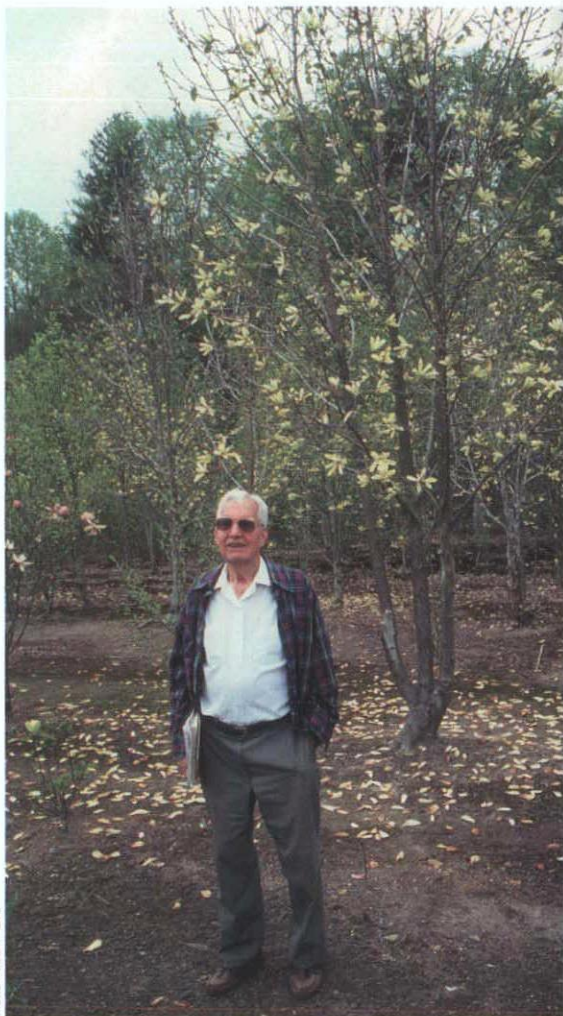


Remembering Augie

When August Kehr died on September 27, 2001, the plant world lost a respected and valued man. Augie was very well regarded, not only by members of the Magnolia Society, but by rhododendron enthusiasts as well.

The Fall 2001 issue of the *Magnolia Magazine* (Vol. 8 No. 2) contained a detailed obituary describing Augie's many accomplishments. However, in this issue of *Magnolia*, we have collected some personal remembrances from those members of the Magnolia Society who knew him best. Interestingly, a common thread runs through most of these personal remembrances: Augie developed his interest in magnolias late in his life. As several of the contributors pointed out, he didn't even begin his extensive magnolia hybridizing program until he retired from his day job. He lived his life and made his plans as if there were an unlimited number of tomorrows. We will certainly miss Augie.

Augie with his magnolias in Hendersonville, NC. Pat McCracken took this photograph in the Spring of 1999.



PAT MCCRACKEN

*From Joe Hickman
Benton, IL October, 2001*

On Saturday morning [September 29th —ed.], I stepped over to my secretary's computer in the office to read some e-mails and learned of Augie's death. I was on my way to mow an acre or two, a beautiful day, and this news just left me desolate for awhile. Then I really digested the various e-mails. Augie was evidently in a reclining chair, dozing or taking a nap and just didn't wake up. What a fine way for that old gentleman to go—at peace and in the company of his loved ones. I don't remember his exact age, but he was in his higher 80s and I'm sure you'll remember that he and his wife had to move from their beautiful home due to their failing health.

All of us make many friends in a plant society and this is one of the major reasons that we belong. I never heard Augie say a bad word about anyone. He was strong physically and mentally. He was a man, a good man, and a gentle man. I think of him frequently because wherever I go in the five acres at my office, I see his hybrids from scion wood or from plants that he gave me.

I am sure that you know of his long and distinguished career in horticulture. By his writings and

his generosity, his plants are spread over the world where ornamental plants are cherished and cultivated. At this writing I can only think of him in superlatives. His contributions to the Magnolia Society and to the world will endure forever.

I have forgotten the source and I cannot quote exactly, but I read something long ago to the effect that *he created a legend more enduring than bronze*. This certainly applies to Augie. What a splendid life he lived!



*From Harold Hopkins
DeLand, FL October, 2001*

Augie was a plant genetics expert in the USDA at Beltsville, MD. I'm not sure who introduced me to him. He had already enjoyed a successful career in breeding and introducing cultivars of either azaleas or rhododendrons. When I met him, I talked about the fun of being in the Magnolia Society and experimenting with breeding and grafting. I guess it was a time when he was looking for a new place to direct his energies. He leaped at the opportunity, and never looked back.

