from J. Rinz, who had been working on double-flowers since 1834. Some of the old German hybrids are still available. The first mention of ‘Ghent’ azaleas instead of ‘Mortieri’ appears in the same catalogue.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the 19th century, at Knap Hill in England, Anthony Waterer, father and son, began to use the Caucasian-American and East Asian species. None of their hybrids, except ‘Nancy Waterer’ (*R. molle* x *R. cal-
endulaceum), was ever named. However it is still listed as a Ghent cultivar and is available (see below).

About this time, J R Gowen, the friend of Lord Carnarvon of Highclere Castle, was making the same crosses as Mortier had done. ‘Altaclarens’ (sic.), described in 1842, was a cross between R. molle and R. viscosum (syn. R. viscosepalum, pink-edged white flowers and yellow stamens). It has disappeared, but must have been close to ‘Daviesii’ dating from the same period, with the same parentage and still available. The cultivar now described as ‘Altaclarens’ (or more correctly, ‘Altaclerense’) is quite different, a soft yellow, and does not fall into any recognized category. There is some doubt about the origin of another English cultivar, ‘Unique’, (R. molle x R. calendulaceum) still in commerce. Classified as a Ghent, it was in cultivation by 1864, and is variously attributed to Standish & Noble and to Anthony Waterer.

In The Netherlands, ‘Hollandia’, another cross between R. luteum and R. japonicum, was produced in 1902 by P M Koster.

The name ‘Hardy Ghent’ was proposed for the group in 1870 by Louis Van Houtte. The group was described as hardy to distinguish them from the R. simsii
hybrids, the evergreen indica azaleas for indoor cultivation, which were the other
great horticultural speciality of the Ghent
region. He preferred this name to ‘Azalea
Americana’. Other pseudo-botanic names
such as x gandavense were not generally
acceptable for a range of hybrids stemming
from such a large number of species. Both
the Dutch and the Germans, however,
always used the name ‘Pontica azaleas’.

Recently more than 1,000 cultivars
and 500 colour descriptions have been
recorded by the Belgian, Albert De Raedt.
It is probable that far too many seedlings
were named in the 19th century.

In 1875 L Duval described the Ghent
azaleas in these words: ‘These beautiful
plants have seen their star pale before the
arrival of a newcomer, which possesses
even more of the same qualities.’ This
newcomer was the group known as the
Mollis azaleas (see below). Nevertheless,
although the Mollis hybrids are earlier and
have larger flowers appearing before the
leaves, in my opinion their leggy habit
after a number of years produces an ugly
plant.

Between the two wars the cultivation
of hardy Ghent azaleas was abandoned. In
1944 there was a concerted attempt at
conservation in The Netherlands. The
Botanical Garden Association in Boskoop
made great efforts to trace Ghent cultivars,
but succeeded in finding only 80 names
responding with even fewer hybrids. Of
these, 26 hybrids, comprising all possible
colours and flowering periods, were
selected. But by 1954 few Boskoop grow-
ers had more than 12 available, and H J
Grootendorst predicted an economic
future for no more than perhaps 20 to 25.

In The Garden, Journal of The Royal
Horticultural Society, November 1983,
Archie Skinner, citing their elegance, per-
fume, autumn colour and charm, regretted
the lack of present-day interest. He had 27
Ghent varieties in his collection at
Sheffield Park in Sussex, formed for the
National Council for the Conservation of
Plants and Gardens (NCCPG). The inter-
est of some Belgian gardeners was stimu-
lated by this information and today more
than 100 of the older hardy Ghents have
been traced. One Belgian nurseryman
(César Dekeyzer, of Lochristi) is prepared
to propagate any old named cultivar
offered to him.

Mollis Azaleas
The so-called Mollis azaleas are botanically
speaking crosses between forms of R.
japonicum and forms of R. japonicum x R.
molle. They are also sometimes referred to
as R. x kosterianum.

Louis Van Houtte, enterprising as
ever, was the first to recognize the poten-
tial offered by these plants and he pur-
chased in The Netherlands a number of
cultivars which displayed considerable
variation during the blooming season. In
1870 he selected and named about 20 cul-
tivars, among which were ‘Isabella Van
Houtte’, ‘W. E. Gumbleton’, ‘Thérèse’
(syn. ‘Afterglow’ or ‘Pink Beauty’),
‘Alphonse Lavallée’, ‘Comte de Gomer’, all are still listed.

Oswald de Kerchove, President of the Royal Agricultural and Botanical Society of Ghent, contributed a brief history of deciduous azaleas and notes on their cultivation in the *Revue d’Horticulture Belge et Érrangère* (3. 1877). This contained an illustration of ‘Comte de Gomer’, a cultivar bearing bright pink flowers with orange flecks. It is still found in specialist catalogues (Esfeld, Wezelenburg).

Fred De Conink, of Ghent, had been the first to cross *R. japonicum* with *R. molle*, but in 1890 he sold all his stock to M Koster and Sons of Boskoop, in The Netherlands, where all future development took place. The first eight seedlings were marketed by Koster in 1892, including ‘Hortulanus H. Witte’, ‘Hugo Koster’ and ‘Frans van der Bom’ (all still available).

