

James Harris Hybrids

Roger Duvall — Atlanta, Georgia

[This article was contributed by a rhododendron lover who knows James Harris; some Harris hybrids were featured at the joint ARS/ASA convention Atlanta, April 17-21, 2002. Ed.]

James Harris has been hybridizing evergreen azaleas for 30 years. He got his start working with fellow Georgians Ralph Pennington and Bruce Hancock. At about the same time, he became acquainted with the director of the National Arboretum, Henry Skinner, who also encouraged James in his work. According to those who know him best, James eats, sleeps, and dreams evergreen azaleas. He has named about 50 of his hybrids, but unfortunately, none of them has been registered. Fred Galle's *Azaleas* lists 32 Harris hybrids, and this does not include James' more recent plants. James has drawn from a broad palette

of sources to produce his hybrids: *Rhododendron kaempferi*, *R. oldhamii*, *R. nakaharae*, *R. yedoense* var. *poukhanense*, Satsuki, and Gable, Glenn Dale, and Back Acres hybrids.

Sadly, commercial azalea growers too often overlook the Harris hybrids. Given the choice between 'Kirin' (syn. 'Coral Bells') and 'Gloria Still' by Harris, or between 'Hinodegiri' and 'Rain Fire' by Harris, many gardeners would choose the Harris hybrid, and our gardens, as a result, would be more interesting and more beautiful. I hope that readers of this article will make the effort to locate these plants and to

popularize them in their gardening circles. What follows is a list that James Harris provided of his personal favorites.

First Hybridizing Phase

Mr. Harris' hybridizing has gone through two phases and is now enter-

containers, or the tops of walls. James says that it is "limber, like English ivy." It layers wherever it touches the ground, producing new plants for the gardener fortunate enough to have it. 'Pink Cascade' has been issued a 25-year patent in Europe and is in tissue culture there. James estimates that

the Nicholas Gyomark nurseries have sold 250,000 plants. The pastel color and the affinity for containers have made it especially well loved there. 'Pink Cascade' is now grown world-wide, from Istanbul, Turkey, to Australia.

'Bruce Hancock' (Azaleodendron: 'White Gumpo' x *R. keiskei*). Named after James' friend hy-

bridizer Bruce Hancock, this azalea also exhibits a cascading growth habit. In a pot, its branches will extend 4 feet below the crown in 5 years. The blooms are large, 3-1/2 inches across, white with a pink border.

'Fascination' ('Grace Freeman No. 2' x 'Amagasa'). 'Fascination' is an upright plant, becoming 3-1/2 feet tall by 3-1/2 feet wide in nine years. The blooms are large, four and one-half inches across, and a striking pink in the center with a red border. The white center is clearly defined, giving the appearance of a bloom within the bloom. 'Fascination' was cho-



'River Mist' forms delicate pale trusses, with up to 30 blooms each.

(Photo by Roger Duvall.)

ing a third. The first phase, from 1970 until about 1985, has been documented in *Azaleas* by Fred Galle and in Jim Darden's *Great American Azaleas* (now out of print). James' objectives during this period were a cascading growth habit, unusually large blooms, and a high tolerance for hot, humid southern summers. Five of James' picks come from this period:

'Pink Cascade' (*R. nakaharae* x 'Bunka'). This azalea has 2-inch salmon blooms with a red blotch. This azalea has a trailing growth habit, making it excellent for hanging pots,

sen to illustrate the title page of *Great American Azaleas*.

'Gloria Still' ('Albert-Elisabeth' x 'Fedora'). The hose-in-hose blooms are white with pink variegation, 2-3/4 inches across. The blooms form large trusses, larger than most rhododendrons, and force easily, a virtue for the gardener who likes to start spring a little early (and who doesn't).

'Joan Garrett' ('Bunka' x 'Target') This is one of a group of ten azaleas named for members of the Ralph Pennington Chapter of the ASA in Anderson, South Carolina. 'Joan Garrett' boasts the largest blooms of the plants described here, as much as 6 inches across, salmon pink with a red blotch. The plant becomes 4 feet wide by 3 feet tall in nine years. Galle's *Azaleas* includes a picture of 'Joan Garrett'.

Second Hybridizing Phase

James' second phase, from 1985 to the present, might be called his "Red Period," because his goals were to produce plants with good red blooms and the ability to withstand sub-zero winters. James' favorites include five reds from this period:

'Midnight Flare' ('Red Red' x 'Red Slippers') has the deepest, darkest red color (blood-red comes to mind) and is hardy to -10°F. It is the most widely available of the reds, and is finding its way now out of the specialty nurseries and into the mainstream, at least in the southeastern United States.

'Coronado Red' produces bright red blooms. This is another of James' plants that produce blooms in ball trusses, good for attracting attention in the garden or in a flower show. It too is hardy to -10°F.

'Rain Fire' ('Moonbeam' x 'Lilacimun') is the best of James' reds for holding up in the heat and humidity. It blooms late and is hardy to -5°F. It is a delicate, willow-leaved cultivar that explodes in an inferno of bright orange-red every spring.



Current breeding work by James Harris is notably red, as in this vivid example, 'J. Valentine,' named for his grandson. (Photo by Roger Duvall)

'September Morn' is named for its tendency to bloom during the period from August to December. Extreme cold will knock back the blooms, but as it warms up, and that is the nature of our southern winters, 'September Morn' will begin to bloom again. It is hardy to at least -15°F and blooms in the spring, too.

'J. Valentine' is named for James' grandson Jared, whose birthday is February 14, Valentine's Day. In addition to its large (3-3/4- to 4-inch) red blooms, 'J. Valentine' has outstanding foliage and plant habit. The plant is hardy to -10°F.

Current Hybridizing Efforts

James, who remembers his own grandmother's interest in plants, has detected in his grandchildren a budding interest in his azalea hybrids. Their interest has spurred James into a new phase. He says he is doing more now than he has ever done. He is breeding bi-colors, primarily purple and white, and working for a long bloom period, at least four months.

At the moment, James has a new plant about which he is extremely excited. It is a cross between a seedling and the Encore Azalea™ Autumn Em

bers™, and its blooming period is unique. It does not begin to bloom until late October and then produces bright red blooms steadily through January if protected. The foliage is a good, dark green. It is hardy enough to grow outdoors, but James believes it would be ideal for large indoor spaces, providing bloom through the winter. As yet un-

named, this plant blooms for Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day, and probably Valentine's Day. James, who has not lost a whit of the enthusiasm that pushed him into hybridizing in the first place, says he has "never seen anything like it."

Roger Duvall has been a member of the Azalea Chapter of the ARS since 1988. He was Publicity Chairman for the joint ARS/ASA Convention in Atlanta, April 17-21, 2002.