
“AN AZALEAPHILE SALUTE”

FRED GALLE

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When Bob Hobbs, the editor of *THE AZALEAN*, called and proposed this project, I was at first reluctant. You see, I'm not exactly a star reporter, much less an accomplished writer; to go off and interview someone, particularly this person, seemed like quite an assignment. Anyway, when Bob agreed to help me compose some questions, I accepted the challenge. A few phone calls later, a date and time was set: December 3 at 9:00AM, a Monday.

So on that cold, dreary, misty morning, armed with a tape recorder, a camera and an old Rockwell-Barnes Eye-Tint No. 2000 Non-Skid Easel Stenographic Note Book, I hit Interstate 20 west, headed for Interstate 85 south, bound for Hamilton, Georgia. Folks, I had forgotten about the traffic, even at 6:30 in the morning. How I survived commuting into Atlanta all those years I'll never know. Speeds any Daytona 500 driver would want to record were the norm. It was about twenty miles south of Atlanta before the color came back to my knuckles—maybe I'm getting old.

All the way, some 85 miles, I was concerned about finding the residence, because the day before I noticed I had only a P. O. Box address. I had tried to call but there was no answer—only a machine. I kept thinking I could call when I got to Hamilton. I had never been to Hamilton, and when I did get there, I was even more concerned—where's a phone?? I finally found one with a book, and the first name under “G” was “Galle, Fred C. 13580 Highway 27 N.” I could relax; I had 15 minutes to spare.

You guessed it, I was here to interview Fred Galle (Galley... gal'e...as in ships...as my friend Bill Miller likes to say).

Fred C. Galle, the author, the consultant, the lecturer, the horticulturist, known for his work throughout the United States and many parts of the world, and I was nervous. I had met Mr. Galle before, but this was different. It all started when I turned into the gravel driveway, into the woods. That's right; the Galle home sits in the middle of six acres of woodland, on top of a ridge, overlooking a deep ravine, where at the bottom runs a little stream. A beautiful place. If it had been in the summer when the trees would have been in full leaf, I wouldn't have seen the roof top of their home to help guide me up the hill. I just might have turned around!

I rang the doorbell at 9:00AM sharp and was met by Fred and his lovely wife, Betty. They invited me in, ushered me through the foyer and into a large, spacious room. High ceilings, skylights and sliding glass doors lead out onto a deck overlooking the stream at the bottom of the ravine. I had to go outside to take a look even though it was still misting rain.

Back inside we settled down in a warm comfortable setting and began to talk. I wanted to know where he grew up, about his family, the personal side of Fred C. Galle.

Fred grew up in Dayton, Ohio, graduating from high school and spending about two years working in the nursery and landscape business thus obtaining his early training, the practical experience that would be invaluable to him throughout his career. Unable to obtain dormitory space at Ohio State for his first year, Fred headed to Michigan State. A year later, 1940, he transferred to Ohio State where he received his bachelor of science degree in 1943.

It was 1943, during the war years, and Fred was a prime candidate to be called on to participate, and participate he did. Right in the middle of it—in a field artillery unit in the army. First Lt. Fred C. Galle didn't come away without being in harm's way. He was wounded twice and received the Purple Heart with one Oak Leaf Cluster and the Bronze Star.

Coming home and getting married in 1945, Fred returned to Ohio State to receive his master's degree in 1945. If you check your arithmetic you'll find Fred and Betty celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary this past year (1995).

Fred had trouble in the job market, especially for someone with a shoulder injury—someone whose arm would go numb—and especially for someone who wanted to go into the tree business, the career field Fred wanted to pursue. (Fate really plays a part in our lives doesn't it? Think about it; suppose Fred had gone into the world of trees? O.K. for the tree folks, but what about us azaleas lovers? You'll see my point as we go on.)

In 1947, Fred was an Assistant Professor of Horticulture at the University of Tennessee where he specialized in ornamental plant studies. He was also in charge of the campus landscape. Fred stayed there until 1952 when he was called back to Ohio State as Assistant Professor

of Horticulture. During this period, Fred completed course work for his Ph.D., but as fate would have it, all his records, his notebooks, were stolen. He was robbed by a bear, as in black bears of the type you can find around Gregory Bald in Tennessee. It seems as if the bear wanted his own Ph.D.

