

The Best Deciduous Azaleas for Hot Climates

Will Ferrell — Kernersville, North Carolina

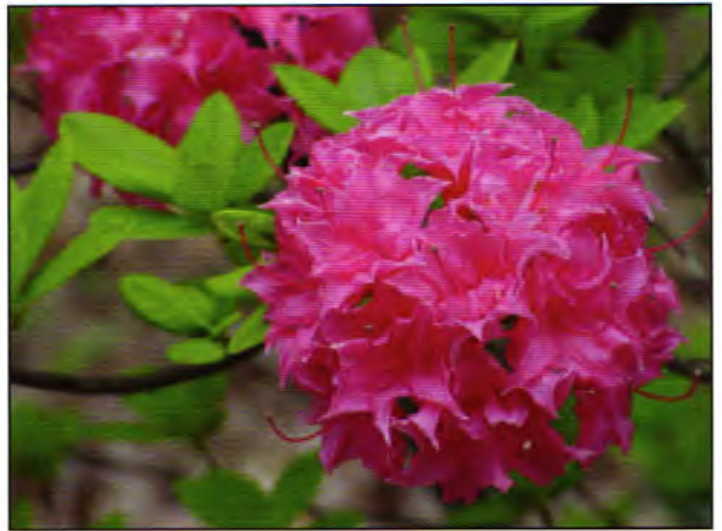
Before about 1990, my interest in gardening was limited to enthusiastically enjoying the blooms of redbuds and dogwoods and a casual interest in trees. Indeed, I was somewhat put off by the juxtaposition of hot pink and orange evergreen azaleas that is all too common in my area.

But soon thereafter, I fell in love. Following an infatuation with the Ilam hybrid 'Peachy Keen' that I purchased on a whim at Wal-Mart, I fell head over heels for the fantastic deciduous azalea seedlings of Wyatt Lefever of Kernersville, North Carolina. Among his multitude of beauties, I was especially attracted to several 'Cecile' x 'My Mary', *Rhododendron calendulaceum* x unknown Exbury, and *R. atlanticum* x unknown seedlings. I have managed to root two of them; it is a shame that they are not all in the trade. I think it was the wonderful, subtle color blends, but who can discount the enticing effect of the perfume(s)?

Like a lot of novice gardeners or garden lovers, I ran into my share of frustration. I discovered that a lot of the hybrid deciduous azaleas that tend to show up in the nurseries in my area do very well in England where they were developed, but less well in the heat of Zone 7. I have learned a good bit in the last few years; and through the ASA and ARS, I've come in contact with a number of gardeners who know more than I ever will. I thought perhaps if we could pool the knowledge flowing from our experiences, we might be able to save future nascent

enthusiasts some avoidable frustration—not to mention money, as the typical deciduous azalea costs more than twice what the typical evergreen does. The purpose of this article is to try to bring together that knowledge as to which cultivars will thrive in the relatively hot humid areas of Zones 7 and 8.

My concentration here is primarily on older and relatively available hybrid cultivars. Exburys, Knap Hills,



The Knap Hill 'Homebush' is one of the few consensus good performers without a hint of orange in it. (Photo by Joe Schild)



The subtle beauty of Knap Hill 'Buzzard' appears about May 1 in Charlotte, North Carolina, in spite of its delicate name. This is one of the author's favorite deciduous azaleas.

(Photo by Dan Royster)



Exbury 'Cecile' in one the author covets.

(Photo by Glenn O'Sheal)

Ghents, Girards, and similar families of hybrids make up a dominant part of most catalogues and local nursery selections. *A priori*, I assume that most of the (relatively modern) Southern-developed cultivars (Aromi, Dodd, Beasley, Sommerville, etc.) will thrive in Zones 7 and 8. (I find it interesting that in my area, Lowe's and Home Depot have been quicker than the "quality" nurseries to sell Aromi and other heat-tolerant hybrids and natives.) I have included numerous species as well, though I think knowledge of their appropriate range is more widespread.

In constructing the chart below, I have invited input from ASA members generally and from people I know to be heavily involved in this area of gardening in particular. I have consulted current ARS "good-doers" lists and older ASA and ARS lists. I have delved into Galle's and Dirr's monographs. Still, it seems likely that some readers will have areas of disagreement. The numerous details of site selection, soil, care in irrigation, etc. may well influence each gardener's results more than the particular cultivar's strengths or weaknesses. While my garden is Zone 7a and at 850 feet above sea level, I attribute my degree of success—such as it is—to soil preparation (lightening our native clay broadly with all manner of organic materials) and watering during dry periods of the summer. But I've certainly had my share of failures. Thus, I offer this diffidently as an aid to those wanting to grow some of the beautiful older hybrids in the South with a little less frustration.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the following people for their input: Wyatt Lefever, Graham Ray, Anna Lyon, Joe Schild, David Royster, Larry Mellichamp, Anita Lawson, Bill McDavit, Earl Sommerville, Maarten van der Giessen, Richard Clifton, Bob and Martha Kelley, Joe Coleman, Mike Creel, Harry Weiskittel, Carrie Winter, Don Hyatt and others.

