

## **‘WILSON FIFTY’ KURUME AZALEAS AND CAERHAYS**

Kurume is an inland city on the Japanese island of Kyushu which is the home of a large group of azaleas. The great English plant hunter, Ernest Wilson, visited Kurume in 1918. In April 1919 two sets of the 50 varieties of Kurume azaleas, as chosen by Wilson from the garden of Mr Kijiro Akashi in Kurume, arrived at the Arnold Arboretum in Massachusetts, USA, for propagation and distribution.

Wilson ensured that all the 50 plants were correctly labelled with the names given to them by Mr Akashi but later recognised the difficulty in pronouncing the Japanese names and added his own English names in 1926. The plants were however distributed initially under their Wilson numbers.

Kurume azaleas are all evergreen or semi evergreen, upright, medium to tall shrubs of 6-12ft in height in maturity. They have a dense and shapely habit and flower in March, April and May. Most flowers are single but some have hose in hose flowers. The colour range is from pink, red, purple and white with some flowers striped, edged or suffused with another colour.

Two sets of the ‘Wilson Fifty’ were sent to the UK in the early 1920s. One to my great grandfather, JC Williams (JCW), at Caerhays and one to John Barr Stevenson at Tower Court between Ascot and Bagshot. Wilson’s association with JCW had begun 20 years earlier while undertaking plant hunting expeditions in China initially for the Exeter based Veitch Nurseries and, subsequently, for the Arnold Arboretum and Professor Sargent.

Today the only known surviving mature and named collections of most of the ‘Wilson Fifty’ are at the Punch Bowl and Valley Gardens at Windsor Great Park and at the Isabella Plantation in Richmond Park. Exbury Gardens also has an older collection which is less well documented. Following the death of her husband, John Stevenson, his wife, Rosa, remarried General Harrison and they moved to Tremeer in Cornwall and many of the ‘Wilson Fifty’ came with them. Trewidden Garden near Penzance have also been establishing and rebuilding a ‘Wilson Fifty’ collection in recent years. Castle Howard established a collection in the 1980s but the demise of Sunningdale Nurseries in 1968 saw the end of commercial production of many of the original Wilson 50.

While maintaining the original Wilson 50 collection in its original form may be an exciting and worthwhile ambition there are a number of practical problems to address for those gardens, like Caerhays, who purported to have the full Wilson set 100 years ago.

1. In the current edition of the RHS Rhododendrons, Camellias & Magnolias yearbook Polly Cooke, a member of the Wilson 50 Legacy Project Team, has produced a very well researched article entitled ‘The Wilson 50 Muddle’. It would appear that there never were 50 Wilson originals and the herbarium records of the ‘Wilson 50’ at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University and those from Kew contain some duplicates and other key inconsistencies and differences even though annotated by Wilson himself.
2. The lifespan of these Kurume azaleas at Caerhays has been 100 years in only a very few instances. The majority of these plants seem to live for only 50 to 70 years in our high rainfall, high growth environment. Where they are cut back hard to regenerate, then their lifespan can be extended but head gardeners and owners did not know that in the 1950s and 1960s and probably had other preoccupations in the post war years.

3. The original Wilson 50 were a selection from 250 varieties in Mr Akashi's garden. There are many other named Kurume azaleas growing in UK gardens which still have great garden merit and are grown by nurserymen but they are not part of the 50 although very similar in appearance with similarly difficult to pronounce Japanese names.
4. Inevitably azalea breeding has developed and moved on from its Japanese origins. Double flowered azalea houseplants are in every florist's shop. Ultimately what determines the success and survival of a particular variety is its enduring public appeal. As one delves more deeply into the Wilson 50 it is soon clear that the best known and grown survivors are still very garden worthy today while many others are not.

Against this background and with the enormous scope for muddle and confusion even from the outset with Japanese names we have attempted to locate and identify the 'Wilson 50' survivors which are still well, or just about still alive, here at Caerhays today.

Wilson, with the help of Mr Akashi, selected six out of the 50 as being the 'pick of them all'. These were:

'Azuma Kagami'

'Kirin'

'Kumo no Uye'

'Kurai no Himo'

'Kureno Yuki'

'Takasago'

Of these probably only two survive in their original form here today. Both remain in the Burncoose catalogue and their survival has been ensured by the planting of newer clumps since the 1960s and more recently.

It would seem from the survivors that the Wilson 50 were actually dotted around the garden in large clumps with the Rookery and Crinodendron Hedge being the location for several groups.

'Azuma Kagami' flowers as a huge clump and 'Kirin' grows similarly alongside it. Both have hose in hose flowers.



