

# Rare Finds and Exceptional Specimens: The Native Rhododendron Germplasm Repository at Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens

By Steve Wright—Devon, Pennsylvania

## Part 1: A Growing Obsession

We all have a story to tell—a life filled with moments of inspiration that lead us down new paths to new adventures. The story of how I came to be curator of an accredited collection of rhododendrons and azaleas at a public garden in America’s Garden Capital has been filled with those moments. In fact, horticulture is a second career for me and, at one time, one that I could have never imagined pursuing. Though there were many of those inspirational moments, I admit that when I came to Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens almost twelve years ago I had very little experience with rhododendrons and azaleas and at the time, little interest. The truth is, I just didn’t know enough about them to appreciate them. Through these years of immersion though, I have come to treasure them.

With an existing interest in the value and beauty of native plants, and a newfound interest in rhododendrons, I quickly became fascinated by the native azaleas and rhododendrons. It started with the pinxters (*R. periclymenoides*), which grow in great abundance at Jenkins and light up the garden with drifts of pink in early May. Over time though, I started to get to know the other species as well and came to appreciate the differences among them—their growth habit, bloom time, fragrance, flower colors, site requirements, and so on. With so much variation, it seemed there was a native azalea or rhododendron for just about every spot in the garden.

In time, I started to notice the diversity that existed *within* each species as well. Naturally, this too would start with a pinxter—one that came to be known, at least in-house, as Stiff Upper Lip (See Photo 1). Harold Sweetman, our director at the time, told me about a particularly interesting

pinxter that he had been observing for 30 years. Every year, it bloomed a little later than the others, and was a little bit darker than the others, but, most notably, it had one bright white petal. Of course, I had to see for myself. Was it really so different? Well, yes, yes it was, and it was fantastic! I wondered, are there others in this collection that have unusual characteristics? I had to investigate. Of hundreds of specimens, there were a handful that were really nice, but only a couple that were much different from the norm. One we would call Starfish for its somewhat slender, contorted petals and another we would call Orchid Ombre for its intense lavender-pink flowers. The latter is especially nice.

Shortly after these discoveries, I was walking around the garden and crossed paths with Barbara Bullock, then the curator of the azalea collection at the National Arboretum. I just happened to be near Stiff Upper Lip and had to show her. She went on to tell me about a man named Allen Cantrell and his collection of split-petaled and double flowering native azaleas of various species. This was intriguing; at that time, I had no idea such plants existed. I had to know more. I learned from Allen that he had operated a nursery, called Fern Gulley, and sold many of these unusual selections, but that he no longer ran the nursery. He told me, though, that when he did close up shop, he sent many of his plants to Vivian Abney at East Fork Nursery in Sevierville, TN. I had to see these plants, so off to Tennessee I went. I was about to dive into a rabbit hole that I could have never imagined would be so deep.

As I worked to grow the collections at Jenkins, I would stumble across other remarkable selections in catalogs, nursery lists, and journal articles. I am particularly thankful for Don Hyatt and his prolific writing that introduced me to plants like *R. maximum* ‘Red Max’ and others at Curtis Creek, *R. minus* f. *smokianum*, the *R. calendulaceum* at Hooper Bald, and countless other outstanding, though unnamed plants growing wild throughout the Appalachians. I started collecting and traveling to meet others who shared this appreciation for native azaleas.

In 2014, we grew out a couple hundred *R. vaseyi* (pinkshell azalea) from seed collected near the Blue Ridge Parkway. If you have grown plants from seed, you surely know that you end up with many more than you can possibly use. We did not have the space to grow them all to blooming size, so we started sharing with our regional colleagues. A couple of years later, I received an email saying there must have been a mistake—one of the plants we had gifted bloomed white. I requested a photograph and, sure enough, there was no mistake, it was a white *vaseyi*. Several others had been

▼ Photo 1—*R. periclymenoides* Stiff Upper Lip.



Photo Nancy Cosmos



Photo Steve Wright

▲ Photo 2—*R. vaseyi*—unnamed dark pink.



Photo Nancy Cosmos

▲ Photo 3—*R. prunifolium* Best in Show.

set aside to share with another regional garden, but before they were picked up, there was one that started to come into bloom. The opening buds were quite dark, so I pulled it aside and waited for it to open. Within a few days, that small azalea was covered with unusually dark pink flowers (See Photo 2). I'm happy to say that that plant found a place in the Jenkins collection and we collected seeds from it and grew another batch of seedlings. I'm anxiously awaiting the results.

Though my passion for these plants had been building for years, it was those two pinkshell azaleas that finally pushed me over the edge. There were so many great plants out there—I had to have them, I had to display them, and I had to share my appreciation for these beautiful plants with as many people as I could. Perhaps more importantly though, I had a desperate desire to preserve them. It was the start of a new mission—the project of a lifetime.