About this time, Callaway Gardens was after Fred to join them at Pine Mountain, Georgia. At first he was reluctant, but after a visit he and Betty decided to stay. Betty, however, had several items to negotiate—running water and indoor plumbing—Hey! Back then in rural Georgia these were serious points to consider. They moved into lodging that is now the Executive Suite. This was 1953!

It was here that the Galles raised two children: son Phil, who is now a doctor and lives in Springfield, Illinois, and daughter Peggy, a nurse, who resides in San Bernardino, California. Phil and Peggy have two daughters each.

And it was here Fred would practice his calling, working in the field of horticulture, a love instilled by his father, a man who loved gardening, mostly flowers. Fred recalls many hours spent with his dad sitting under an old buckeye tree in a garden setting prepared by his dad. Being a Boy Scout and an Eagle Scout enhanced his love for the outdoors. Even as a young man, Fred was still active in the Scouts with Phil, who also became an Eagle Scout. It was here Fred began a love affair with the azalea.

Callaway Gardens, a place Fred made famous for its Azalea Trail, a place where he became famous for the work he did in the field of horticulture, doing research on many plants—clethra, ginger, crabapples (the list goes on and on), a place from

which he and Betty would retire. The hillside that Fred would transform was an early project, inspired by the Valley Gardens in England, where Fred had visited years earlier. Fred also started the native azalea collection that is of special interest to Callaway Gardens. Callaway Gardens, a place where Fred worked for over thirty years, most of which he spent as Director of Horticulture and where during the last few years, five in all, he wrote the book, *Azaleas*.

Fred was approached by Van Nostrand, the publishers of Frederic P. Lee's book, *The Azalea Book*, who wanted an updated version. But Fred soon found, as he began writing, that a new book was needed. There were too many changes, too many new things happening in the azalea world. The first edition of *Azaleas* was published in 1985, the second in 1987, and the third will be in the book stores any day now, published by Timber Press.

Fred Galle is no stranger to the publishing world. Early on, Fred began writing books, pamphlets and articles (many, as Betty pointed out, free of charge). When I asked Fred if this were true he simply said "Well, you don't make a lot of money writing garden books". "He wrote for the sake of educating people, there was so little information available for southern gardens at that time", Betty pointed out.

From Sunset, Oxmoor House, Timber Press, Southern Living, Ortho, you name them, you can find Fred's work; whether he was the sole author or was a consultant, he's been around the circuit. He hasn't finished. A new book on hollies, from Timber Press, is being edited right now. Fred hopes to see it in print soon. This book is the result of researching over 800 species of hollies from all over the world, taking over eight years to complete, taking a lot of translating from

Latin, German and Dutch, most of which Fred did himself. It's going to be a large book, over 1,800 pages typewritten.

As a side note, while we were talking about writing, I found out that Fred had been a radio talk show host in Atlanta. It was, of course, a garden show where Fred would answer listeners' questions. Maybe some of you folks around here remember. Is caller Bill still out there?

Moving on, Fred has been active in practically every society in the horticultural world, including the American Rhododendron Society (ARS) (since the early fifties) and the Azalea Society of America (ASA) (since it was formed). He has received recognition, awards, medals, and citations from all over the country. Among those are a citation from the Royal Horticultural Society and the coveted Liberty Hyde Bailey Gold Medal from the American Horticultural Society. The list, all significant, would fill two pages of a resume. Fred also spent many years as a member of the advisory council of the United States National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. after being appointed by then Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman.

It would be needless to say that during all these years Fred established some lasting relationships with some of the giants in the world of azaleas. Just to name a few: Dr. August Kehr, Dr. John Creech and Dr. Henry Skinner, all from Hendersonville, North Carolina; Julius Nuccio, Altadena, California; Orlando Pride, Butler, Pennsylvania; Peter Girard Sr., Geneva, Ohio; and Tony Shammarello, from Euclid, Ohio. I'm sure you'll recognize these men as some of the early hybridizers of the azalea.

