

Save the Azaleas at the U.S. National Arboretum

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Aaron Cook (acook@cccti.edu), the President of the Azalea Society of America, learned on November 8 that the U.S. National Arboretum planned to remove the mature azalea display on Mount Hamilton. The Gardens Unit Leader at the National Arboretum, Mr. Scott Aker, announced that all the original Glenn Dale azaleas would be cut down in 2011 and their stumps painted with herbicide. Many of us are upset by this decision. Mr. Steve Henning has set up a website called "**Save the Azaleas**" to help focus our concerns: www.savetheazaleas.org

The azalea display on the Glenn Dale Hillside is one of the prime floral attractions in our Nation's Capital. It is a National Treasure. Many of the azaleas are over 60 years old, among the most spectacular specimens of their kind anywhere in the country. Historically, these azaleas are of particular importance to the U.S. National Arboretum since they were developed by its first Director, Benjamin Y. Morrison. They represent the top 2 to 3% of the 50,000 to 75,000 seedlings he raised when developing the famous Glenn Dale Azaleas. Morrison's colossal breeding project has had no equal; it produced the first large flowered azaleas hardy in the Middle Atlantic region.

The Arboretum's Interim Director, Dr. Ramon Jordan, supported their removal, but he tried to calm fears by noting that only 25% of the azaleas in the collection will be destroyed, only the plants that had no labels. The sad reality is that all of the oldest and most majestic plants are targeted for destruction. On December 3, a new Director was named, Dr. Colien Hefferan. We do not know her position yet, but it is important to share our concerns.

Below are some quotes from Mr. Aker regarding the decision to destroy the Glenn Dale Hillside, as well as facts that contradict his reasoning. Full context can be found on the "Save the Azaleas" website listed above.

1) The azaleas attract too many visitors, and that creates problems

Aker: "I cannot dispute the beauty of the display and its value as an attraction for our visitors. Currently, again in part to diminishing resources, we are now unable to accommodate the crowds of visitors in April and May when the azaleas are in bloom. We have inadequate parking and restroom facilities."

Fact: The Arboretum has several large parking areas, and for years has provided a shuttle service to get around to the various attractions. The Potomac Valley Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society has held its flower show at the Arboretum during peak azalea time for nearly 40 years and never observed any difficulties.

Fact: The Arboretum received \$9 million in Federal stimulus funds as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. That money has been put toward the renovation of the Administration building and includes adding more public restrooms. That facility is closed now but should reopen in 2012.

2) Because the Asian Valley Exhibit lost private funding, the Arboretum must remove other collections

Aker: "Recently, we learned that a donor that has supported two gardener positions on our staff will no longer be providing that support, and the loss of this staff has resulted in the need to deaccession collections. We will be deaccessioning our National Boxwood Collection and the co-located Perennial Collections as well as the Glenn Dale Hillside portion of the Azalea Collection."

Fact: Neither of the privately funded positions involved the Azaleas, Boxwoods, or Perennials. There is no reason to eliminate federally funded positions in order to replace those private gardeners. Mr. Aker makes the staffing decisions, and Ms. Bullock continues to be the only person assigned to the 20-acre azalea collection. The physical removal those large azaleas will incur additional expenses. Denuding the hillside will increase the risk of erosion.

3) The original plants on the Glenn Dale Hillside have lost their name tags after 60 years

Aker: "We do not have documentation for any of the plants on the Glenn Dale Hillside. Although Morrison's breeding records do exist, no labels have been found attached to any plant so that we can know its provenance beyond conjecture."

Fact: Ms. Bullock and her volunteers have been making excellent progress on plant identification. Many of the original Glenn Dale varieties have been positively identified by using plant records, Morrison's notes, registration data, and comparisons with known forms. Inexpensive DNA tests will likely become available in the future to assist with plant identification. Even unnamed plants whose parentage may never be known still have merit and can be introduced. The striking bicolor azalea 'Ben Morrison' is one of those unknown plants. It was named to honor the original hybridizer by the Arboretum's third Director, the late Dr. John Creech.

An irrevocable decision such as cutting down the Glenn Dale Azaleas would not likely have been made if the Arboretum had considered its ramifications. Originally, the Arboretum had an Advisory Board that provided expert advice to its leadership, but that group was dissolved in 1994. You can still advise USDA officials of your concerns:

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