The Boskoop Tree and Plant Exhibition Association listed 45 cultivars, 26 Belgian and nine Dutch, but of these nine only ‘J. C. van Tol’ (1890) was still in cultivation in Boskoop in 1954. The origin of this hybrid merits special attention. Its parents are unknown but must consist of red and yellow species. Mendel’s law applies to this hybrid, for when red is dominant, three-quarters of the progeny will be red and one-quarter yellow when selfed. The second generation reds gave two-thirds resembling the original ‘J. C. van Tol’. This led M Koster and Sons to discover that by selective breeding they could produce progeny more or less uni-

form in colour, and therefore could market seedling azaleas true to colour. Many other growers also sold unnamed seeds and young plants simply as ‘azaleas op kleur’ (azaleas to colour).

In 1899 the Kersbergen brothers bought large quantities (perhaps 36,000) of Hoogendijk azaleas and even more from other Boskoop growers. They selected those of fine colour producing clusters of 14 large flowers. Around 30 of these plants were still in cultivation in 1954. Being strong-growing, easy to pack and transport, they supplanted the Belgian hybrids.

H J Grootendorst, in his *Rhododendron en Azaleas* (1954), lists some of the best examples of *Azalea mollis* as ‘Christopher Wien’ (large orange-yellow flowers), ‘Hamlet’ (deep salmon with red tints), and ‘Winston Churchill’ (deep red-orange). All are still listed.

Mollis azaleas mostly bloom in the first fortnight of May. They are not scented and have large, short-tubed flowers, the stamens of which do not project beyond the petals as do those of the hardy Ghents. They are strong-growing to begin with, easy to pack and transport but after a time their habit deteriorates.

**Rustica Azaleas**

The Rustica azaleas (see figure 19) differed from the Ghent azaleas because of their double blooms, more compact form and early flowering season. They forced well, flowering before the leaves, and therefore found great favour with the public.
Charles Vuylsteke was the first to show these hybrids at the Ghent Floralies in 1888. He had established himself in Lochristi in 1882 and had a flourishing export business to England. H J Grootendorst has commented that Vuylsteke marketed many new hybrids produced by other breeders and the Rustica azaleas originated with Louis de Smet who had died in 1887. Vuylsteke did not know how De Smet came by these plants, but it is likely that they had *R. japonicum* blood. Of his 19 hybrids, some were so alike that only their flowering date distinguished them; five were white.

**Occidentale Azaleas**

*Rhododendron occidentale* was first imported into Europe from western North America by William Lobb for James Veitch in 1850 (1851?). The species, perhaps the most beautiful of all in nature, first flowered in Britain in 1857. Anthony Waterer Senior crossed *R. occidentale* and *R. molle* in 1870 and called the plant *R.* 'Albicans'. It had almost white, green-speckled flowers, a strong perfume and flowered in June. According to Desmond Clarke, it appears to have been lost. The Occidentale hybrids now in commerce consist mainly of rather similar clones raised by M Koster and Sons by crossing *R. occidentale* with *R. japonicum* x *R. molle* azaleas in 1895. 'Delicatissima', 'Exquisita', 'Graciosa' and 'Superba' are all lovely with delicately coloured fragrant flowers in late May or early June.

**Azalea viscosa**

Hybrids whose parents include *R. viscosum* are often grouped together under this name. 'Altaclerense', one of the first and a cross between *R. molle* and *R. viscosum*, can also be classed as a Ghent azalea, but as we have seen, it no longer exists.

Since 1938 B B C Felix of Boskoop has been crossing *R. viscosum* with *R. mollis* azaleas to obtain perfume with showy flowers. The research is still continuing. Flowering during the first fortnight of June, they are scented and of soft pink or creamy yellow hue.

**Azaleodendrons**

This rather unattractive name was given to a new race of hybrids of the Ponticum series fertilized by pollen from azaleas. G van der Meulen was the first to use *R. japonicum* instead of *R. molle* as a pollinator using different rhododendron hybrids. He bequeathed his azaleodendrons to E Pynaert who exhibited six varieties at the 1892 Ghent Floralies. By general agreement the jury awarded the new creations a special silver medal. They were thought to be of major interest and E Pynaert named two of these new arrivals after a Dr Masters and Comte Oswald de Kerchove. Despite all the praise they received at the time, Grootendorst admitted in 1954 that as a class azaleodendrons had fallen into oblivion. It is not known why.

**Knap Hill and Exbury Azaleas**

Closely allied to the Ghent azaleas are the
English so-called Knap Hill hybrids. As mentioned above, the Waterers did not name or sell their mid-century Ghent x molle hybrids, although their properties of size, richness of colour and later blooming were recognized in 1861 (The Gardeners' Chronicle, 1861, p531). But by 1900 their fame had spread in Britain. P D Williams of Lanarth, in particular, described their remarkable colours – brilliant scarlet, butter yellow and bright orange, including soft pink and white (Rhododendron Society Notes, II, 1924, p274). From 1921 onwards Lionel de Rothschild at Exbury began to experiment with the unnamed Knap Hill plants and he gained his first Award of Merit in 1934 with ‘Hotspur’.

Further crosses have produced a splendid strain. Many have been named since, but they are usually supplied ‘to colour’.

All these hybrids named as being ‘still available’ are to be found in the Rhododendron Handbook, Part Two, 1964.

Renauld de Kerchove is the great-grandson of Oswald de Kerchove and lives on the family estate at Beervelde in Belgium where he maintains a large and splendid collection of deciduous azaleas in which the Hardy Ghents receive special attention. To help maintain the domain he organizes two popular flower-shows every year.
Figure 19: Azalea rustica *Flore Pleno* hybrids: 'Murillo', 'Virgile' and 'Phébé (all still available) illustrated in a Belgian Horticultural journal of 1893 (see Chapter 12)
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