

Research Notes

A Legacy of Dr. Tsuneshige Rokujo

North Tisbury Ground-cover Azaleas at Polly Hill Arboretum

Polly Hill — Hockessin, Delaware

[This article shows how the North Tisbury hybrids resulted from an international scientific cooperation, spanning 40 years and two continents, Ed.]

In 1956, I visited Japan with my son, Jefferson. By introduction of Dr. Russell Seibert, director of Longwood Gardens, we met with Dr. Rokujo and had lunch with him in our Tokyo hotel, a meeting that was the start of a long association. We began mail correspondence, and during the next 41 years I received 233 letters, handwritten in English. The letters always began with "Dear Mrs. Julian W. Hill" and ended with a signature with flourishes, "Tsuneshige Rokujo."

Dr. Rokujo's first letter to me (June 15, 1956) states: "I am a medical doctor, aged 36 and am at present a research fellow at Tokyo University." In December, 1963, a letter from him informed me that he was the Director of the Medical Division of the Fujisawa Pharmaceutical Co. Ltd. in Osaka, where he was doing cancer research. He spoke also about his gardening and stated that "...here I grow larger collection of alpine plants through the world. [sic]" Later he also wrote of collecting and breeding rhododendrons: "I have possibly the finest collection of rhododendron in Japan," a statement I believe to be totally accurate.

I learned that he wished to exchange plants, seeds, and bulbs with Longwood Gardens and asked me to act as intermediary. His initial offering for Longwood was seeds of *Rhododendron*, *Primula*, *Phyllodoce*, *Lycoris*, *Viola*, *Schizocodon*, *Gaultheria*, *Ledum*, and *Arisaema*. In later years, he dealt with Longwood directly.

On August 23, 1956, he wrote, "I had collected some plants for you such as *R. kiusianum*, *R. nakaharae*, *R. yakushmanum*. If you need them, please send me the sheet of importation tags." I was not yet aware of rhododendron. My interest at that time was growing camellias outdoors on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and conifers to act as wind shelters. I did not ask for his offering. What a mistake on my part!

Over the years I sent Dr. Rokujo catalogs and sponsored him for membership in plant societies, including life member in the American Horticulture Society. Meanwhile he sent me much plant material, Christmas gifts, and many valuable books on Japanese trees, camellias, and rhododendron. I sent him plants, bulbs, and his orders from nurserymen. Early in our relationship he explained that he had very decided color choices, preferring purple, deep blue, clear white, vermilion red, and excluding fuchsia, cerise, mauve, and especially "washed

out" purple. Despite the name tags, if the resulting flowers were not a proper purple, he was "disappointed."

In 1956, I had assumed the management of Barnard's Inn Farm, the family property on Martha's Vineyard. The land included old farm buildings and barns on 20 acres of open area surrounded by stone walls. There was no greenhouse or caretaker. I had decided to grow an arboretum from seed and was armed with memberships in many plant societies and the desire to improve the horticulturally deprived island.

Letters of June 1957 from Dr. Rokujo asked, "Are you interested in modern varieties of Japanese azaleas? Their flowers measured more than four inches across on small plants." He added, "I saved the seeds of more than 300 kinds of rarer and unusual



Strong pink 'Late Love' shows the characteristic low-growing, almost flowing habit of the North Tisbury hybrids, forming a good horizontal contrast with the columnar *Cupressus sempervirens*. (Photo by Polly Hill.)

plants,” of which he sent me some, with the advice on how to treat them: “They should be planted in [a] 1:1 mixture of coarse sand and peat in sunshine as for Rhododendron.” Some of these seeds were planted along the border strip of a driveway at my home in Wilmington, Delaware, and some were planted in a plowed strip of the old orchard field on the Martha’s Vineyard property, which thus became the start of my nursery. Plants were carefully labeled and mapped. Regrettably, however, the deer marched through and knocked down the labels, and mice, rabbits, and birds added to the confusion.

In a letter asking me for purple violets, Dr. Rokujo added, “I am enclosing the seeds of very fine Japanese violas and *Hylomecan japonica* (*Chelidonium japonicum*), which is a woodlander, with hairy golden poppy-like flowers for semi-shade. For germination of viola, cold exposure is necessary. I use pulverized sphagnum mix only. Are you growing irises, tree peonies, and so on?” For 30 years letters like this one were for me an advanced course in worldwide horticulture, as I tried to keep pace with his generosity and learning. Step by step I documented my accessions and deletions and kept these listings in order. Without these records, the Polly Hill Arboretum would never have developed.