## Part 2: A New Venture

In fall of 2019, Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens was awarded a small grant to begin working toward establishing a Native Rhododendron Germplasm Repository. Though it is a multi-faceted project, the three main goals of this project are to:

1. Acquire plants, cuttings, and/or seeds from known wild populations, grow them, plant them, and share them with others thus preserving the genetics of those populations.
2. Collect rare, unusual, and exceptional specimens and share these plants with others, again preserving genetics of those specimens.
3. Display and actively promote the ornamental value of these beautiful plants through programs, publications, and guided tours of the collection.

This emphasis on germplasm preservation stemmed from Jenkins' participation in the Plant Collections Network (PCN). Administered by the American Public Gardens Association, the PCN "coordinates a continent-wide approach to plant germplasm (genetics) preservation and promotes excellence in plant collections management." It is a collaborative effort with collections holders working

together to compare holdings and share germplasm to prevent the loss of significant plants. It is a noble and worthy cause.

When I started to pursue the idea of developing a germplasm repository, I was a strict purist. I told myself, "I only want native species or selections of species." This was partly because I liked the idea of marrying Jenkins' native plant focus with its rhododendron collection. It was also because I started realizing just how big this could get if there wasn't a line drawn somewhere. With so many native azalea hybrids, the possibilities are seemingly infinite. Though












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Photo Steve Wright

▲ Photo 4—*R. flammeum* Salmon Sunset.



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▲ Photo 5— *R. atlanticum* Plyler's Paintbrush.

there is still a line, that line is starting to blur, and I have begun to soften a bit.

I now also realize that much of the diversity within the species could be the result of hybridization somewhere in a plant's ancestry. There may be a gene that has lain in waiting for generations that suddenly pops up and the voila—a yellow flowering *prunifolium*, a pink *viscosum*, or a magenta *flammeum*. This has me rethinking the purist outlook, but for the purposes of developing this collection, I prefer sticking with species and natural hybrids over hand-pollinated, complex hybrids.

With these guidelines set, I would get to work tracking down some great plants.

### Part 3: A Growing Collection

Despite the setbacks caused by COVID-19, the project is off to a promising start. We have collected cuttings from dozens of interesting plants from several botanic gardens and specialty nurseries, as well as those in our own collection. We have had mixed results with propagation using Vernon Bush's rooting bin method, though it was not unexpected—the species that are known to be difficult to root, were.

There were many plants purchased as well including a white form of *R. canadense*, a pink form of *R. viscosum*, and a pink form of *R. maximum*. The most significant additions so far though have come from Jim Plyler's Natural Landscapes Nursery in West Grove, PA. I had heard about Jim's nursery

many times over the years, but just never took the time to make the 45-minute trip down to see what he was growing. I am so happy I finally did. In fact, I made several trips to Jim's nursery this year in search of exceptional specimens, and I didn't have to search very long.—There were many scattered throughout his 40+ acres. Among the best plants we selected were a salmon-orange ball-trussed *R. flammeum* that we named Salmon Sunset (See Photo 4), a bright pink *R. prunifolium* that we named Best in Show (See Photo 3), and a dark-pink-tipped *R. atlanticum* that we named Plyler's Paintbrush (See Photo 5). They, and several others, have already been added to the garden.

It has been an exciting project so far as I have spent a great deal of time evaluating, selecting, and naming noteworthy specimens. Though it continues to grow, Table 1 shows a list of selected plants that are now part of this collection. If anyone is interested in seeing our full list, I am happy to share that. Those shown as "In-process" are plants in the pipeline: we have either well-rooted cuttings or potted plants growing on in our nursery, but not yet in the ground.

### Working Names

The names for some cultivated plants in this article were given to the plants by the author during propagation and evaluation. They are considered here as descriptive working names, not cultivar names as defined by the International Code for Nomenclature of Cultivated Plants. ICNCP cultivar names will always be shown in single quotes. These azaleas with working names may be officially named and possibly registered in the future with these working names as the cultivar names or with other names as the cultivar names.