'Azuma Kagami'



'Kirin'

At the entrance to the gardens from the nursery at Burncoose grows what we call 'Salmon Kirin'. Could this in fact be 'Takasago' or 'Cherry Blossom' which also has a hose in hose flower? The incorrect name 'Tagasako' used to appear in old catalogues from South Down Nurseries, before the nurseries moved to Burncoose nearly 40 years ago.



'Salmon Kirin'

The garden planting records at Caerhays as well as records of gifts and acquisitions to the collections are extensive. In particular the correspondence from Wilson and George Forrest is voluminous. However JCW lost or left many of his garden notebooks on an overnight train to London in around 1930. Despite offering a large reward they were never recovered. This may well be why we can find no details of the Wilson 50 arriving here or details of what was planted where. Another frustration in this complex puzzle.

So which other Wilson 50 originals still definitely survive here?

'Hana Asobi'

'Hinode Giri'

'Ho o'

'Iro Hayama'

'Seikai'

'Shin Seikai'

'Shin Seikai' and 'Seikai' in several elderly clumps are very near the end of their lives as they are at Burncoose. This seems to be a short lived variety in comparison to 'Hinode Giri' which remains in its prime as a huge clump. As with so many elderly rhododendrons there is very little new growth to propagate from and cuttings from elderly plants so often perform poorly.



'Seikai'



'Shin Seikai'



'Hinodegiri'



'Ho o', 'Iro Hayama' and 'Hana Asobi' are growing reasonably well in dappled shade and have all benefited from a hard pruning in the last 20 years. Polly Cooke advises me that all three are incorrectly named and has corrected the naming of one of them.



'Hoo' – incorrectly named



'Irohayama' – incorrectly named



'Hana Asobi' – correct name is 'Azuma Kagami'

As you might expect, there are quite a number of elderly plants, especially in the Rookery, where we can have a guess at the identity but are far from certain. One or two have started sporting different colours here and there which adds to the confusion.



Sporting

A clump of Wilson 50 directly above the greenhouses grows in more sun and has, again, been reinvigorated by a hard cutback.



In the absence of any website that I can find which shows a full set of the 'Wilson 50' properly in flower I can really only speculate on the naming of these Rookery and greenhouse plants. Again Polly Cooke has advised on these next pictures and corrected the name of two of them. The 'speculation' on my part has therefore been clarified.



'Yorozuyo'



Rookery Path clump of 'Yorozuyo'



'Waka Kayede'

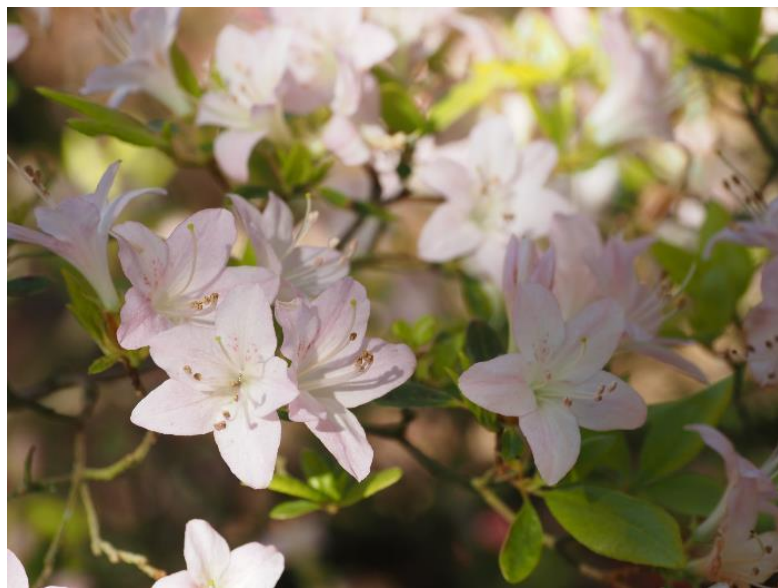




'Nani Wagata'



'Saotome' (possibly 'Suga No Ito')



'Hachika Tsugi'? Probably also 'Nani Wagata'.

I can also find references to the following in our garden archives:

‘Asa Gasumi’

‘Aya Kammuri’

‘Oino Mezame’

‘Saotome’

‘Tama No Utena’

So we struggle to amass about 20 possible survivors. Close examination of these unnamed (and speculative) survivors reveals that many of the varieties are very similar indeed albeit, perhaps, with different original names. I am, of course, largely guessing from the relatively sparse information available but, now, with the help of Polly Cooke the naming is more likely to be correct.