Did you know that Fred was a hybridizer himself, naming five crosses? Starting in 1954, looking for

large fragrant crosses, he registered these five in 1984:

'Choice Cream' (*austrinum* × *atlanticum*, light yellow, pink tube, yellow blotch, fragrant)

'Galle's Choice' (*calendula-ceum* × *alabamense*, light yellow, white throat, light pink on tips, fragrant)

'White Flakes' (a selection from wild *canescens* from Haralson County, Georgia, white, pale to light pink on tips of lobes)

These hybrids are being propagated by Ed Egan for retail sales by fellow members Harold and Nancy Greer of Greer Gardens. You can always find their ad in **THE AZALEAN**.

Back to Fred's association with fellow plantsmen. If there would be one lasting bit of wisdom, one impression made on Fred, it would be testing and evaluating your plant before you put your name on it. Pressing, I asked Fred if he thought that since azaleas were so easy to work with, too many were being named. Fred replied, "most definitely. It seems", he went on, "that some name every seedling that comes along after their wives, kids, cats and dogs. After a while their description disappears. We need to have a longer period, a wider range of environmental testing before registering. The ARS and ASA need to be more interested in the process. Some plants just don't merit registration. Even Ben Morrison named too many, besides dropping over 400 on the market at one time. Now some are hard or impossible to find."

Speaking of merit, I asked him what traits did he find made the azalea so popular. "Easy to grow, low maintenance, pretty much disease free,

deer maybe a problem and of course, their flowers. With some of the new hybrids, their foliage makes it an interesting plant. The natives are having a revival of sorts since you can find more on the market now days. Their fragrance alone makes them popular!"

I asked about the use of azaleas in the landscape, what do you look for? "A lot, of course, depends on the position and the setting. I'd use a lot of the dwarfs, the lower growers, intermingled with the natives. You can intermix different varieties, but you have to be careful. Some landscapers don't know how so they shy away from using them." I had to ask the next question, even though I felt I knew the answer, "Which is your favorite azalea?" There was no one plant, naturally, but he did favor the Kurumes, especially, the early varieties, and some of the Southern Indicas, but they are not too cold hardy around here. The Glenn Dales, the Back Acres, the Girards, they have nice foliage. And, of course, the natives, because of the different flowering seasons and the fragrance.

"What are Fred and Betty up to?", I asked. Was he still on the lecture circuit? I don't know who responded first, Betty or Fred, but the answer was, "No. We're keeping a low profile, enjoying retirement, waiting for the holly book to come out, and we still piddle around the yard a bit, but we do it slowly." You see, for a while Fred's health wasn't the best in the world, but since having a heart valve replaced in 1990, he said he's doing much better. I thought, at 76, he looked pretty good.

I was running out of questions and I still wanted to look around outside before heading home. I had expected a landscape filled with aza-

leas, no grass, just shrubs. I was right about the grass because of all the leaves, but Betty explained. "When we moved here, I wanted to know where we were going to build the garage. Fred said, "There won't be a garage", and then I wanted to know where we would store things, like a lawn mower. Fred said, "There won't be a lawn." Anyway, there were a few azaleas around, both evergreen and natives, a large native hybrid by the front door and some rhododendrons. Oh! A lot of plants in pots, some recently introduced Kurumes that Fred was evaluating and a lot of hollies, a collection of some unusual plants.

I asked Fred which did he prefer, azaleas or hollies? It would have to be a toss up, was the reply, but the real answer came from Betty: "The natives azaleas first, then the evergreen azaleas, then the hollies and then any other plant that comes along." I also noticed Fred had, over the years, collected the rare, the unusual and the dwarf type plants.

I couldn't leave without a final question, and this one was for Betty. "All these years, what can you say about living with the Azaleaman?" "It's been a good life. A healthy life. I've learned a lot, by osmosis. I'm the weed and water person. The extra hand when he needs it, that little extra help."

On my way home I thought of what Betty had said and the song about "The Wind Beneath My Wings" kept running through my head.

Jim Thornton is a long-time azalea enthusiast. Jim is retired from the telephone company. He is the founding force behind the Oconee Chapter, and is currently Vice President of The Azalea Society of America. □