Very red North Tisbury ‘Joseph Hill’ has wavy margins to the blooms, and forms a very dense creeping shrub 1 foot tall by about 4 feet wide in 13 years. (Photo by Polly Hill.)

In 1970 I decided I should name a rhododendron for Dr. Rokujo and chose one bred by the distinguished American breeder and renowned student of American azaleas, Dr. Henry Skinner, a former director of the US National Arboretum. Dr. Skinner gave me a hand-rooted plant he simply named #819-4, *R. serrulatum* x *R. prunifolium*. In July of 1972 his little propagule went into my nursery and on July 22 of 1981 it flowered with medium-large pink flowers. It was still in flower on August 8. The mid-summer bloom is a very welcome attribute and led to its being registered in 1986 as *R. ‘Tsuneshige Rokujo’* syn. *Shigi*. This nickname, given by his friends on the west coast of the US, seemed to me to be more appropriate for the rhododendron nursery trade. Before he died, I was able to send him both plants and photographs of this azalea. He replied that he was pleased with the selection.

His spirit of sharing was evident again in 1990 with his last gift of the following four of his propagations of young rooted plants. These reflected my interest in dwarf evergreen azaleas.

- ‘Mariko’ x ‘Mount Seven Star’ 90.056
- Gumpo ‘Kogane’ x ‘Mariko’ 90.057
- *R. serpyllifolium flavescens* 90.058
- *R. tchonoskii* var. *trinerve* x (*R. nakaharae* ‘Mariko’ x ‘Bengal Fire’) 90.059

Unfortunately, the yellow serpyllifolium failed; but the other three, the last of many legacies of a generous, patient, and persistent friend and plantsman, may be named, registered, and available for
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Table 1.
Dr. Rokujo’s Crosses of
Rhododendron, with Seed
of Progeny Sent to Polly Hill

- ‘Chinyeyi’ x ‘W. Leith’
- ‘Chinyeyi’ x *nakaharae*
- ‘Kogane’ x ‘Mariko’
- ‘Maruba Osakazuki’ x lost label of male
- R. metternichii kyomaruense* x *williamsianum*
- R. nakaharae* x *kaempferi*
- R. nakaharae* x ‘Kin-no-sai’
- R. nakaharae* x ‘Mount Seven Star’
- R. nakaharae* x ‘W. Leith’
- R. tchonoskii* var. *trinerve* x *nakaharae* (‘Mariko’ x ‘Mount Seven Star’)
- ‘W. Leith’ x *nakaharae*

Table 2.
Rhododendron Cultivars
from Dr. Rokujo

Polly Hill #	Source	Name
63-001	seed HP	‘Alexander’
63-003	seed	‘Andante’
61-076-2	seed HP	‘Bartlett’
65-041	seed	‘Corinna Borden’
80-094	rooted	‘Eiko san’
61-076-1	seed HP	‘Gabrielle Hill’
63-003	seed HP	‘Hot Line’
61-083	seed HP	‘Jeff Hill’
61-079	seed HP	‘Joseph Hill’
64-005	seed	‘Lady Locks’
61-079-2	seed HP	‘Late Love’
65-041	seed	‘Libby’
61-076	seed HP	‘Louisa’
61-080	seed	‘Marilee’
62-036	rooted	‘Matsuyo’
79-011	rooted	‘Midori’
61-080	seed	‘Nakami’
61-077	seed HP	‘Pink Pancake’
61-084	seed HP	‘Red Fountain’
61-084	seed HP	‘Susannah Hill’
63-003-3	seed	‘Trill’
61-081	seed	‘Wild Wealth’
61-080-2	seed	‘Wintergreen’
61-041-1	rooted	‘Yaye’
61-041	rooted	‘Yuka’

Note: HP = hand pollinated

1946-1947 — Approximately 15,000 azaleas from B.Y. Morrison's top 1200 selections of azalea crosses are planted on seven acres of the southern flank of Mt. Hamilton in the US National Arboretum.

1949 — The Arboretum's first opening for the azalea display, and Morrison was assigned full time to the Arboretum July 1.

September 1952 — Dr. Henry T. Skinner appointed second Director of the Arboretum. He was an azalea enthusiast. Especially favoring the native azaleas, he was responsible for the extensive planting of native and deciduous azaleas in Azalea Valley.

1952-1962 — Azalea Valley was extensively planted with deciduous azaleas, including Knap Hill, Mollis, Exbury, Ghent, and American species.

May 3, 19 — Morrison Garden at the Arboretum dedicated. Designed by B.Y. Morrison, this garden displays the Glenn Dale azalea hybrids that he selected and introduced.

