Azaleas

The ‘Lights’ series of azaleas brings the colors of the tropics to Minnesota’s early spring landscape. The plants are world-renowned for varied colors and incredible flower bud hardiness—an achievement that initially took two decades. The first crosses were made in 1957; ‘Northern Lights’ — with various shades of fragrant pink flowers on a 4- to 6-foot bush—was the first introduction, in 1978. Since then, 12 new ‘Lights’ have been released.

Although nearly commonplace in Zone 4 landscapes today, the range of colors and flower forms in the ‘Lights’ azaleas were unknown even as recently as the mid-‘80s when some of the richer yellow, orange, and multihued cultivars began to find their way into the landscape.

University azalea breeders continue to improve foliage quality and powdery mildew resistance. Researchers are screening 41 deciduous azalea varieties in replicated field plots in Minnesota and Ohio to identify mildew tolerant or resistant cultivars for use in future breeding. Most of the varieties in the field are also screened in growth chamber experiments to determine whether the same resistance/susceptibility reactions occur. If so, the powdery mildew screening can occur more quickly—on a smaller scale, in the off-season, and with less expense.

Breeders now select for attractive fall foliage color, flower fragrance, and significantly extended bloom periods—cultivars that flower later into June and possibly even July.

Rhododendron is the genus name for both rhododendrons and azaleas. In the Upper Midwest, azalea refers to the deciduous members of the genus Rhododendron and rhododendron refers to those that hold their leaves through the winter.