
North Tisbury Nakaharae Azaleas

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North Tisbury azaleas are becoming more generally available in the market place so it might be a good time to discuss their history and the several qualities which distinguish them. This paper refers only to the nakaharae group.

Ground cover azaleas were new in the late sixties. They were new because they were bred from the species *R. nakaharae*, which was new to our horticulture in the West. *Rhododendron nakaharae* is endemic to Taiwan, although it may have originated thousands of years ago when Taiwan was part of the Chinese mainland. In time the species established progeny on the various mountains in Taiwan. The first time it was mentioned in print was in 1908 in Japan. The name honors the Japanese botanist, Dr. Nakahara.

At Barnard's Inn Farm on Martha's Vineyard I am growing four different individuals of *R. nakaharae*. The first cultivar, named 'Mariko', was given to me as a tiny rooted cutting by Dr. August Kehr in 1973. Its story goes back before 1965 to the first introduction to England by Dr. Tsuneshige Rokujo of Tokyo, a knowledgeable and well-known rhododendron breeder. I quote this bit of history from a letter of August 5, 1985 to me from Dr. Rokujo. "As for nakaharae 'Mariko' I sent nakaharae to Mr. Cox more than 20 years ago. He gave the division (or cutting) to Mr. A. F. George, the owner of Hydon Nurseries. He got the A.M. (The Royal Horticultural Society Award of Merit) in 1970 and gave the name of 'Mariko', after my first daughter. I know Mr. George personally. The original plant came from Mr. Ichiro Yenomoto, the farmer and collector of our native azaleas and *Rhododendron*. He has one of the best collections of our native plants. His nakaharae might have come to him before the war." Dr. Kehr told me that his plant came from Mr. Peter Cox of Scotland. In the 18 years since I nurtured this tiny 'Mariko' it has grown to ten inches high by 26 inches wide, clearly a rock garden treasure. Its color is 43-C flushed 54-A in the RHS red group.

In 1974 I purchased my second cultivar of *R. nakaharae*, #73/195 from the Rhododendron Species Foundation. That number has been replaced in the RSF catalog by the cultivar 'Mount Seven Star'. The plant #73/195 now measures nine inches high by 33 inches wide. Its form is quite perfect, but the flower color leaves something to be desired, paling beside 'Mount Seven Star'.

My third cultivar is 'Mount Seven Star', named for the English name of the mountain in the North of Taiwan from which its seed was collected. Mr. C. S. Kuo of Taiwan sent a pinch of seed to Anne Fielder, my neighbor on Martha's Vineyard, which she passed on to me in 1969. Only one seedling remains. The mountain on which it was collected and for which the cultivar is named, is called Mt. Chising in Chinese. It is in the Tatung Range in the North of Taiwan. This many-branched dwarf plant has small deep green leaves, set close together, large deep red flowers, RHS #40 A, "pure cadmium red", says the artist Jeanne Holgate, and all its parts have red hairs, typical of the species. It measures 15 inches high by 52 inches wide after 18 years from seed.

I am now registering the fourth plant which came to me as a seed in 1962 from Dr. Rokujo. It took 29 years to bloom. Its measurements are six inches high by 19 inches wide. The seed envelope was labelled *R. nakaharae* open pollinated.

Other plants from that envelope of seeds proved to be hybrids. I have named only two of them, 'Marilee' and 'Wintergreen'. The only one to come true to the species I have named, with Dr. Rokujo's help, 'Nakami'. That means "beautiful nakaharae". 'Nakami', my fourth plant, is another rock garden gem and worthy in every respect.

Labels do not always tell the whole story. In 1967 I was sent a plant of D. G. Hobbie's labelled "nakaharae". But the label belied the plant's its hybrid origin and was undistinguished, as were so many of my hybrid seedlings.

In 1971 Dr. John Creech sent me two seedlings from seed he had gathered on Mount Morrison in Taiwan. They were also labelled *R. nakaharae*. One died and the other I am registering as 'Fuzzy'. It is clearly a wild hybrid with *R. oldhamii*, which Dr. Creech assures me grows wild along with *R. nakaharae* "all over the mountain". My plant grows prostrate on the ground with soft furry leaves and red flowers. It is not reliably hardy north of Zone 8, I am told.

After evaluating the four cultivars of *R. nakaharae* from the wild that I have described, I would say that all four fit the description of the species in Li's *Woody Flora of Taiwan*¹. To paraphrase his discussion of *R. nakaharae* he says, "A low shrub, often prostrate, many branched". He further describes the branchlets as covered with strigose and appressed hairs, the leaves polymorphic, short and broad, also with hairs on both sides and margins. Petioles and pedicels are also hairy. Flowers, one to three, are terminal. Stamens nine or ten, sometimes five or six, unequal. Ovary is pubescent. Capsules are globose or ovoid about eight mm long, pubescent. Li describes the flower color as scarlet, though the RSF plant is somewhat more faded than that. 'Mariko' is closer to scarlet, and 'Mount Seven Star' is both deeper and richer red and larger than the others, a superb flower. It is a plant with enormous

presence whatever your garden style may be.

