

Frank Mossman 1916-2009 - by Mike Oliver

Frank Mossman, whose significant work with azaleas and rhododendrons spanned several decades, passed away on November 2, 2009. He was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska. He attended the University of Nebraska and its medical school. He graduated with his M.D. in Ophthalmology in 1940. When he was a teenager, he met his future wife, Doris Roberts. They were married in 1937, and over the next fifteen years had three children.

In WW II, he joined the Army and served in several theaters, and was discharged in 1945 with the rank of major.

He needed, at this time, to obtain a residency. The opportunities were extremely limited with many doctors returning from the military. There were only two available in ophthalmology, and he selected the one with the Kaiser hospitals in Portland, Oregon. He worked for Kaiser for eight years before setting up a private practice in Vancouver, WA.

During the first years in Portland, he developed his interest in rhododendrons, and started growing and propagating them. He visited Halfdan Lem in Tacoma, and obtained cutting material from him as his interest grew. Also at this time he met his future partner in azalea exploration, Britt Smith, who lived in Portland at the time.

Both Frank and Britt became interested in the Western Azalea, *R. occidentale*, in the early 1960's and they initiated a methodical study of the plants in their southern Oregon and northern California habitats. They made several trips a year for over ten years to "occidentale-land" and cataloged the most unusual forms. They then published several articles describing the very large variation in the flowers that they had found. These articles brought Frank into contact with rhododendron experts from around the world. Beyond these articles, they created increased interest in *R. occidentale* by making many contributions of wild collected seed to the ARS Seed Exchange. Frank also made presentations at chapter meetings and national conventions. On another front, Britt and Frank were key forces in pushing for the creation of the Azalea Reserve at Stage Coach Hill south of Orick, CA. Primarily for his azalea work, Frank was awarded the ARS Gold Medal in 1977.

Frank chaired a National Convention in Portland in the early 70's where one of the guest speakers was H. H. Davidian, from Edinburg, Scotland. Dr Davidian believed the observed large variation in *R. occidentale* flowers was due to interspecific and not intraspecific variation. When Frank took him on a trip to the occidentale habitats, he managed to convince Davidian that it was indeed intraspecific variation that produced the large floral variation.

He also met Hideo Suzuki, a RHS Gold Medal recipient, at an ARS convention. On later trips, the Suzukis often stayed with the Mossmans at their home in Vancouver, WA.

After a decade or so, Britt Smith and Frank suspended their azalea hunting trips, as they were turning up few new interesting azaleas. However, his descriptions have inspired others since to explore *R. occidentale* habitat.

About this time Frank became interested in tender rhododendrons, such as the Maddenii's and Vireyas. Again, he decided to explore the plant habitat, so he and Dave Goheen made a plant hunting expedition to Borneo. They traced Herman Sleumer's trail up Mt. Kinabalu, a known Vireya habitat and collected seeds, cuttings and plants. Frank made a number of crosses using material from the Borneo expedition. One, 'Doris Mossman' was registered by Bovee's Nursery and is now in the trade. Their trip is documented in an interesting article in the January 1983 issue of the ARS Journal. Unfortunately, shortly thereafter, the plastic-covered shelter where he had his tender rhododendrons was torn, and he lost all of his plants. He decided not to pursue this area further.

Frank was an enthusiastic member of the Portland Chapter. He was awarded the bronze Medal by the Chapter in 1969. He served as President from 1978 to 1980 and was a ARS Life Member. He was a generous contributor to the Chapter's plant auctions and served for many years as auctioneer. Many local gardens are in debt to his contributions. Frank also judged many of the Chapter's shows and donated a trophy for the *R. occidentale* section. He last served as a judge in May of 2009 only months prior to his death.

From the time of his initial interest in rhododendrons, he always had done some hybridizing. Beyond the Vireya crosses noted above, he produced some very good crosses, but he registered only two. The first, "Taurus" an early-medium red, was introduced in 1972 and later received the Superior Plant Award. The second was a deciduous azalea, "Washington State Centennial", introduced in 1989 to honor the centennial of the state of Washington. Both plants have been very well received. Richard Cavender was given one of his intraspecific *R. occidentale* crosses, which Richard later named in Frank's honor and also was a trophy winner at chapter shows.

Beyond his own work he actively shared plant material and knowledge, especially concerning rhododendrons. However, he was interested in other plants, including trees such as Japanese maples and magnolias. He grew specimens of many of these on his property. From these he propagated more, and contributed many of his grafted maples and magnolias to the Portland chapter auctions.

In 2000, the Lake Wilderness Arboretum in Maple Valley Washington, www.lakewildernessarboretum.org, initiated a project to save specimens of as many Smith-Mossman azaleas as possible. Frank Mossman contributed almost all of the plants from his property and also made several financial contributions. At this time, a sizeable collection is thriving at the Arboretum. Frank and Britt's slide shows and photos of Doris Mossman's paintings can be found at www.smith-mossman.net.

His wife, Doris, died in 2003 and left a large vacuum in his remaining years. In the last decade of his life, he took up hybridizing daylilies, which could be flowered two years after planting the seeds. At the time of his death, he had several hundred seedlings planted out to bloom in 2010.

He will be greatly missed by the many people he mentored and inspired.