

AROMI GARDEN PREVIEW PARTY

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On behalf of our family, I would like to thank all of you who have donated your time, effort and money to help make this garden become a reality. We are very grateful that you appreciate Daddy's creations and recognize the benefit of making them accessible to our local community. Again, thank you!

Looking back, I never remember a time when Daddy wasn't doing something with plants. Honestly he could grow anything even in concrete. He started out very small but soon built a large greenhouse in our backyard. I have very fond memories of playing with my sister Marilyn underneath the potting benches while he worked using coffee cans, which we had in abundance, and other recycled containers for pots in those early days. He was a true child of the Depression. He never threw anything away that he thought he might be able to reuse. He was content to have us there and patiently waited for something to spark our interest, those "teachable moments", and then he'd capitalize on it to help us understand some of what he was doing - as long as we would listen.

In the winter, I would sometimes go with Daddy out to the greenhouse IN THE DARK to light the kerosene heaters on particularly cold nights. I thought that was quite an adventure as a little girl. We also learned to hammer nails pretty early as we were either tacking plastic on the large domed greenhouse roof with black straps or removing it in the spring and tacking on shade cloth instead. This plant thing was INDEED a family affair. It really was, because it just seemed normal for us to find Mama sitting at the kitchen table with tweezers or an itty bitty screwdriver lifting tiny seedlings from flats to transplant into very small pots or to have a strange glow coming from our foyer because it was filled with tiered plant stands fitted with grow lights or to think nothing of the plastic vials and gel caps filled with pollen or the envelopes carefully marked containing the seeds of recent crosses in our refrigerator when we were getting a snack.

About the time Marilyn and I started taking after school lessons and spending less time playing at home, it was good-bye swing set and hello black plastic and rows of pots. The back yard was gradually turned into a mini nursery one section at a time although I'm not sure that was the

original plan. It just happened as Daddy found more and more success. He'd keep running up the crosses that were promising, watching and cataloging the blooms each year, until he decided whether they were keepers or culls to be discarded. We did manage to keep our tire swing but it was a constant challenge to avoid swinging too close to the ever expanding Austrinum that was planted at the corner of the house marking the start of Daddy's interest in native azaleas.

Our front yard was much larger as we lived on a corner but it progressed the same way, going from several well placed beds to pretty much a laboratory with less and less lawn where Daddy placed the best of his crosses in the ground to observe and use for future crosses. Less lawn was fine with me since I was becoming the main grass cutter at the time. I did on occasion broach the subject of trimming some of the azaleas back but lost every time for fear that we might lose some blooms.

Living so close to the University of South Alabama, Daddy was able to come home for lunch most days. He'd fix himself ANOTHER cup of coffee and take it out with him to the greenhouses, we had 2 later on, or check on seedlings or things that were blooming in the yard. Some people meditate or go to the gym. For him, he de-stressed with his plants. There was the requisite ham sandwich and a little talk radio as well. Then he would head back for his afternoon classes leaving his daily calling card on the counter - a crumb covered paper towel, a knife with a smear of mustard on it and an empty coffee cup.

Although I didn't relish it at the time, a very endearing memory of Daddy was his habit of picking up an empty paper towel roller and coming to our bedroom doors early on Saturday morning trumpeting through it like reveille and then shouting, "Wake up! The sun ball is up! Time to weed some pots!" We did weed A LOT of pots and learned to transplant and all sorts of other things but we were never really made to do it. On occasion we were firmly encouraged, as all children are, to do assigned chores but it was understood that the azaleas were Daddy's passion and ours for the asking but only if we wanted it.

When we were home, Daddy enjoyed us tagging along as he made his crosses, even letting us dab the pollen on the pistol and hang the tags marking the crosses ourselves, and also as he used his color chart to type new blooms. Having been an artist, this part was right up his alley and surely came in handy when he was crossing for color, size and shape. He loved getting us to help decide which color was the best match. We

thought he needed our help, but he, of course, was teaching us along the way asking questions and leading us to the answers that he already knew. I PARTICULARLY LOVED the color charts but we weren't allowed to use them outside of their intended purpose.

I need to stop here to make a very important, but maybe not very obvious, point. While we all participated on some level, this was mainly a 2 person project. As I said, it was Daddy's passion but none of it would have been possible without the support, tireless effort and dedication of our mother, Jane Aromi. HE was her passion and so she loved what he loved and did whatever it took to make it a success. It was a mini nursery but there were no nursery workers. It was mainly her. She put his project above everything else except for us and he knew it. That's why he named one of his flowers Jane's Gold which really means Jane IS Gold.

As we got into our teen years and were busy with all sorts of other things, we found it commonplace to arrive home or to even wake up on the weekend and find nurserymen and other "azalea people" there looking around and talking with Daddy in the yard.

There were also others that were invited into the backyard to see the whole operation if they showed interest or asked him questions about his flowers like the many lucky evening walkers in our neighborhood. He was so excited about what he was doing and loved sharing it with others. I think he was continually fascinated by each and every new creation. Ever the teacher, he found equal joy in explaining the process to anyone who wanted to learn.

He was the same way with his grandchildren, although, with the exception of the 2 oldest, he had already begun his battle with lung cancer by the time they came along. Unfortunately for them, he didn't live long enough to teach them all of this. That is where this garden comes in and why it's so important. I KNOW that Daddy and Mama would be so pleased. Daddy was very humble and just enjoyed the process and seeing what he could come up with. I may be wrong, but I think he would have been a bit overwhelmed with all the attention. Now that the garden is open, though, he can continue teaching - as each person strolls through and enjoys the fruits of his labor or love, possibly inspiring new hybridizers and backyard hobbyists in the process.

Thank you again for making this dream a reality!