The original Wilson 50 were labelled with long lead labels with the Wilson names impressed into the lead. A few survive in the potting shed. For reasons best known only to grey squirrels these labels became particularly attractive to them. Once the greys replaced the reds here from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s the lead labels were irreparably chewed or simply vanished.

Amid all this ongoing speculation there came a moment of, perhaps, more clarity. In 2010 an overseas client of Burncoose Nurseries asked if we could try to assemble a ‘Wilson 50’ collection for them. We saw this more as an opportunity to improve our own lack of knowledge and also to bolster the remnants of the original collection here.

In July 2011 Windsor Great Park and the Isabella Plantation very kindly gave us permission to gather cuttings under their guidance from their two collections. Jaimie Parsons and Andrew Mills then set off on the challenge and returned to Caerhays with cuttings from 39 varieties of which 31 were then grown on successfully. At the Isabella Plantation the cuttings came mainly from their nursery beds with the help of Jo Scrivener and from the Punch Bowl at Windsor with the assistance of the late Mark Flanagan.

A full list is attached:

‘Aya Kammuri’	No. 19
‘Beni Fude’	No. 30
‘Bijinsui’	No. 13
‘Gosho Zakura’	No. 46
‘Hachika tsugi’	No. 7
‘Hana Asobi’	No. 50
‘Hatsugiri’	No. 53 (not listed in the original 50 but listed in both sets of herbarium specimens)

‘Hinodegiri’	No. 42
‘Hoo’	No. 9
‘Irohyama’	No. 8
‘Kasane kagaribi’	No. 32
‘Kirin’	No. 22
‘Kiritsubo’	No. 24
‘Kumo no uye’	No. 28
‘Kurai no himo’	No. 40
‘Oi-No-Mezame’	No. 25
‘Omoine’	No. 26
‘Osaraku’	No. 17
‘Otome’	No. 18
‘Rashomon’	No. 37
‘Sakura Tsukasa’	No. 44
‘Saotome’	No. 21
‘Shin Sekai’	No. 3
‘Shin utena’	No. 28
‘Suga-no-ito’	No. 31
‘Sui yoki’	No. 10
‘Tancho’	No. 6
‘Ukamuse’	No. 47

As these plants grew to flowering size we were able to photograph most of what we had and to then plant out clumps of many of the missing plants here. Nevertheless these photographs made clear to us that confusion and mistakes in naming were still a very real problem.

The arrival of roe deer in this part of Cornwall around 10 years ago did little to help these clumps establish and we were probably slow to surround them with wire netting guards. Dry summers have not helped either



in the meantime but we do now have some decent established groups of some of the varieties which were here originally.

Attached to this article is therefore an update or alternative to the extremely sparse existing Wilson 50 website pictures that I can find online. I am not going to pretend that this is anything but a very amateur effort and I expect to be shot down in flames on the naming of many of them from others who know much more about this subject than we do here.

In a sense then this little photographic library may never be right. The history and origins of the Wilson 50 are, as we now know, a muddle. The naming and numbering muddles in gardens with Wilson 50 collections are almost inevitable and will have diversified. Many of these plants have very similar flowers and the colours of individual plants change as the flower develops and can change according to weather conditions in the previous year or at flowering times.

I doubt anyone alive will get us to the definitely correct answer but hope that others will be able to improve on my initial cockshy at the problem. Gardeners know their own plants in their own gardens and information is passed down the generations. As we can readily see here that need not mean the names are correct!

My final thoughts on the Wilson 50 are that there are today growing here several other Kurume type azaleas which have (also) survived for many decades and are just as garden worthy today as the best of the Wilson 50.

Huge clumps of Azalea 'Hinomayo' adorn the entrance to the garden. *R. kaempferi*, *R. kiusianum* and *R. Obtusum* Group line the sides of the drive and certainly date from the 1920s. One suspects that JCW invested in rather more new Japanese azaleas than just the Wilson 50.



