

# Evergreen Azaleas in Western Europe

Tijs Huisman — The Netherlands

We just could expect it, that after the exploration of the Far East by Europeans, there would also follow a “flood” of plants to Europe. Robert Fortune and Kingdon-Ward are just two names of the many plant finders. So, let’s review some historic facts and what happened next. We should, however, consider that nomenclature is a bit difficult, because names changed sometimes.

In 1680 *Rhododendron indicum* was brought to Holland by the Dutch, but got lost. In 1833 there was a reintroduction to England under different names like *Azalea laterita* or *A. macrantha*. And to make it more difficult the *R. simsii* from China was imported to England under the name *A. indica*.

In the first half of the 19th century foreign ships brought more azaleas to Europe. Old azaleas from Japanese gardens were introduced under westernized names such as ‘*Indica Alba*’ and ‘*Phoenixium*’. These early-introduced azaleas were all called the Indian Azaleas. After introduction to England they also came to the continent, and then the popular breeding of the indoor azaleas began. Especially in Belgium, millions are still grown for sale worldwide.

The Kurume hybrids are originally the result of hybridization in Japan, some varieties came to England around 1850, but most of them were imported by Mr. Wilson to the US in 1918, and later they came to Europe. But in Holland and Germany, they were not so hardy.

In 1690, Mr. Engelbert Kaempfer, a medical student and naturalist in the employ of the Dutch East India Company, from Germany introduced many Japanese plants to Holland, including *R. kaempferi*. This species, named after him, was imported again by Prof. Sargent to the US in 1892, then to England, and after that into Europe. Here it proved to be hardy, and many hybridizers started to cross with it. The last thing I will mention is that the *R. yedoense* var. *poukhanense* from Korea is very hardy and so is much used for



Tijs crossed ‘Fascination’ x ‘Gunki’ to obtain this handsome frilled, salmon-coral evergreen hybrid.

hybridization in the US and in Europe. The seeds were imported first by the American Mr. John Georg Jack, in 1905 to the Arnold Arboretum in Boston.

It would lead too far to follow the importations from Japan and China precisely; so, we will follow how the hybridization in Europe went on.

I found out that actual hybridization was mainly done in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, especially in the first half of the last century. Not

too much was done by British or the French and Danish hybridizers. I asked many experts and looked on the Internet, but found no information.

## Belgium

In Belgium, the first Japanese azaleas were imported between 1901 and 1911 by Mr. Albert van Hecke. He imported ‘Amoenum’, ‘Hatsugiri’, ‘Hinodegiri’, and ‘Yodogawa’. These plants were brought in by Dutch bulb merchants.

From 1920 to 1975, many Belgian hybridizers hybridized azaleas as amateurs. In a flower show, “Floralien” in Ghent, some plants out of Wilson’s Fifty (imported from Japan in 1918 by Mr. Wilson) were introduced: ‘Azuma-kagami’, ‘Kirin’, and ‘Kure-no-yuki’. ‘Kirin’ grew especially well and became popular. As a sort of “victory tour,” the whole family Van Hecke—Albert and later André and René—hybridized and introduced fine new hybrids, like ‘Blauwe Donau’, ‘Excelsior’, and ‘Madame Albert van Hecke’, still popular plants.

Mr. O.F. Wuyts, inspector for plant protection, also hybridized as an amateur. From 1944 until 1947 he showed his hybrids, but many names have been lost since. From 1960 he brought into the trade ‘Conny’, ‘Hong Kong’, ‘Imperator’, which are some of his best.

Dr. ir. (which means engineer) Jozef Heursel, one of today’s best experts on Japanese azaleas, hybridized mostly with *R. simsii*, with one hardy new cultivar ‘Gilbert Mullie’.

Of course, not mentioned here, there are so many indoor azaleas that originated in Belgium. These are very popular and fine plants because of the two-colored and double flowers.

### United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom Lionel de Rothschild, famous for his deciduous Exbury Azaleas, also hybridized for evergreen azaleas, and he mostly used *R. kaempferi*. 'Leo' and 'Eddy' are a couple of his varieties.

Other hybridizers were Haworth-Booth, Stevenson, A. George, and Hydon Nurseries. But as far as I can tell, no hybrids from them are in trade.