With this background for the species I will now try to describe the hybrids of *R. nakaharae* that have been given the name of "ground cover azaleas". Dr. Rokujo has a large collection of azaleas in his garden that he uses for breeding. In the introduction to the translation of *The Brocade Pillow*² of Ito Ihei, p. xviii, John Creech said that Morrison, Gable, and other early American breeders used nearly the same species as the early Japanese breeders. Only recently has *R. nakaharae* from Taiwan been incorporated for dwarfness. It is Dr. Rokujo who made that contribution, after I had requested dwarf azaleas of the kind I had seen in one or two Japanese gardens. He made crosses with *R. nakaharae* and sent me the first seeds in 1961.

Some time before 1961 he had purchased in England a plant whose flower was an unusual shade of bronzy-orange. It is listed in Hillier's catalog dated 1963-1964, on page 136. Its name is 'W. Leith', and the comment was "a very striking plant". This is going pretty far for a catalog from Hillier. Rokujo crossed it with his *nakaharae* 'Mariko'. He was hoping for larger, finer red flowers and low creeping plants. That cross resulted in my seedling selections 'Joseph Hill' and the reciprocal crosses 'Susannah Hill' and 'Red

Fountain'. Observe that this cross does not involve any Japanese species or Gumpo azaleas.

In searching for pink flowers, at my request, he used the Satsuki azalea 'Chinyeyi', a white-flowered seed parent, with *R. nakaharae* as pollen parent. My selections of that cross are 'Michael Hill', 'Pink Pancake', and 'Late Love'.

Very much in the Japanese taste is the Gumpo azalea 'Kin-no-sai', with narrow leaves and split-petal flowers of bright vermilion red. He crossed it with *R. nakaharae*, I grew the seed and selected 'Alexander'. I might also have registered its sibling, now known as 'Hill's Single Red', but I did not. Not only is 'Alexander' a vigorous dwarf creeper, but it is also ground-hugging and cascading when permitted.

Also in 1961 Dr. Rokujo sent *R. nakaharae* seeds crossed with *R. kaempferi*. One of the two remaining progeny is known as 'Flaming Mamie'. I rejected it as being what I called "Airport Red". These two plants are shrubby in habit, not prostrate ground covers.

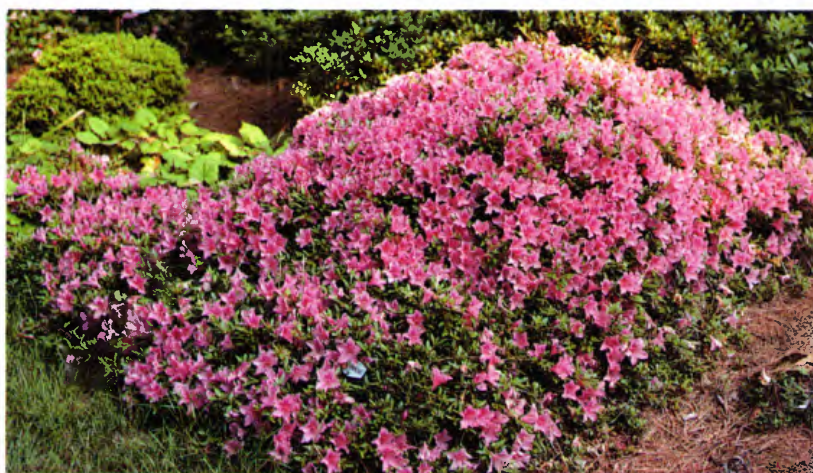
The three selections using 'W. Leith' as one parent bloom about the first of June. The others, under the influence of Gumpo parentage, bloom

later in June and July. As a group they are the latest to bloom of all the evergreen azaleas. They follow on the heels of the beautiful Robin Hill azaleas.

