The Aromi Hybrid Azalea Garden

Think about Mobile Botanical Gardens as a refuge. Let’s say you want to collect all of Sawada’s camellias. You do your homework, buy the camellias, plant them in your garden. What happens when you pass away? The greatest collection of camellias in the last generation was at the corner of Broad and Government, now a Greer’s Grocery. Down the road at Catherine and Government Blacklawn Gardens is now an Office Depot. Rubel’s magnificent Longview Gardens with its roaring lions and giant Buddha is now Mobile waterworks. The lions sit silently in a museum. Even the garden of Dr. Aromi, where all these wonderful hybrids were created, is now a lawn.

Mobile Botanical Garden allows us to hand down what we value to our children, and to their children. It is an enduring home. It is our enduring home.
- Maarten van der Giessen

When Dr. Aromi moved into his new home on St.Gallen Ave. S in 1966, he was an Education professor at the University of South Alabama and knew as much about azaleas as the next person. The azaleas in his yard soon became sick and he eventually realized that it had been caused by construction materials in the ground affecting the soil’s pH. From that point on, he began to research and experiment with improving azaleas for Mobile’s unique conditions.

In 1969, Aromi produced his first cross using the Southern Indian azaleas. He continued to develop new evergreen crosses, focusing on improving cold tolerance, larger flower trusses, and a new range of vibrant colors. After failing to convince growers that more azaleas were needed on the market, Aromi set his evergreen project to the side. During the time that he was working with evergreen azaleas Aromi also discovered the native deciduous azaleas of Alabama, which were known as ‘honeysuckle bushes’. He crossed these hearty and fragrant natives with the cold-weather suited Exbury hybrids to produce azaleas that were ideal for Mobile and showcased stunning colors and large flower trusses. Aromi’s own native *austrinun* served as the parent for many of the crosses that he produced.

His more than 40 years of dedication to hybridizing resulted in 1045 crosses and over 100,000 seedlings that he brought to flower, of which he only named one percent. He named a flower for each of his children and grandchildren, as well as other important friends in his life. In addition to being a professor he was also an artist and the beautiful flowers that he produced with charming names like Dancing Rabbit and Tipsy Tangerine reflect this creative nature. Of the 108 cultivars of deciduous azaleas Aromi named, 25 have already been lost to the world of horticulture. The importance of housing this collection is critical.

Mobile Botanical Gardens is proud to be able to conserve and display the life’s work of the late Dr. Eugene Aromi. Maarten van der Giessen, of van der Giessen Nursery in Semmes, AL, inherited most of the plants when Dr.Aromi passed away and looked after them for more than 10 years. He generously donated the collection for the Aromi Garden at Mobile Botanical Gardens so that the magnificent azaleas could be shared with Mobile and the world in perpetuity.

We now feature the most significant collection of Aromi hybrid azaleas in the country.