Recently, the Cox family in Scotland, well-known because for their books about rhododendrons and owners of the Glendoick Gardens in Perth, hybridized and introduced new and very fine hybrids: 'Panda', 'Racoon', 'Squirrel', and 'Wombat'; and these new varieties as licensed plants: 'Glendoick Crimson', 'Glendoick Dream', and 'Glendoick Garnet'.

### The Netherlands

Hybridizers in the Netherlands introduced, especially in the first half of the last century, many fine new varieties that sold well. Cold hardiness is very important in the Netherlands and Germany. The last six winters were very mild, but we can't count on it for the future. Zones 7a and 6a/b require hardy and tough plants. Many hybridizers are from the famous region around Boskoop, and the Research Station for Plants there played an important role.

So, hardy varieties like 'Amoenum' and 'Mucronatum' and species like *R.*

*kaempferi*, *R. kiusianum*, *R. yedoense* var. *poukhanense* were used. Most nurserymen, like H. den Ouden and Sons, Felix & Dijkhuis, P. Koster, C.B. van Nes & Sons, and A. Vuyk and others introduced superb, hardy azaleas: 'Adonis', 'Ageeth', 'Alice', 'Anna Maria', 'Arabesk', 'Beethoven', 'Chopin', 'Favorite', 'Helena', 'Jeanette', 'Joseph Haydn', 'Mahler' and many more. (Note that many with composers' names are from A. Vuyk van Nes.)

Another variety is 'Noordtiana' introduced by the firm P. van Noordt & Sons in 1897, originating from a seedling from seeds of a plant, imported from Japan. The reason that I mention this particular plant is that it is



This deep red evergreen azalea is another Huisman hybrid, which he says is probably 'Canzonetta' x sport of 'Easter Parade'. (Photos by Tijs Huisman)

very cold hardy and therefore many hybridizers used it for hardiness.

At the Agricultural University in Wageningen material of 'Vuyk's Scarlet' got a radiation treatment, and at last 'Aleida' was introduced. More experimental work was done by radiating flower buds on 'Silvester', resulting in the mutations 'Odilia' and 'Stefan'.

Recently, I know that hybridizing has become quite a rare thing here in the Netherlands. I guess I am one of the very few who spends time and allows space for it. Some new hybrids are coming from my own work.

### Germany

Thanks to many hybridizers in Germany we can now enjoy numerous exciting and cold hardy new hybrids. Remember names as Hans Hachmann, Georg and his son Werner Arends, Carl Fleischmann, Walter Nagel, and Urban Schumacher. Also from the former East Germany there are fine new introductions from the Pilnitzer Research Station, which does not exist anymore, Gerhard Mittendorf, and from Bernhard Knorr. Let's follow these names for their contributions.

One of the first hybridizers with Japanese azaleas was Georg Arends. His goal was to get very floriferous and hardy new hybrids that could withstand the cold German winters. So he used 'Hinodegiri', 'Hatsugiri', 'Benegiri', *R. kaempferi*, and 'Noordtania' to cross with. His first crosses were not very successful, but F2 crosses looked better. Then the WWI came, and in this period the plants/seedlings were not taken care of, and many died. After the war, the best, toughest, and hardiest ones were

selected and brought into the trade. In 1926, they were shown in one of the enormous plant exhibitions in Dresden in eastern Germany. Many people were very enthusiastic about these new azaleas. They were mostly named for rivers in the 'Sauerland', a region in Germany, where he lived, for example: 'Agger', 'Diemel', 'Eder', 'Neye', and 'Sorpe'.

Another hybrid from unknown origin, 'Multiflorum' was very hardy and often used in further hybridizations. For instance, his son Werner used it and introduced nice new and hardy hybrids between 1950 and 1960. He gave them all Japanese names like

'Fumiko', or 'Hiroko'; and every name had a second name like 'Geisha dark pink', or 'Geisha orange/red'. These names should not be confused with the Glenn Dale hybrid 'Geisha'.

One of the hybridizers who used this 'Multiflorum' was Carl Fleischmann in northern Germany. He crossed it with a hardy form of *R. kiusianum* and tested them during some very cold winters. The results are all named as "Diamant" azaleas, such as 'Diamant Pink', or 'Diamant Rose' etc. They are very popular in Holland and Germany.

