

In Memory **Aromi's Jungle**

Maarten van der Giessen — Semmes, Alabama

"Man, Sub-creator, the refracted light
Through whom is splintered from a single white
To many hues, endlessly combined
In living shapes that move from mind to mind"

J.R.R. Tolkien

Dr. Eugene Aromi departed this world July 7th, 2004. He left behind his wife Jane, two daughters, ten grandchildren, and over 140 of the most beautiful azaleas on earth.

I had worked with Dr. Aromi for four or five years before I began to understand the forces that drove him to hybridize year after year, mixing the colors in his mind to create a living canvas of flowers. Driving down the highway to look at another group of azaleas, he told me how he became an education professor at the University of South Alabama where he taught for 24 years. Aromi was a painter, receiving his MA from the University of Alabama in 1951. He taught painting at Copiah-Lincoln Junior College in Mississippi and Hewitt Trussville in Alabama where he became interested in the process of how students learn. He returned to the University of Alabama and received his doctorate in education in 1960.

So, when Aromi and his wife began making crosses in 1969, it was with the eye of a painter and the inquisitiveness of a teacher that he applied his skills. His service in the Philippines during World War II had instilled a toughness in him that is characteristic of his generation, blending with his experiences to create a resilience that was to last 35 years. A naturally soft-spoken and unassuming person, he released his passion into his hobby, hybridizing thousands of azaleas in their small suburban back yard. His daughter, Jeanette, remembers that the neighborhood children teased her and called their yard "The Jungle" when she was a child.

And What Came Out of "The Jungle"?

Dr. Aromi's studbook logs 1074 crosses between 1969 and 2003. He named 109 deciduous and 31 evergreen azaleas. His deciduous hybrids have been widely distributed throughout the nursery industry, popularizing a previously obscure group of plants in the South. His new release 'Glory Be' is a Rhododendron Society of America's 'Rhododendron of the Year' for 2004. His evergreen hybrids, apparently doomed to anonymity in the 1970s, have become my fastest selling group of azaleas.

"The Jungle" is almost empty now. A few towering natives stand in the side yard as sole reminders of where they originated. A circle of Aromi evergreens rings an Okame cherry in the front of their small home. Jane talks about finally making room for the grandchildren to play. Yet five miles away in my nursery over 1000 of his seedlings have yet to be described. Public collections of Dr. Aromi's work are being established in Mobile and Huntsville in Alabama, and Nacogdoches, Texas. In Charleston, South Carolina, thousands of his new hybrids are being readied for market. Dr. Aromi bequeathed such a wealth of plants to us that it will take the remainder of my lifetime to count its fruits. And every spring Aromi will teach. He'll teach about patience, persistence, and the beauty of the world in which we live. Such is the power of Aromi's jungle.

Maarten van der Giessen is the vice-president of van der Giessen Nursery, Inc. a Mobile, Alabama, area wholesale grower of azalea and woody ornamental liners and containers since 1990. Maarten and his father, Peter, have been working on azalea evaluations at their nursery since 1994 to provide new and exciting selections to the industry. Maarten has been collecting his friend Dr. Aromi's hybrids to ensure they survive in the trade.

To learn more about the Aromi hybrids, see the article by Frank Bryan, "Eugene Aromi, Hybridizer." *The Azalean*. 2003. 25(2): 30-31, 38-41, which contains a listing of the then-known Aromi hybrids, both evergreen and deciduous.



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