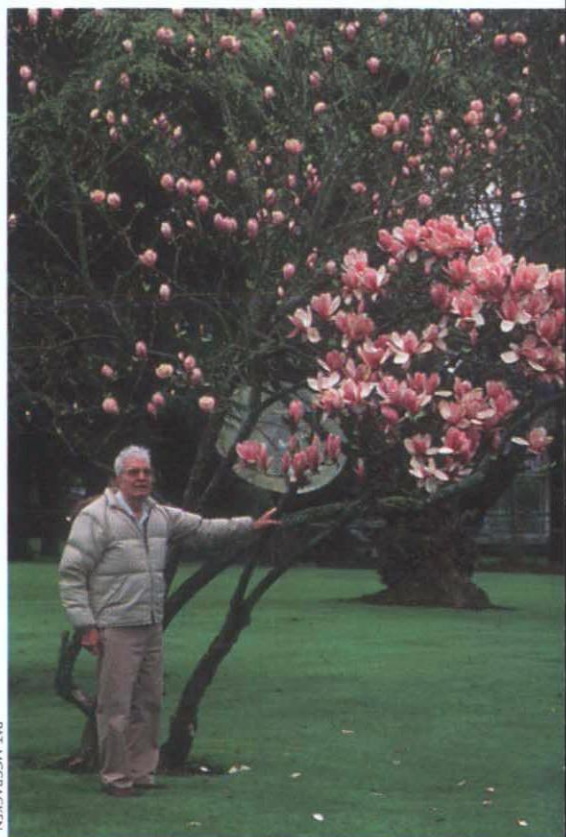
I don't give myself as much credit as he does for introducing him to magnolia breeding. He retired from the USDA about that time,

and bought a retirement home with acreage for avenues of magnolias in Hendersonville, NC, near Carl Sandburg's retirement retreat at Flat Rock, and set goals of desirables and possibles for his breeding. He exploited the use of hybrids previously considered sterile for breeding purposes because of odd ploidy numbers, and—using pollen from the fall-flowering crocus—tricked magnolias into changing their ploidy to make them subjects for hybridization. Like Joe McDaniel, he watched for witches brooms that might provide new material (see photo). It wasn't long before he was turning out a steady trickle and then a stream of new and desirable cultivars with new colors and bred to cope with late freezes—an almost regular spring phenomenon that harms the fruit, flower, and wood of some Asian magnolias in the Eastern U.S. With other society member breeders, he has helped introduce some American magnolias and their desirable characters into the breeding of Asian magnolias.

Augie's life was one of useful and energetic action to remove breeding obstacles. He was also, to my knowledge, the instigator of the society's sponsorship and funding of a magnolia research program.

I knew he had experienced some medical problems several years ago but I found it difficult to accept his recent letter saying that he was moving closer to his nearest kin somewhere in the Midwest, and where magnolias are not a way of life.

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PAT MCCracken

Augie Kehr inspecting a witches broom in Salem, OR in the Spring of 2001.

*From Mark Krautmann
Salem, OR March, 2002*

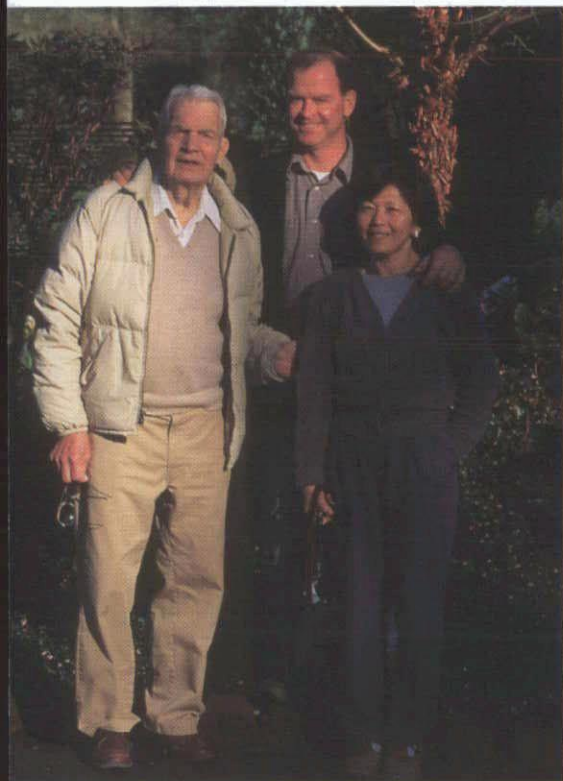
In my heart August Kehr will always occupy a revered spot. He was a gentle, generous man who enjoyed a good hug and never tired of talking about plants.