1966-1972 — Volunteer Dr. Roy Magruder, retired Beltsville scientist,

worked very hard on assessing the Glenn Dales in the Arboretum collection and on acquiring missing cultivars. He also evaluated the gardens and made specific suggestions for cultural improvements that were acted upon over the next 10 years.

April 1971 — Dedication of the Lee Azalea Garden to honor the late Frederic P. Lee, who served as chairman for the Arboretum's advisory committee for over 20 years and published *The Azalea Book* in 1958. This garden contains late-blooming (June) azaleas, mainly Satsuki.

January 1973 — Dr. John Creech was appointed the third Director of the US National Arboretum. He was responsible for acquiring azaleas and other plant material on plant exploration trips to Japan and Korea.

May 21, 1981 — Dr. Marc Cathey appointed as fourth Director of the Arboretum.

1990 — Barbara L. Bullock begins as fifth Curator of the Arboretum's azalea collections.

[The February issue of "The Azalea Clipper" also contained an overview of the George Harding Memorial Azalea Garden at RiverFarm. This will be reprinted in an upcoming issue soon, Ed.]

Oconee Chapter

Frank Bryan, Newsletter Editor
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All hands have been working hard to help set up the 2002 convention in Atlanta, April 17-21. Ruth and Frank Bryan are coordinating volunteers for the many special activities. Help was requested for the registration and information desk April 17-19, plant sale set up April 16, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and tear down, April 22, 8 a.m. to 12 noon plant sales, and to work the sales area April 17-21. There were also opportunities for tour bus captains.

Note especially that there was a Convention Store and a Trade Show area for nursery owners and green industry products. Both were open on the same schedule as the plant sales times.

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distribution. At present they are growing in the Polly Hill Arboretum.

Among my plant introductions other than rhododendron that originated with material from Dr. Rokujo are:

- *Ilex crenata* 'Muffin', 66-018, from seed
- *Magnolia hypoleuca* 'Lydia', 66-004, rooted
- *R. metternichii* from Oki Islands, about 20 plants, 67-001, from seed
- *R. dauricum* 'Album', no selections, 68-001

Reference

For more information on North Tisbury hybrids, see also: Hill, Polly. 1991. "North Tisbury Nakaharae Azaleas." *The Azalean*. 13 (4): 71-74.

Polly Hill has retired from 40 years of horticulture. In 1957, she began work on what is now called the Polly Hill Arboretum when she was 50 years old and she and her husband inherited her family's 40-acre sheep farm in the North Tisbury area of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. She has been using the farm as a summer home since the 1930s. Inspired by the beautiful landscape, she decided to create an arboretum there by growing trees from seed. A few courses in botany at the University of Delaware and some at Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania encouraged her. A year of teaching in Japan after graduation and various trips through the years introduced her to new varieties of azaleas and rhododendrons not grown in the US, especially the ground cover azaleas. She and her husband developed the farm and bred, selected, trialed, and introduced new rhododendrons and aza-

leas. She has over 2,000 different plants in the living collection, all with labels and detailed histories. She has personally introduced over 83 new cultivars from her work in Martha's Vineyard. Among these are the North Tisbury azaleas, but dogwoods, hollies, magnolias, and Stewartia are also key collections. Polly still keeps a home on the grounds that she calls the Cow Barn, and she still visits when she can.

The **Polly Hill Arboretum** is a not-for-profit institution established in 1996 by a cooperative effort of the Vineyard Conservation Society, medical researcher and conservationist Dr. David H. Smith, the Hill family, and many of Polly's horticultural colleagues. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts joined in preserving the 60-acre Arboretum property by providing for a conservation restriction, which will prevent development of

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New Members

We welcome the following new members who have joined the Society as of March 17, 2002.

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the property in perpetuity. The grounds are made up of 20 acres of open fields and 40 acres of woodland and are noteworthy for the great care that has been given to the overall landscape effect of the diverse collection of plants. Research initiatives focus on the floras of eastern Asia and the close relationships shared by those plants with those of the eastern US. Tours, lectures, and some internships are available. The mission statement is grounded in Polly Hill's inspiring work:

The mission of the Polly Hill Arboretum is to perpetuate the experimental tradition in horticulture established by Polly Hill, encompassing the dissemination of knowledge of plants and scientific procedure through educational programs, research, and exploration. The Arboretum seeks to preserve its meadows and woodlands, to promote an understanding of its collections, and to encourage their utilization for scholarship, observation, and the enjoyment of all.

For more information, contact:

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