References

- Dirr, Michael A. 1998. *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*. Champaign, Illinois: Stipes Publishing.
- Galle, Fred C. 1987. *Azaleas*. (Revised and Enlarged Edition). Portland: Timber Press.
- Hardy, Judson. 1980. "Deciduous Azaleas, Part II—Asiatic Species." *The Azalean*. 2(3): 1-3

Will Ferrell is a general dentist practicing in High Point, North Carolina, who is, in the Jeffersonian use of the term, "a young gardener." His other interests include history, economics, and ideas.



'Illum Peachy Keen' displays one of the singular virtues of numerous deciduous azaleas: complex and varying suffusions of color. It tends to remain relatively compact and maintains nice dark green foliage. An occasional fall bloom tendency brings to mind its New Zealand origin. (Photo by David Royster)



'White Lights' has performed well in my garden in spite of putative *prinosphyllum* x white Exbury antecedents. (Note that both Roslyn and Greer catalogs describe 'White Lights' as white with a yellow blotch.) (Photo by Rachel Rees)

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Chart of Other Gardeners' Responses to Selected Deciduous Azaleas in Zones 7 and 8

Category 1: Consensus "Good Doers" In	
Hybrid Group	Cultivars/Comments
Beasley	'My Mary', 'Nacoochee Princess', 'Rosy Cheeks' (and probably others of Beasley group)
Confederate Series	'Admiral Semmes' (and probably other Southern-developed hybrids by Aromi, Dodd, Sommerville, et al.)
Choptank River Group	All cultivars
Exbury	'Balzac', 'Brazil', 'Gibraltar'
Ghent	'Daviesii'
Ilam	'Ilam Primrose'
Knap Hill	'Homebush' (tends to get gangly with age), 'Orangeade'
Slonecker	'Wallowa Red'
Species	<i>Rhododendron alabamense</i> , <i>R. atlanticum</i> , <i>R. austrinum</i> , <i>R. canescens</i> , <i>R. cumberlandense</i> , <i>R. eastmanii</i> , <i>R. flammeum</i> , <i>R. periclymenoides</i> , <i>R. prunifolium</i> , <i>R. viscosum</i>

Category 2: Lots Of Positive Comments	
Hybrid Group	Cultivars/Comments
Abbott	'Jane Abbott'
Arneson	'Mount Ranier'
Aromi	'Pink Carousel'
Beasley	'Lemon Drop'
Coolidge Rare Plant Gardens	'Snowbird'
Exbury	'Cecile'(some mildew), 'Golden Eagle', 'Hotspur Yellow', 'Klondyke', (overwhelmingly positive responses, but sometimes reported challenging)
Galle	'Choice Cream'
Ghent	'Narcissiflorum'
Ilam	'Ilam Copper Cloud'
Knap Hill	'Golden Oriole', 'White Swan'
Metselaar	'Golden Flare'
Northern Lights	'White Lights'
Sloccock	'Satan'
Windsor	'Windsor Daybreak'
Unknown	'Tabasco', 'Walla-Walla'
Species	<i>R. japonicum</i>

What Do The Zones Mean?

When a description of a plant in a book or magazine or on a plant label includes a Zone designation, it normally reflects one of the 10 United States Department of Agriculture Plant Hardiness Zones. The USDA developed this system, based on 60 years of data collection and analysis. What the hardiness zones indicate is based on a range of average annual minimum temperature; thus, they reflect cold-hardiness or cold-tolerance. According to the official USDA Hardiness Zone Map, the coldest temperature range for Zone 7 is 0° to 10°F (or -17.8° to -12.3° C) and 10° to 20°F (or -12.3° to -6.6°C) for Zone 8.

However, for gardeners in the South, cold-tolerance is not so relevant as heat-tolerance. More recently, the American Horticultural Society and the president emeritus of the AHS Dr. H. Marc Cathey developed a system of Heat Zones to reflect the opposite extreme of hardiness conditions. They analyzed data from the National Weather Service for the daily high temperature recorded between 1974 and 1995. The standard is number of days per year over 86° F (30° C). For Heat Zone 7, this means an average of 60 to 90 days per year over 86° F (30° C); for Heat Zone 8 the number would be 90 to 120. Will Ferrell's garden happens to be in both USDA Hardiness Zone 7 and AHS Heat Zone 7. Both systems

help you "bracket" likely survival of a plant in your area; however, the whole range of horticulture skills (adapting soil type and fertility, air circulation, watering, as well as actual exposure to direct sunlight, etc.) and microclimates can enable gardeners to help marginal plants survive. Some wholesale nurseries are beginning to tag their material with Heat Zones as well as USDA Hardiness Zones.