### Part 4: A Call for Support and Collaboration

Though I have only just begun, I realize that this effort will never end—I will forever be in search of remarkable plants and will spend the rest of my career building this collection. I do not see this though as my collection or Jenkins Arboretum's collection, but rather a collaborative effort. If

**Table 1. Native Rhododendron Germplasm Repository Collection  
Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens**

		<u>In- Process</u>
<b>Alabama Azalea (<i>Rhododendron Alabamense</i>)</b>		
Alabama Snowballs	Ball truss selection by Vivian Abney.	X
Catherine	Larger than normal flowers.	X
Coleman's Sunshine	Fragrant, bright yellow flowers. May be a hybrid with <i>R. austrinum</i> without its vigor.	X
Double White	Double-flowered form w/other genes mixed in.	X
‘Mary Brooke’	A very nice pale yellow selection.	
‘Pete McNees’	A selection with some double flowers.	
‘Terry Greer’ (syn. Frosty)	A foliage selection w/small glaucous leaves with white, powdery undersides.	
<b>Sweet Azalea (<i>Rhododendron arborescens</i>)</b>		
Dwarf Arborescens	Dwarf/compact Clarence Towe selection.	X
Georgia Belle	Clarence Towe selection for large, leathery dark green leaves, late flowering, vigor.	X
var. <i>georgiana</i>	Late-blooming, southern form, blooming with <i>R. prunifolium</i> .	
var. <i>richardsonii</i>	A high-elevation variety, smaller/compact.	X
‘White Lightning’	Dense, compact selection w/exceptional fragrance, Discovered by Towe near Franklin, NC. Possible natural hybrid.	
<b>Coast Azalea (<i>Rhododendron atlanticum</i>)</b>		
Baby Blues	Selection with very small, bluish leaves.	
Double White	Double-flowering selection, Allen Cantrell found growing wild.	X
‘Fragrant Star’	Created by Briggs Nursery: chemically treated <i>R. atlanticum</i> ‘Snowbird’—highly fragrant octoploid.	X
Pistil	Henry Skinner selection, compact ball trusses w/small, contorted petals, with long pistils.	X
Plyler's Paintbrush	Jenkins selection dark-pink-tipped buds and white petals; selected in Jim Plyler's fields.	
‘Snowbird’	Fragrant selection from Biltmore Estate, white flowers w/hint of pink in pistils and tubes.	X
Strap Pink	Strap-petal selection found by Allen Cantrell growing wild in North Carolina.	X
<b>Florida Flame Azalea (<i>Rhododendron austrinum</i>)</b>		
Dryocampa	Jenkins Arb. selection; yellow petals, pink tubes. Named for rosy maple moth, an insect with same color combination.	X
‘Evening Sunset’	Natural hybrid collected in SW corner of GA by Earl Sommerville, late 1970s. Produces large orange ball trusses.	
‘Harrison’s Red’	A unique, coral-colored selection discovered by Falling Waters Nursery, Chipley, FL.	
Lemon Ice	Selected by Jim Plyler, Natural Landscapes Nursery, named for its light yellow flowers.	X
Mac's Millie	The inverse of ‘Millie Mac’ with white petals and orange picotee margins. Selected by Floyd McConnell (who discovered ‘Millie Mac’) in a batch of seedlings of ‘Millie Mac’.	X
‘Millie Mac’	Noted for its unusual gold picotee flower with a thin white margin. Floyd McConnell found this as a limb sport on a wild-growing plant in Escambia County, AL. Lineage debatable, but some believe contains <i>R. canescens</i> genes.	

‘Moonbeam’	An early-blooming, yellow flowering vigorous outstanding plant. Found by Kelly Strickland.	
‘Ruffled Gold’	A Vivian Abney selection with bright ruffled gold flowers.	
Tomato Soup	Dark orange, nearly red selection by Jenkins Arb.	X
<b>Flame Azalea (<i>Rhododendron calendulaceum</i>)</b>		
‘Curahee’	White-striped selection, red-and-yellow buds open to orange blooms w/rosy pink margins.	
‘Mandarin Red’	A selection w/intense orange-red flowers.	X
Marmalade	A Jenkins Arb. selection w/orange flowers w/dark orange accents.	
Big Bird	Don Hyatt/George McLellan selection found on Roan Mt. near Jane Bald: clear yellow w/ top petal frilled and overlaid with gold.	X
Serenity Yellow	A yellow-flowered selection by Jim Gears.	X
<b>Piedmont Azalea (<i>Rhododendron canescens</i>)</b>		
Babydoll	A Jenkins Arb. selection with light pink, frilled petals; plant typically has ball trusses.	
‘Candy Striper’	An outstanding Vivian Abney selection from the fields of Jim Plyler. Pink flowers with a light pink stripe down middle of each petal.	
‘Chocolate Drop’	An unusual foliage selection of <i>R. canescens</i> made by Ernest Koone: new leaves are chocolate-red, flowers are white. Leaves fade to green with age.	
Glenda's Spider	A very thin strap-petaled selection by Hubert and Glenda Jones from a wild-growing plant.	X
‘Summer Lynn’	A bright pink selection by Superior Trees.	
Watermelon	A gorgeous watermelon pink selection by Superior Trees.	
<b>Oconee Azalea (<i>Rhododendron flammeum</i>)</b>		
Double Pleasure	A selection w/orange-red flowers, some are doubles. Discovered by Tom Dodd. Possibly a hybrid.	
‘Jack Melton’	A vivid red cultivar discovered in central GA by Jack Melton. Blooms in ball trusses.	
‘Jake’s Red’	A dwarf (3'-4') selection by Earl Sommerville. Flowers are light red, in ball trusses.	
Raspberry Sorbet	A Jenkins Arb. selection with vibrant raspberry flowers with faint orange blotch.	X
‘Red Inferno’	An Ernest Koone selection with bright orange flowers w/a yellow blotch that mature to solid bright red.	
Salmon Sunset	An outstanding Jenkins Arb. selection with salmon-orange flowers in large ball trusses.	
<b>Rosebay Rhododendron (<i>Rhododendron maximum</i>)</b>		
Ballet Slipper	A Jenkins Arb. selection with delicate pink flowers without a blotch.	X
Independence	A selection with bright pink flowers	
‘Red Max’ aka	A rare selection with variable red/white/pink flowers and red staining along leaf veins.	
‘Mt. Mitchell’		
var. <i>leachii</i>	A curly-leaved selection that tends to be more compact than the species.	
‘Whirligig’		