Jolly and I first met Augie at the Magnolia Society meeting in Eugene, OR in 1994. I recall being delighted by his articulate presentation about his hybrid yellows,

Augie with Mark and Jolly Krautmann of Heritage Seedlings in the Spring of 2001.

and I was especially amazed to realize how few people knew of his accomplishments. August was such a humble person. It seemed to me that this might be why so few wholesale nurserymen knew of him. Despite the remarkable success of his plant breeding efforts, he seldom called any attention to his plants and never to himself.

My friend, Pat McCracken, and I determined to do whatever we could to get his beautiful magnolia cultivars into the mainstream of horticulture. In the spring of '95 we drove from Raleigh to Hendersonville, NC to see August and to photograph his magnolia crosses in bloom. Of course, we nagged him about his favorites, but he was always non-committal. He'd counter, "What ones are your favorites?" His only conclusive statement about any of them that I can remember was, "'Daybreak' is a pretty good one." In my own judgment, "breathtaking" is an inadequate term for the unfolding blooms of 'Daybreak.' We recall from the Old Testament the notation that King Solomon in all his glory was never arrayed as lovely as a lily. Yet August, by his God-given talent, created this lovely creature he so elegantly called 'Daybreak.' I will just leave



PAT MCCracken

it at that. Don't leave this mortal world yourself until you lay eyes upon 'Daybreak' in bloom.

Later that year we gathered scions of 'Daybreak' and 'Sunspire' (a great upright yellow) for budding and grafting, and since then we've given talks here and there to promote his material. After some false starts, we feel that we have a solid basis to offer some of his best magnolias to the trade. Pat, Al Reimer, and I and have a gentlemen's agreement to contribute a dollar to the Magnolia Society research fund in August's name for each plant of 'Sunspire' that we sell. It could generate a significant amount of revenue so that research will be much better funded. We hope others will join us in this tribute to August. If we in the Society don't support research and carry on with the example that August set, who will?

During our visits to Augie's home or his to ours, my sense was always that I was in the presence of a living saint. On the occasion of his last trip to Oregon in spring of '01, I recall feeling so fortunate at breakfast with August to be able to ask about his strategies in crossing magnolias. He'd patiently explain all about his goal to get a fine, late blooming yellow—what cultivars he used, and why. Should you casually remark that any of his

plants might be a good one to bulk up, not long afterward you'd find in your mailbox a meticulously prepared package of buds of his horticultural legacies. These buds were like gold in your propagating hands.

August was a mentor to me as a nurseryman, but that's not the main reason I will always carry a part of him with me. He was a gentleman—heavy on the gentle. His kind wife, Mary Lou, and he seemed a perfect match, so I know that she misses his presence and smile more than any of us. At their comfortable mountain home they'd created a piece of heaven in the woods. Because it's situated at relatively high elevation and his magnolia trials were on a low-lying creek bench, the area would get devastating frosts nearly every year. In typical fashion, at the age of 60 or so, August was undaunted. He saw the opportunity to breed late-blooming, frost-resistant magnolias, and to test them under severe conditions. Who among us, even in this Society, would consider beginning a magnolia breeding effort in such a place at age 60?

August was a great man. He had the audacity to do what none other has done before, and to do it without any staff or contract or incentive other than to leave the world a more beautiful place than



DICK FIGLAR

he found it. Each of us is greater because of August. His fragrant, stunning, hardy magnolias will always be with us, and a bit of him lives on in each of us who were fortunate to know him.

*From Pat McCracken
Zebulon, NC March, 2002*

Finally! It is that time of the year again when the dull grays and browns of winter are quickly disappearing and spring is here in all its multicolored glory. For me, much of the glory of spring is the anticipation of the beauty of magnolia flowers. There is no doubt that August Kehr has helped

Augie instructing members of the Magnolia Society at the 1987 Annual meeting, which was held that year in Hendersonville, NC.

to make spring, and the world, much more beautiful!

The loss of August has been very difficult for me since we were so close. Not only have I lost my mentor, but also one of my best friends. It would be easy to get bogged down in the pain of Augie's passing, but this is not what Augie would have wanted. He lived his life to the fullest and took great pleasure in his magnolias. The pain of his passing is still here, but the amazement and joy of what Augie has created are all around me everyday. I have the great fortune of being a large producer of magnolias and I have specialized in working with the plants that Augie produced. When I go into the greenhouses or into the gardens, I feel Augie's spirit and the joy of his creations surrounding me.