Urban Schumacher, who worked at the nursery of Georg Arends, introduced some new hybrids like 'Georg Arends' and 'Sirikit'.

The Pilnitzer azaleas were hybridized at the Pilnitz Plant Research Station not far from Dresden. The hybridizer was Mr. Werner Dähnhardt, who used his own hardy clones and some *kiusianum* hybrids. His results include 'Falkenstein', with very small leaves, and 'Königstein', 'Lilienstein', and 'Rauschenstein', all named for some rocky mountains east of Dresden.

Also from Dresden are some fine new hybrids from Mr. Bernhard Knorr. He was the leader of the Dresden Plant Research Station and hybridized at home, which was forbidden in East Germany at the time. He used hybrids from Georg Arends and the hybrid 'Van Noordt'. He called them "Dretonia" with the suffix for the color, such as: 'Dretonia Pink', 'Dretonia Lilac' etc. He made some other introductions: 'Fairy Bells', 'Kamenz', 'Meissen', and more, using *R. yedoense* var. *poukhanense* and 'Multiflorum'.

Gerhard Mittendorf, also from the former East Germany, hybridized for hardy evergreens that would not lose too many leaves in cold winters. So he used 'Noordtiana', *R. kaempferi*, and *R. yedoense* var. *poukhanense* to produce introductions like 'Luzi',

'Mizi', 'Popzi', 'Rotfuchs', and others.

I could go on like this, but will concentrate now on one hybridizer, Mr. Hans Hachmann from Barmstedt in northern Germany, who is famous for his work on hybridizing rhododendrons, introducing tens of splendid new plants, and also deciduous and Japanese azaleas. The latter he calls all *R. obtusum*, because we can't trace them back to the original plants.

And he continues the work, recently introducing 'Schneeperle', double white and very hardy; 'Schneeglantz'; and 'Peppina', purple with darker blotch just to mention some of his most recent introductions. And who does not know his 'Canzonetta', with bronze leaves in winter; 'Estrella'; 'Fridoline'; and maybe the most beautiful, 'Maruschka' with glowing bronze leaves in winter and early spring? And many more—widespread and grown in Europe and abroad: 'Allotria', 'Estrella', 'Gabriele', 'Gislinda', and 'Rubinetta'. His latest new introductions, of which some are very fine new ones, many with double flowers, and often licensed plants: 'Babuschka', 'Eisprinzessin', 'Rosinetta', 'Kirstin', 'Melina', and 'Purpurkissen'.

#### Czech Republic

Also in the Czech Republic some hybridizers of evergreen azaleas brought out several good hardy compact hybrids, working in Pruhonice, near Prague. Especially, Mr. B. Kavka from 1939 on, but also J. Jelinek, M. Opatma, J. Dvorak, and others used *R. obtusum* var. *amoenum* (that's how they called it) and *R. yedoense* var. *poukhanense* to cross with. Introductions are—and some of them are widespread—'Blanice', 'Doubrava', 'Labe', 'Ledikanense', 'Morava', and 'Oslava'. Many of them are extremely winter hardy.

#### Switzerland

The last data I could find are that a certain Mr. H. Frey from Switzerland, used open-pollinated seed of *R.*

*yedoense*, and his hybrids, like 'Bernina', 'Gotthard', 'Jura', 'Matterhorn', are introduced by the Esveld Nursery in Boskoop, the Netherlands.

*Tijs Huisman, from The Netherlands, is a gardener of many years and is really crazy about plants. He started with a rhododendron garden 20 years ago and also hybridizes. He has been a member of the ASA since 1993 and is very active in growing azaleas. He has a seven-acre garden with many of his own hybrids, and is testing hundreds more. In the spring of 2002, his first introduction of a new rhodo hybrid, 'Helen Martin', received a "Certification" at a rhododendron show in Germany, and he has many fine plants coming. Tijs has written articles for numerous publications: The Azalean, Journal-ARS, and publications of the German and Dutch Heather Society and a new Dutch magazine 'De Tuin Exclusive'. He has also presented a number of programs in the US in the last 10 years. You can learn more about his horticultural experience by visiting his Web site <http://www.rhodoland.nl>. He is a professional teacher of German in high schools.*

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