

Our Prized Native Azaleas

by Steven Kristoph

WITH THE INTEREST IN NATIVE PLANTS continuing, I thought it might be nice to highlight a group that many still have little or no knowledge of—the native species azaleas.

If you ask the average gardener if they grow any azaleas in their garden, their usual response is yes, but often what they're referring to are the evergreen types. These are the common landscape azaleas which end up as foundation plants, and which, more often than not, get sheared into meatballs, hockey pucks, or some other ungodly shape...yuk! These are the azaleas that hit the garden and home improvement centers sometime in middle to late April through Mother's Day. In fact, the cultivar 'Mother's Day', an old, evergreen Kurume-type azalea, continues to be a popular red-colored variety. None of these evergreen azaleas are native to the US—they come from Asia: Japan, China, and Korea. The native azaleas (of which there are seventeen species: sixteen found on the East Coast and one from far out West...well beyond the Colorado Rockies) are what I'm going to be talking about, with emphasis on a half dozen or so.

Some Basic Botany

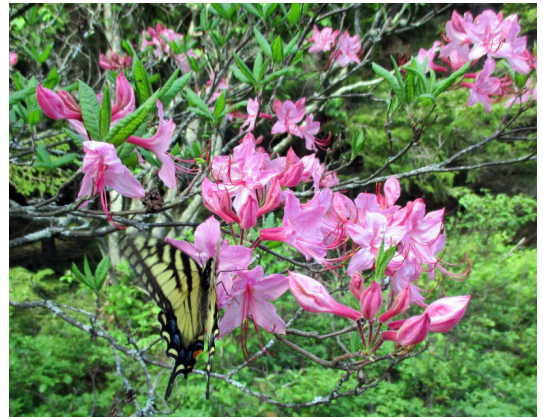
We commonly call them azaleas, but proper nomenclature classifies them as rhododendron, as in *Rhododendron serrulatum*, the hammocksweet azalea, a wonderfully fragrant, white-flowered plant that was in bloom at Mt. Cuba Center in Hockessin, DE, in September of 2015, wow! Actually, the hammocksweet azalea is no longer considered to be a distinct species but classified as *R. viscosum* var. *serrulatum*, a variety

of the swamp azalea...ahhh, the taxonomists strike again!

Several botanical features separate the azaleas from what most people recognize as rhododendrons. Native azaleas have hairs on their leaves and stems—rhododendrons do not. Rhododendrons usually have 8–10 stamens within their flower, while the azaleas have 5–7. Ok, that's enough for you to pass one of my plant ID exams at Rutgers University, where I teach landscape plants in the Department of Landscape Architecture.

A Look at the Plants

Where I live in central New Jersey, there are some very nice populations of *R. perichlymenoides*, the pinxterbloom azalea. It's found growing in open dry woods, primarily oak with some beech. In Shark River Park, located in Wall, NJ, there are several plants growing alongside and overhanging the Shark River. Similarly, you can find many plants along a pristine creek at the Dick and Nancy Eales Preserve, near Moosic Mountain in PA. The range of pinxterbloom is extensive—from New England down to the mountains of the Southeast. Flower color is various shades of pink to white (see below), with some plants displaying a rich violet color—such a plant exists at the Rutgers Gardens in New Brunswick, NJ. Bloom time is late April to mid-May.



A tiger swallowtail butterfly enjoying the nectar of a roseshell azalea.

R. prinophyllum, the roseshell azalea, is normally found growing at higher, cooler elevations. In June of 2014, I made it out to Dolly Sods Wilderness area in WV to see the hundreds of roseshell azalea in bloom. Fragrant, light pink- to carmine-colored flowers were in each clearing, all being frequented by both black and tiger swallowtails. There are many plants found at the Tom Darling Preserve in Blakeslee, PA. I have also found them in southern VT and northern MA. New York state is also home to this species.

Two native azaleas found in moist to wet areas are *R. canadense*, commonly called rhodora, and *R. viscosum*, the swamp azalea. I want to make this point right now—even though these two bear water wings, note that when found in the wild they sit perched on hummocks. If you hike the trail at the Tom Darling Preserve towards the power line right-of-way, you will go through a nice woody area, eventually entering into an open wet meadow where you'll find the motherload of rhodora. Each plant rides on what is likely a rotted black spruce stump covered with sphagnum.



