

Winchester Hillside Aglow With Azaleas, Grown by Harvard Professor

By GEORGE TALOMIS
Staff Horticulturalist Massachusetts Horticulture Society

If you were to turn the corner of Cliff st. in Winchester during the middle and latter part of May—or merely cast a glance



up the road—you would be confronted by a spectacle that would dazzle your eyes.

There at the foot of the short street is a steep hillside aglow with brilliantly colored azaleas, including every kind that will grow in this climatic area.

The gardener responsible for this breathtaking floral sight is the world famous sociologist, Prof. Pitirim Sorokin of Harvard University. Since 1931, when he bought his house, he has been adding new plants and varieties so that the garden is an extraordinary accomplishment for any one man, let alone such a busy scholar as Prof. Sorokin, who nevertheless devotes about three hours a day

to his beloved hillside. "You can see," he expressed with a twinkle in his eye, "I have already appropriated part of the Middlesex Fells, but the Fells authorities say I can take over the entire woods if I promise to plant it with azaleas."

Prof. Sorokin likes to tell how he came to be interested in azaleas. When he first bought his property he had no gardening inclinations whatsoever. He planted tulips, daffodils and other common plants, because everyone did, but when he saw that his neighbor, Jack Willis, had such wonderful luck with some azaleas, it gave him an idea. The result was that he ordered a few plants, the next year a few more, the next year still more.

"It's like eating, once you start you can't stop" is how he expressed it. What is more, he has done all the work himself. In his 23 years of gardening he had outside help for exactly four hours—once when he was ill.

Although the number of azaleas has never been computed, there are now over 300 plants on a steep hillside, covered with native oaks which provide high shade and acid leafmold, that constitutes an area of one and half to two acres. These represent some 150-200 species and varieties, including the exquisite Gable hybrids. Then there are 80-90 rhododendrons, 40-50 lilacs and a number of dogwoods. As you come down Cliff st. you can spot a huge wisteria high on a precipice, which when in bloom is "a blue Niagara."

Planting such a rugged hillside is more difficult than one may think. It is practically all rock and ledge, with a little soil, and

Prof. Sorokin had to do a great deal of blasting before he was able to plant in certain spots. But the scant soil in which azaleas thrive is a test to the fact that azaleas—and rhododendrons, too—are shallow rooted, with many fibrous roots close to the surface. Because of this there is a watering problem, especially during periods of drought. It takes two days to water the garden properly, but plenty of natural leafmold, from the leaves of the trees which are permitted to stay where they fall, helps to retain moisture.

At planting time, Prof. Sorokin uses some peat in the soil. Beyond that the only fertilizer he uses is manure—any kind he can get—which is usually applied in the Spring. There is no Winter covering except the leaves from the trees which eventually turn into leafmold. No other food of any kind is used. Prof. Sorokin's advice to those who want a successful planting of azaleas is to find a natural woodland, preferably with oaks, and the rest is up to nature.

The first azalea in bloom is the Korean or Magnolian azalea, whose lilac-rose flowers open with forsythia. This is followed by another lavender variety, a Gable hybrid called Conewagon, which is very showy. Speaking of the Gable hybrids, Prof. Sorokin is very proud of his plants which have been sent to him by the great breeder, Mr. Joseph B. Gable, with whom he has been corresponding for many years. He starts out with young plants and nurtures them until they are the sizable specimens that many are today. This, of course, takes a number of years, because azaleas are slow growing, a good trail in that little or no pruning is required.

Among the other Gable hybrids in the Sorokin hillside are Big Joe and Elizabeth Gable, both of



PITIRIM SOROKIN WORKING IN HIS AZALEA GARDEN

which are hardy. Of the pure whites, Prof. Sorokin finds that the Snow azalea is the hardiest and the loveliest. There are many specimens of, the orange-flame torch azalea, many yellow-orange mollis hybrids and superb plants of the red Hinodegiri, including a spreading specimen at the top of a large rock that has a horizontal Japanese character.

Another garden enthusiast in the Sorokin family is charming Mrs. Sorokin, who is a doctor of botany busily engaged in her research. But the azalea garden is all her husband's, she insists. In fact, Prof. Sorokin, who has a delightful sense of humor and an inimitable wit, revealed, "In this family we have a standing joke. When a plant is scientifically planted it does not grow. When it is unscientifically planted it does. All my azaleas have been unscientifically planted—that is why they have done so well."

Both Prof. and Mrs. Sorokin are proud of their garden and especially because of the pleasure it offers others. Visitors are encouraged to come and see the azaleas any time, but not to walk up the hill, not only because they might step on a small precious plant, but because of the danger involved. There are many rocks and stones which do not make the going safe. But all are welcomed to walk along the outside to marvel at the panorama, a symphony of blazing color, if ever there was one.

Most of all, the Sorokins are delighted with the shut-ins who come to see their hanging garden. Some of them are not able to get out of the car, but sit within and enjoy it from there. Many old people

come too, and ninety-year-olds often insist on walking among the plants, so thrilled are they with what is before their eyes. Nuns and priests come, and policemen. Mrs. Sorokin told of a woman who came recently and remarked that she was going home to describe the incredible range of colors to her blind son.

Prof. Sorokin, who has written such monumental works as "Social and Cultural Dynamics" (4 vols.) and "Crisis of our Age," is the most translated living sociologist in the world. Some of the languages into which his books have been translated include Japanese, Chinese, Norse, German, Dutch, Finnish, Portuguese, Yugoslavian and Czech-Slovakian. He has also just published two new books, "The Forms and Techniques of Altruistic and Spiritual Growth" and "The Ways and Power of Love."

Yet with all his teaching, writing and other prodigious activities he would not think of

being without his garden and the pleasure it gives him, because he believes it is the best means to mental and physical health. It is also the best therapy for mental or physical disorders—"both gardening and doing good deeds," he added, "as there are no better ways for a prolonged and harmonious life." "Why I even made a study," he continued, "of the saints of all times and found that, with the exception of those who died as martyrs, the others lived longer than contemporary Americans. And in those days, the average life span was short."

Modest and unassuming, boyish in his enthusiasm, best described as a blithe spirit, Prof. Sorokin attributes his capacity for creative accomplishment to the relaxation, inspiration and strength he derives from his garden. "Why," he confessed, "I'm even a very selfish man. As you can see, I've even arranged my garden so that it looks best from my study so I can enjoy it from indoors."