It would be a welcome addition to this group of plants to include a white-flowered form. Red is strongly dominant in *R. nakaharae* and so far there are no white plants with the particular characteristics transmitted by *nakaharae*. My best offering for a late blooming, compact, and white flowering cultivar is 'Yuka' (pronounced Yoo-kah). It was selected by Dr. Rokujo from a collection of Gumpo. He rooted it and sent it to me un-named with four other selections also un-named. Four of the five are single-flowered whites. 'Yuka' is the hardiest, but the others, 'Yaye' (rhymes with Hi), 'Matsuyo', and



Top Right: 'Yuka'
Bottom Right: 'Michael Hill'
Below: 'Pink Pancake'



'Midori' are beautiful with three- to four-inch flowers successfully growing in my Zone 6. The fifth selection he sent me is a double-flowered coral colored plant I named 'Eiko San' [see Letters to the Editor, p. 76]. It is very dwarf, almost flat, and slowly increases in size. It is truly double, seven times. Each layer has five lobes in the corolla, making a 35 petalled rose-like flower on a carpeting plant. It is possible that my azalea 'Eiko San' already had the Japanese name 'Beni Banyo'. 'Matsuyo' is white flowered with many salmon colored stripes, flecks and sectors, giving it a peppermint effect. 'Yaye' with four-inch flowers of white also has intrusions or borders of coral or rosy colors. 'Midori' is mostly pure white with a charreuse throat, and is three and one-half to four inches wide. 'Midori' and 'Yaye' are less hardy than 'Yuka' and 'Matsuyo', but I grow them all in Zone 6 at Barnard's Inn Farm.

The following details relate to my ground-cover azalea hybrids, one of whose parents is the species *R. nakaharae*. All crosses are by Dr. Rokujo, who sent me the seeds. Color ratings are from the RHS chart, early edition.

'Alexander': the leaf is long and narrow with red hairs. Flowers are



seven cm. across, vermilion red. Winter buds and pedicels are red. Winter foliage is a dark green-maroon. The plant spreads readily and cascades when permitted. It blooms in late June.

'Joseph Hill': the plant is thickly branched, creeps and roots well, with a smooth and flowing habit. The flower is a deep rich cadmium red 44 A, 6.5 cm. wide. It blooms the earliest of this group which is June the first at Barnard's Inn Farm.

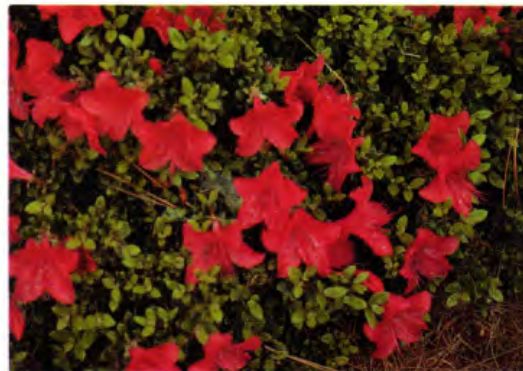
'Late Love': is thickly branched, creeping over the ground and rooting. Flowers are apricot pink 50 A with purple blotch 54 B and 6.5 cm. across. It blooms late for a long period in late June and July.

'Marilee': very vigorous low shrub, tightly twigged and mounding. Flowers are 5.5 cm. across, the color red 47 C with purple blotch 52 A, which is a sparkling combination. It blooms in late June.

'Michael Hill': the fastest creeper of this group. Give it room to spread. Flowers are seven cm. across and frilled. The color is a bright salmon pink 49A-B with blotch 57A. Blooming in June, it will creep and bloom under tall or leggy plants.

'Pink Pancake': has a very narrow leaf, spreads and roots well. Flowers are a glowing peach-pink 48C with blotch purple 57A, and 6.5 cm. wide. It is hardy in Zone 6, but a trifle less hardy than its siblings.

Below: 'Mount Seven Star'



'Red Fountain': strong branches that reach up then arch over. They are covered with four cm. flowers of deep red, occasionally appearing double with petaloidy. It blooms in early June.

'Susannah Hill': mounded twiggy shrub with broad and rounded, hairy leaves. Its flowers are four cm. wide, appearing double with petaloidy. They resemble dark red "rose-buds", lightly blotched strong red. It blooms in early June.

'Wintergreen': very dwarf plant which spreads and roots in a regular circle pattern. The leaf is long and narrow with red hairs. The leaves hold a good green color in winter. Flowers are 6.5 cm. across, vermilion red and lightly ruffled. It is a hardy and reliable plant.

For those who grow the nakaharae group of azaleas I offer two caveats. One, they have proved delicious to rabbits, in fact irresistible, from November to April. Wire cages are one way to handle the problem. The other warning concerns maintenance. I have seen an untutored groundsman minister to my ground cover plants at the end of a long shovel full of coarse mulch, instead of on his knees with a hand tool. Azaleas are very brittle and the branches are easily broken. Even three or four years' growth, complete with flower buds, can be shovelled off in a few seconds. And please do not expect showy results the first few years. They take time to get established, but then get better every year, both in and out of bloom.

References

- 1) Hui-Lin Li, *Woody Flora of Taiwan*, Livingston Publishing Co. Narbeth, PA, 1963, page 698.
- 2) Ito Ihei, *The Brocade Pillow* (translation by Kaname Kato with introduction and commentary by John L. Creech). Weatherhill, New York and Tokyo, 1984 p. xviii. □