Rhodora (and another species, *R. vaseyi*,) have a marked difference in flower shape from the other natives in that the corolla is not tubular, but split as seen in the image above. The two lower petals angle off left and right creating the letter “V”, maybe for victory.



Another image from the Tom Darling Preserve, this time with my wife Barbara in May, 2015. You can see how the leaves on the trees are just starting to emerge.



R. vaseyi, the pinkshell azalea, as seen above, shows the same flower structure. It is native to only a few areas along the Blue Ridge Parkway in western NC. Flower color is usually light pink, but some deeper shades do exist. A pure white form is known as ‘White Find’.

The swamp azalea (*R. viscosum*) blooms in June with very fragrant, sticky white flowers, see above right. Of the species found in the landscape trade, this one is probably most common, appearing on plant lists of obligatory wetland species. Its range is large, covering many states—from southern Maine, down to Florida, west to Mississippi.



Swamp Azalea

Two species that share the sticky, tubular white flower with swamp azalea are *R. atlanticum*, the coast azalea, and the sweet azalea, *R. arborescens*. The coast azalea, as you would expect, is native to coastal areas from Delaware down to Georgia and along parts of the Chesapeake Bay. It can be found colonizing, staying relatively low (especially in infertile sandy dunes), blooming April to May.



Notice how the above form of coast azalea has pink buds and, as the flowers open, they become pure white.

Appropriately named, the sweet azalea is just that—sweet smelling. It blooms in June and is found often along the banks of fast moving water. I’ve seen it growing out of rock along the Susquehanna River, as well along the Youghiogheny River at Swallow Falls State Park in Oakland, MD.

The images below are from Mt. Davis in PA. There’s a picnic area with a large population of *R. arborescens*. My belief is that many of the plants were transplanted there to enhance the setting. Take notice of the very long and quite red style within the flowers.





Above is the Mt. Davis picnic area with *R. arborescens* in bloom.

The flame azalea, *R. calendulaceum*, is found in and about the Appalachian Mountains. There are also some very nice populations in West Virginia not far from Dolly Sods Wilderness. Colors vary from red, to orange (and various combinations of both), to beautiful bright yellow as seen below.



Above is a flame azalea blooming along the Blue Ridge Parkway outside of Asheville, NC.

One of the latest blooming native azaleas is *R. prunifolium*, the plumleaf azalea. Late July or August is when this one puts on a real show with bright orange to red flowers. See picture right.

Other East Coast native azalea species include: *R. alabamense*, *R. austrinum*, *R. canescens*, *R. colemanii*, *R. cumberlandense*, *R. eastmanii*, and *R. flammum*.

And let us not forget our West Coast cousin *R. occidentale*, the Western azalea.

Culture, Care, and Landscape Use

Like most garden shrubs, the native azaleas prefer an organically rich, slightly acidic, well-drained soil. Most benefit from shade during the hottest part of the day, especially the summer-blooming species, like plumleaf azalea. Remember, there will be fewer flowers in too dense shade. If newly planted, they should receive supplemental water during the first year until their roots get established.

The native azaleas don't have any major pest issues except for one—DEER. In my own garden, until recently enclosing it with an 8' high deer fence, the herd would seek out anything newly planted—especially my prized native azaleas.

Native azaleas are great to use on their own as a feature plant in the landscape or mixed with ornamental small trees and shrubs. If you have a woodland garden, they are a natural that can offer flower color from spring through summer, fragrance, and (since they don't suffer from powdery mildew like the hybrid Exbury azaleas) many have attractive fall foliage color.

Please consider native azaleas for future planting.



Steven Kristoph, owner of Steven Kristoph Nursery and professor at Rutgers University, has been botanizing and cultivating plants in the Mid-Atlantic region over the past thirty years. Listen to Steven at the HPS symposium *March Into Spring* (see page 1).

Ed Note: Unless otherwise noted, all photos are ©Steven Kristoph.

Additional Azalea Information

Azaleas, by Fred C. Galle

American Azaleas,
by L. Clarence Towe

www.tjhsst.edu/~dhyatt/azaleas
(Don Hyatt's website)

The Azalea Society of America

Delaware Valley Botanical Gardens
with collections of
native azaleas

Longwood Gardens
Tyler Arboretum
Morris Arboretum
Mt. Cuba Center



This image of a plumleaf azalea was taken by my friend Karl Bernady at Providence Canyon in GA.