The first time that I had the pleasure of meeting Augie was in 1995. I had heard for several years about a retired gentleman that had been accomplishing incredible things with magnolias. So finally a couple of us from the J. C. Raulston Arboretum in Raleigh, nc took a trip up to see what was

going on. Needless to say, I was completely stunned! Never could I have imagined the extent of what Augie had accomplished after he retired! In his very gentle and quiet manner, Augie instilled in me the love and passion for magnolias. He also taught me that it was completely possible to make huge advances in magnolia breeding within a lifetime.

This has lead me to undertake an extensive and exhausting breeding project with evergreen magnolias. Augie's guidance and encouragement has always been there. Not only did Augie introduce me to the wonders of magnolia breeding, but he also introduced me to the fantastic world of magnolia people! It is amazing how many people have come into my life due to the influence of Augie. Augie has given me the greatest gift imaginable—the gift of friendship! He has also given me the gift of passion for my work. There are days that I just can't get out of bed fast enough to get to work on grafting magnolias. It is wonderful to have a job that I love and to work with plants that I love and to see the hand of Augie every place. Yes, Augie is not with us in person, but he will always be with us in spirit—all we have to do is look at the beautiful magnolias he has given us!

From Al Reimer

Lyndon, WA March 2002

I had the good fortune of getting to know Augie Kehr over the last few years. He was an inspiration to me, not only in the specialty field of Magnolia, but in terms of human creative activity, in general.

One of my strongest memories of Augie was at the Magnolia Society meeting in Washington, DC during the spring of 2000. After the conclusion of the meeting, Augie, Pat McCracken and I took a side trip to the National Arboretum. Augie talked of when he worked there, years before, and his friendship with Kosar and DeVos. He said he had no real interest, or knowledge, of magnolias at that time in his life, and only as he was near retirement did he become excited about the species.

It struck me that it's never too late to begin creative work. Augie's remarkable hybrids are all the fruit of his work as a "retired" person. Augie wasn't just creative in his magnolia breeding, but created an excitement and a love for the plants in Pat and myself, and in many others who he was a friend to.

A year later, Augie and Pat made a trip to the West Coast, which was the last time I saw Augie.



Augie visiting the Reimers in BC, Canada in the Spring of 2001. From L. to R.: Nick Reimer, Augie Kehr, and Al Reimer.

He brought some *M. acuminata* pollen along, wanting to cross with some of the larger pink varieties in my father's collection. A few months later, Augie passed away. I often think of him, and miss his friendship.

*From Ray Head
Rutherfordton, NC
January, 2002*

Augie Kehr retired and with his wife, Mary Lou, moved to Hendersonville, NC in the fall of 1979. He soon became an active member of the local chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. Right away I realized that I was welcome to visit anytime and that Augie would take time to show me projects he was working on and answer my questions.

Most people know about the rhododendron and evergreen azalea hybrids that he created, but his interest went much farther than this. He had a project to try and hybridize a more heat tolerant rhubarb and a seedless pawpaw. He had an excellent collection of native azaleas that had been acquired over a lifetime. He created lepidote rhododendron hybrids using *R. chapmanii* for heat tolerance and *R. auginii* × *R. carolineum* to get blue flowers. These are being tested at present and some will become well known garden plants.

Augie once told me that probably the most important thing he discovered was that pollen can be frozen, stored, and used for years. He was extremely pleased to have been part of starting the Research

Foundation and Breeders Roundtable for the Rhododendron Society.

After all his accomplishments, Augie's magnolias were his passion. I will always remember a man in his mid-80s climbing a 15-foot ladder to collect pollen and make crosses.

I stated on several occasions that one thing I liked about a lot of magnolias were their fragrance. One early spring morning in 2000 he sent me to the far end of his magnolia planting. In about 15 minutes he hollered for me to come back to where he was standing. He had four piles of cut magnolia blooms. I was to separate them by their smell. I was told that I had solved a problem that involved *M. 'Daybreak'* in his orchard. Augie had lost his sense of smell in his later years.

Over the last few years I often questioned Augie about any regrets he might have in regards to crosses that were not made. I never

received any answers to these questions. Augie was always looking ahead and did not have time for looking back. Excerpts from Augie's last two emails show proof of what kind of life he lived:

Thur. Sept. 20, 2001. I have a polyploid plant of (R. 'Klondyke' x R. calendulaceum) X 314-1 that will flower in a few days. It is an ever-green azalea that should be the yellow I've been waiting on for 25 years.

Wed. Sept. 26, 2001. The plant I told you about has bloomed and there is a lot of pink in the flower. It has some pollen and I am selfing it. If I get some seed I will send you part of them. There should be some yellows among these seedlings.

I think that it is fitting that the last contact I had with Augie involved him making a cross and looking forward to the results. Through his plants Augie has left us a legacy that will be enjoyed for generations to come. 🌹