'Hinomayo'

Charles H Williams VMH  
June 2021






**WILSON'S FIFTY**

	<b>Japanese Name</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Wilson's Renaming</b>	<b>Rough Translation of Japanese Name</b>
	'Agemaki'	No. 41	'Jose'	A style of women's hairdo in the Meiji era, in which the hair is twisted into a knot on top of the head and held in place with pins
	'Aioi'	No. 43	'Fairy Queen'	More than 2 plants are grown together Double stemmed plants
	'Asa Gasumi'	No. 14	'Rosy Morn'	Morning mist
	'Aya Kammuri'	No. 19	'Pinkie'	A twill weaved crown
	'Azuma Kagami'	No. 16	'Pink Pearl'	An history book of samurai family
	'Benifude'	No. 30	'Sunbeam'	Lip brush
	'Bijinsui'	No. 13	'Little Imp'	Fascinating by a beautiful woman
	'Fudesute Yama'	No. 35	'Poppy'	
	'Gosho Zakura'	No. 46	'Vanity'	Cherry blossoms of an imperial palace
	'Hachika Tsugi'?	No. 7	'Prudence'	Flower Pot Carried girl-Name of old fairy tale A girl covered her head with a flower pot

	'Hana Asobi'?	No. 50	'Sultan'	Playing with flowers
	'Hatsugiri'	No. 53		
	'Hinodegiri'	No. 42	'Red Hussar'	Sunrise of Kirishima Island (near Yakushima)
	'Hinode no Taka'	No. 48	'Ruby'	Hawk in the sunrise
	'Hoo'?	No. 9	'Apple Blossom'	Chinese Phoenix
	'Ima Shojo'	No. 36	'Fascination'	Ima-Now Sho h jo – Girl Shojo – Virgin
	'Irohayama'?	No. 8	'Dainty'	Coloured leaved mountain
	'Kasane Kagaribi'?	No. 32	'Rosita'	Layered bonfire (watch fire)
	'Kasumi Gaseki'	No. 12	'Elf'	Name of an area where many government offices are located in Tokyo now. Used be a Barrier



				station. (Seki means Barrier)
	‘Katsura no Hana’	No. 27	‘Ruth’	Moon light (Katsura is a tree on the moon in the Chinese legend)
	‘Kimigayo’	No. 15	‘Cherub’	Emperor’s generation/the Japanese national anthem/Another name of Iwachidori *2
	‘Kirin’	No. 22	‘Daybreak’	A legendary Chinese animal with a horn
	‘Kiritsubo’	No. 24	‘Twilight’	Name of an Emperor in The Tale of Genji* (the hero’s father or maybe mother)
	‘Kumo no Ito’ (syn. ‘Suga no Ito’)	No. 31	‘Betty’	String of a spider/string of Suga?
	‘Kumo no Uye’	No. 28	‘Salmon Prince’	Above the clouds
	‘Kurai no Himo’	No. 40	‘Carmine Queen’	String for rank emblem
	‘Kureno Yuki’	No. 2	‘Snowflake’	Snow in the end of the year
	‘Nani Wagata’	No. 5	‘Painted Lady’	Old name of Osaka Bay
	‘Oino Mezame’	No. 25	‘Melody’	Awakeness of the old age – ancient book?

	‘Omoine’	No. 26	‘Dame Lavender’	Sleep with thinking of the person you love
	‘Osaraku’	No. 17	‘Penelope’	Eternal pleasure
	‘Osaraku’ seedling	No. 49	‘Winsome’	Eternal pleasure (Seedling)
	‘Otome’?	No. 18	‘Maiden’s Blush’	Maiden
	‘Rasho Mon’	No. 37	‘Meteor’	Name of a Noh song *1
	‘Sakura Tsukara’	No. 44	‘All-a-Glow’	Cherry blossom – Officer (Higher grade)
	‘Saotome’	No. 21	‘Peachblossom’	A rice planting girl
	‘Seikai’	No. 1	‘Madonna’	World
	‘Shin Seikai’	No. 3	‘Old Ivory’	New world
	‘Shintoki no Hagasane’	No. 20	‘Rose Taffetas’	Double Leaves of new season
	‘Shin Utena’	No. 28	‘Santoi’	New descent/Genuine descent
	‘Suetsumu’	No. 34	‘Flame’	Another name of Safflower=red flower/Name of a woman with red

				nose in The Tale of Genji
	‘Suiyohi’	No. 10	‘Sprite’	Dranken Empress Yokihi (One of the most beautiful women in Chinese history)
	‘Takasago’	No. 11	‘Cherryblossom’	Another name of Tawain/Name of a Noh song (Often used for weddings at shrines)
	‘Tamafuyo’	No. 23	‘Fancy’	Jewel cotton rose
	‘Tama no Utena’	No. 45	‘Flamingo’	A beautiful tower/A beautiful palace
	‘Tancho’?	No. 6	‘Seraphim’	Japanese crane
	‘Tsuta Momiji’	No. 33	‘Cardinal’	Coloured leaves of Ivy
	‘Ukamuse’	No. 47	‘Princess Delight’	Name of a Japanese restaurant in Osaka They serve suke in abalone cup
	‘Waka Kayede’	No. 38	‘Red Robin’	Young maples
	‘Yaye Hiryu’ (syn. ‘Yayi Giri’)	No. 39	‘Scarlet Prince’	Eightfold (Double-petaled) blood red dragons
	‘Yorozuyo’	No. 4	‘Purity’	Eternal generation