To learn more:

USDA Miscellaneous Publication No. 1475. Issued January 1990. First Hardiness Zone map published in 1960.

Cathey, Dr. H. Marc with Linda Bellamy. 1998. *Heat-Zone Gardening: How to Choose Plants That Thrive in Your Region's Warmest Weather*. Time-Life Books.

The Web site of the American Horticultural Society allows you to find out your Heat Zone by typing in your zip code. Consult: http://www.ahs.org/publications/heat_zone_map.htm

The Web site of the US National Arboretum lists USDA Zones and example woody plants that "normally succeed" in them. Consult: <http://www.usna.usda.gov/Hardzone/hrdzn4.html>.

Category 3: Mixed Comments	
Hybrid Group	Cultivars/Comments
Arneson	'Arneson Gem' + +
Exbury	'Fireball' (mostly negative), 'Golden Dream', 'Oxydol'(mildew), 'Strawberry Ice' + +, 'Sunset Pink'(no vigor, rust, shy bloomer)
Girard	'Girard's Crimson Tide' (mostly positive) + +, 'Girard's Mount Saint Helens'(leggy) + +, 'Girard's Pink Delight' + +, 'Girard's Yellow Pom Pom'
Ilam	'Ilam Peachy Keen' (some fall bloom, mostly positive comments about, and holds large blooms well in heat) + +, 'Ilam Persian Melon' + +, 'Ilam Yellow Beauty'(shy bloomer when young) + +
Knap Hill	'Buzzard' + +, 'George Reynolds'(slow grower, shy bloomer), 'Mandarin Maid' + +, 'Yellow Cloud' (mildew, perhaps related to tissue-culture-origin)
Occidentale	'Irene Koster'
Slonecker	'Chetco'(mostly positive and very well-liked) + +
Windsor	'Windsor Buttercup' + +
Species	<i>R. arborescens</i> , <i>R. calendulaceum</i> , <i>R. molle</i> (mostly negative), <i>R. schlippenbachii</i> (mostly positive, but temperamental and slow to bloom), <i>R. vaseyi</i>
Note:	+ + One or more gardeners reported very good success with each of these cultivars

Category 4: Generally Negative Comments	
Hybrid Group	Cultivars/Comments
Exbury	'Cannon's Double', 'Exbury Sunrise'
Ghent	'Corneille'
Ilam	'Ilam Red Velvet'
Knap Hill	'Cheerful Giant'
Leach	'July Jewel', 'July Joy'
Mossman	'Washington State Centennial'
Northern Lights	For example, 'Golden Lights', 'Orchid Lights' (but 'White Lights' seems to be an exception)
Weston	'Weston's Innocence'
Windsor	'Windsor Peach Glow'
Species	<i>R. canadense</i> , <i>R. luteum</i> , <i>R. occidentale</i> , <i>R. prinophyllum</i>

HELP WITH AZALEA NAMES

The Society has developed an interim azalea index that gives the spelling, hybrid group, and source of the name for about 10,000 azaleas, along with their published synonyms and spelling errors, and links to any images for these azaleas. Collecting and publishing these names was possible only with generous permission from Timber Press to use information from their *Azaleas* books by Fred C. Galle, and from the Royal Horticultural Society to use information from their *International Rhododendron Register and Checklist*. Members of the Azalea Society of America have contributed the images posted on the Web site to date; many more images are needed. Contact Bob Stelloh (bstelloh@mac.com) for details on submitting the images. Visit the ASA azalea name index at <http://www.azaleas.org/azzintro.html> for images of many of the azaleas listed on Will Ferrell's chart.

Book Review

Success with Rhododendrons and Azaleas by H. Edward Reiley.

May 2004. Revised edition. Timber Press. 344 pages.

Eve Harrison — Harpers Ferry, West Virginia

[This book review appeared previously in the Northern Virginia chapter newsletter; it is reprinted here by permission of the author, a Northern Virginia Chapter member, Ed.]

This informative, well-written book kept me turning pages and making notes on the blank pages conveniently provided at the back with an ongoing sense of not being able to imagine what could possibly be around the "next corner"! The index is excellent and inclusive. The pictures are both exciting and beautiful and gave me many new ideas for my own woodland garden. I referred fre-

quently to the well-outlined table of contents and will refer throughout the season to the Pest Management Calendar as well as the extremely helpful Good Doer and Heat, Drought, and Sun tables provided.

This is the first book I've seen giving a map of Heat Zones along with the usual Cold Zones [USDA hardiness zones]. This is quite important in

choosing the right cultivar for the right site and temperature. The many zones shown in the Good Doer lists showed locations not only in the USA but also in Canada, British Columbia, Australia, and the British Isles.

Mr. Reiley teaches every single aspect of azalea and rhododendron gardening, leaving absolutely nothing

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