**Pinxterbloom Azalea (*Rhododendron periclymenoides*)**

Gumball	A Jenkins Arb. selection w/light bubble-gum pink ball trusses. Possibly a natural hybrid.	
Lavender Girl	A selection by Jeff Beasley of Transplant Nursery: slightly lavender blooms and diffused white blotch.	X
Orchid Ombre	A Jenkins Arb. selection w/intense lavender-pink flowers.	
‘Paxton’s Blue’	A selection w/showy lavender-blue blooms, by B. Bower & J. Paxton, Transplant Nursery.	
Purple Paladin	A medium purple selection with red tubes, found growing in SC by Nick Anostos.	X
Stiff Upper Lip	A Jenkins Arb. selection w/dark pink flowers w/a bright white top petal. With age, the pink fades and the white less pronounced.	

**Plumleaf Azalea (*Rhododendron prunifolium*)**

Best in Show	A Jenkins Arb. selection from fields of Jim Plyler; a knockout with intense pink flowers. Most likely a hybrid.	
Butter Yellow	A yellow-flowering selection by Allen Cantrell.	X
‘John Conner’	A nice red selection found in Harris County, GA, by Earl Sommerville.	
Summer Pumpkin	An outstanding orange selection by Jenkins Arb. from the fields of Jim Plyler.	

**Pinkshell Azalea (*Rhododendron vaseyi*)**

Red Vaseyi	A dark pink/red flowering selection.
‘White Find’	A pure-white-flowering selection.
Unnamed	White w/purple-pink spotting on upper petals
Unnamed	Deep pink (referenced earlier in this article)

**Swamp Azalea (*Rhododendron viscosum*)**

‘Betty Cummins’	A pink-flowering selection of <i>R. viscosum</i> discovered growing wild in NJ by Dave Lewis.	
Cumberland Blue	A selection by Joe Schild for its bluish foliage.	
‘Delaware Blue’	A selection by Polly Hill for its bluish foliage.	
‘Pink Mist’	A selection with light pink buds that open to white flowers.	X
Roseum	A selection discovered growing wild in Aiken County, SC by Woodlanders Nursery.	
‘Summer Eyelet’	A selection made by Summer Hill Nursery, Madison, CT, for its blue-green foliage.	



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the germplasm is to be preserved, it must be shared with other like-minded enthusiasts, so I would like to offer the Jenkins collection as a resource for cuttings, seeds, pollen, or even potted plants if they are available. I encourage you to evaluate your collections or nursery stock in search of plants you believe are exceptional. Tell me about them. Send me pictures. I want to see them and perhaps collect cuttings or even purchase the plants.

Finally, if you believe this to be a worthy cause and can support this project financially, it would be greatly appreciated as well. Any financial contributions would be used to fund collecting trips, cover propagation costs, purchase plants, and ship germplasm upon request. Please visit [jenkinsarboretum.org](http://jenkinsarboretum.org) and click on the "Support" tab to make contributions.

In closing, I hope you will reach out to me at [steve@jenkinsarboretum.org](mailto:steve@jenkinsarboretum.org) with any questions, comments, corrections, or support. It is such a great project and I look forward to many years of collaboration.

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Bits of information also came from countless nursery websites including: Woodlanders, Dodd & Dodd, Mountain Mist, Mail Order Natives, Summer Hill, and Superior Trees.

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## Deadlines for *The Azalean*

Spring 2021—January 21, 2021

Summer 2021—March 1, 2021

Fall 2021—July 1, 2022

Winter 2021—October 1, 2021

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