## Wilson 50 Information and comments for Caerhays

Identifying any of the Wilson 50 today is challenging. Despite the list Wilson published in his monograph (1921) and again with English names and a couple of descriptive changes (1926/7), these alone do not provide sufficient information to assist. The recent discovery of the Wilson 50 Herbarium specimens at The Arnold Arboretum has been helpful, especially when compared with those sent to Kew in December 1920 but you and I are both correct in using the word muddle! Contributions to the muddle are:

### 1. Wilson and whoever helped him



In Japan, according to Dr Okamoto of the World Azalea Centre, there is no azalea called Hachika Tsugi (Wilson no. 7, White suffused with lavender, photo in my article) only Hatsukatsugi, (photo from Dr Okamoto left). The Kew herbarium specimen labelled Hatsukatsugi matches Dr Okamoto's photo quite easily, although it shows short stamens are present, while they appear not to have emerged in the photo from Japan. Then there are the two azaleas described as white striped peach, no. 23 Tamafuyo and no. 46 Goshō Zakura. It is accepted in Japan that these two azaleas exist in the UK under those names but white striped peach doesn't match the colour of azaleas in Japan called Tamafuyo and Goshō Zakura.

Then there are the differences shown in my article between no. 32 Kasane Kagaribi and no. 47 Ukamuse. The final straw is Wilson including Hinodegiri and Yaye Hiryu (also known as Yaye g=Giri) in the fifty neither of which is a Kurume azalea but an Edo Kirishima azalea. Likewise, Hatsugiri. I am sure that Wilson excluded all of them from his display at the Massachusetts Show in 1920 for this reason and put in Kocho no mai (Amoenum) at no. 49 as it is a Kurume. Dr Okamoto explained to me that whilst all of the Wilson 50 are *Rhododendron obtusum* the Japanese regard Kurume and Edo Kirishima azaleas as regional groupings and seem most particular about it! Edo Kirishima occur near to Tokyo and are said to be older than Kurume.

### 2. The Yokohama Nursery



Looking through the catalogues of the Yokohama Nursery from the early 1920s until 1939, differences occur in the descriptions of azaleas that form part of the Wilson 50 through the years. The most striking 'error' is the 1939 description of Irohayama as 'Beautiful cerise with white stripes, single'.

The photo left is what Sandling Park know as 'Shin Seikai' and this azalea has crept into many other collections from the 1930s onwards. The flowers are hose in hose and cream coloured but are too small and spotting on the upper lobe is absent, so it cannot be 'Shin Seikai'. I believe that a number of erroneous Wilson 50 azaleas were introduced in this way, via the Yokohama Nursery in the 1930s.

### 3. Post World War II

Caerhays and Tower Court contributed Wilson 50 azaleas in the late 1940s to establish a collection at RHS Wisley. In 1958 Francis Hangar showed the complete fifty at the Chelsea Flower Show. Old Herbarium specimens from RHS Wisley show Kasane Kagaribi as a single flower and Ukamuse as hose in hose. I tentatively conclude that what we know as these two azaleas in the UK should stand, as the Wisley plants were derived from the original introductions. That statement holds for Caerhays only. J B Stevenson regularly wrote to Lionel de Rothschild. The constant theme was 'I need to buy more Wilson 50 from the Yokohama Nursery; will you share the cost?' I didn't see any replies but of course the 'new-fangled device' called the telephone was used frequently and prevented continuous threads of written information; they also met up for Rhododendron Society/Association business and may have replied in person. The impression gained from the letters is that JBS could not keep the Wilson 50. This is particularly true for Kurai no Himo. Jim Russell's personal notes from his time at Ray Wood comments that he doubts if Kurai no Himo is hardy in the UK. The Isabella Plantation have 'Kurai no Himo' growing outside in their nursery, it roots easily enough but my experience so far is death in the first few years. I have two one year old plants to try again and I gave two others to Tom Clarke at Exbury for him to try, as a challenge!

Conclusions: There are at least ten of the fifty that are questionable or not yet found. Finding all of the UK Wilson 50 collection is nigh on 'Mission Impossible', unless you have more tucked away at Caerhays.

Polly Cooke

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