

Arneson Hybrids

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This is the story of Ivan Leonard Arneson, the grandson of one of many Norwegians (about a third of Norway's population) who immigrated to North America because of the United States Homestead Act of 1862, and his wife Robertha Burrell. Ivan was born in Westbrook, Minnesota in 1910. Life was very harsh in that southwestern part of Minnesota, with grasshopper infestations, prairie fires, blustery winters, lack of trees for fuel source (most were cut for the increasing railroads), so in 1913 Ivan's dad packed up the family and all the belongings and headed west to the Clackamas area of Oregon.

Ivan's early childhood was spent around the Willamette River Valley. His passion was fishing the nearby Willamette River during breaks from school. While attending a teachers college in Monmouth, Oregon, Ivan met Robertha Burrell.

Graduating in 1935, Robertha taught school in a two-room country school in Astoria, on the Oregon coast. Ivan taught 7th grade students for nine years near his hometown of Canby. Ivan and Robertha married in 1938 and started a family and a 67 year journey together. While growing up, Ivan worked for farmers and nurserymen in the Canby area. In 1937 his fishing partner was a nurseryman who planned to retire. Since Ivan was free from teaching during the summer months, he approached his friend with an idea of growing fruit trees. His friend offered to help Ivan get started and turned some of his customers over to Ivan. Thus, the Arneson nursery began with 10,000 plum trees.

Ivan continued teaching until 1946 while getting the nursery established with other fruit trees, fruit tree rootstocks, shade and flowering trees, and shrubs - including rhododendrons. In 1950, the Arnesons bought a 24-acre farm, later adding four and a half acres, outside Canby on route 99 E .

Deciduous azaleas entered the Arneson's story in 1950 when the first Mollis azalea liners were procured. Mollis hybrids (*Azalea mollis* or *Rhododendron molle*) are a wide ranging group of deciduous azaleas that originated from Belgian and Dutch sources, being possible hybrids between *Rhododendron*

molle subsp. *molle* (Chinese) and *Rhododendron molle* subsp. *japonicum* (Japanese.) An artificial name *R. x kosterianum* is often used for this collective group. For more information about these hybrids see Galle's book on page 84.

Each year Ivan and Robertha bought more and more azaleas from local sources, such as Wade Robbins' azaleas with bright colors and good flowers. Ivan selected the best in Robbins' field for his stock plants, especially several good reds, and planted them in his azalea fields.



Arneson Nursery and the Azalea Fields



Ivan and Robertha next to one of their red hybrids circa 1980's

The Arnesons attended a presentation on Exbury azaleas by John Henny, one of the founding fathers of the American Rhododendron Society who imported Exbury azaleas from England after attending a rhododendron conference there in 1949. The Arnesons were smitten and in the mid-1950s Ivan and Robertha began an extensive collection of named Exbury and Mollis azaleas (and some seedlings) from a number of sources, mainly Wade Robbins and John Henny. They also acquired plants from other growers in Oregon: E.J. Kraus of Corvallis, a retired professor at Oregon State University, and P. H. "Jock" Brydon of Salem, an importer of English azaleas who also attended that rhododendron conference in England. The Arneson hybridization program began in 1959.

Hybridizing for Superior and Unique Azaleas

Ivan and Robertha began evaluating flowers in each set of seedlings they had purchased, and labeled and saved the best. This meant saving only between

one and five plants from a cross, although in one cross they saved 15. They then crossed these best plants with good named azaleas or crossed two named azaleas. The Arneson garden began with their collection of named azaleas and all of the best seedlings they had saved to watch for further crossings. They made many crosses, and as they came to bloom they carefully evaluated them. This enabled them to choose the best from each generation to get better results. During this time Ivan and Robertha also contributed their vast knowledge of grow-

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ing fruit trees to the Oregon's Nurserymen's Association and International Plant Propagator's Society.

By the 1980's Ivan and Robertha were making about 100 crosses a year and selling up to 20,000 plants a year. One of the Arnesons' goals was to develop bright and clear or intense flower colors, and especially good reds. Using Mollis seed from a cross of 'C.B. Van Nes' x 'Koster's Brilliant Red' obtained from E.J. Kraus resulted in plants with various shades of red. But one cross had a red bud opening to a red-edged flower with a yellow center. Ivan and Robertha crossed this variegated plant with several reds, creating more plants with variegated flowers. They also planted open-pollinated seed from the original variegated plant. All the resulting seedlings were pinkish, except one with orange-red buds opening to orange to yellow-orange. The local orchard mason bees did an admirable job, because this plant was good enough to be named 'Arneson Gem'.



Stelloh Garden

'Arneson Gem'

Another interest of the Arnesons has been to produce petaloid doubles with larger flowers. Every time they found a



'Arneson Ruby' in the Dauksza Garden

good flower that was partly double, they saved it, and started to hybridize for a larger-flowered double (corolla 3" to 4" in width).

With the advent of tissue culture technology, the Arnesons have been able to see many of their hybrids become commercially available. They began working with Bruce Briggs in the early 1980's and now most, if not all, of their registered hybrids are available in the trade.

For those visiting the Portland or Canby area, please stop by and visit the Arneson Garden at 249 South Sequoia Parkway in Canby, Oregon. It is now a horticultural park, offering picnicking, a woodland walking trail, benches and, most of all, a special azalea garden. The legacy continues.

Registered Arneson hybrids:

- 'Arneson Baby Doll',
- 'Arneson Cameo'
- 'Arneson Fairy Jewel'
- 'Arneson Flame'
- 'Arneson Frilly Orange'
- 'Arneson Gem'
- 'Arneson Golden Solitaire'
- 'Arneson Little Gem'
- 'Arneson Medallion'
- 'Arneson Pink'
- 'Arneson Ruby'
- 'Arneson Ruby Princess'
- 'Big Punkin'
- 'Canby'
- 'Cascade Pink'
- 'Fluffy'
- 'Frilly Lemon'
- 'Molalla Red'
- 'Mount Rainier'
- 'Nifty Fifty'
- 'Orange Splendor'
- 'Raspberry Delight'
- 'Red Sunset' (synonym: 'Arneson Red')
- 'Robbins Flame'
- 'Rose Ruffles'
- 'Soft Echo'
- 'Twinkie'

Most of those listed Arneson hybrids azaleas can be purchased from Greer Gardens in Eugene, Oregon

(www.greergardens.com)

or Whitney Gardens and Nursery

in Brinnon, Washington (www.whitneygardens.com)



Briggs Nursery

'Arneson Cameo'



Harold Greer Nursery

'Arneson Flame'



Greer Gardens

'Arneson Golden Solitaire'



Greer Gardens

'Arneson Little Gem'



Tijs Huisman

'Arneson Pink'



Greer Gardens

'Arneson Ruby Princess'



Stuart Imrie

'Big Punkin'



Diane Weissman

'Molalla Red'



Briggs Nursery

'Arneson Medallion'

Many thanks to all providers of photos to
Glen Jamieson (American Rhododendron Society- ARS Journal Editor),
and Sheldon Hatheway (son-in-law of Ivan and Robertha Arneson).

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