



## Azalea Chapter December 2010 Newsletter

The Annual Christmas Party and Plant Swap of the Chapter will be Saturday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, at 2166 Azalea Circle, Decatur, GA, at 11:00 a.m. Please note the change in location, as the Central Congregational Church was not available this year. As per usual, it will be covered dish with each attendee bringing their favorite salad, vegetable, or desert to share with all. The Chapter will supply the meat and the drinks. Also, bring a living plant for swapping with your fellow ARS members. If you are “fresh out of plants,” don’t worry and come anyway for there will be ample numbers for each person to take one home.

Directions: Exit I85 at Clairmont Road as if you were still coming to the Central Congregational Church and proceed south toward Decatur. At the LaVista Road intersection, start counting the streets on your left. The third street on your left after LaVista is Azalea Circle. Turn left at Azalea Circle and proceed to the stop sign. The third house on your left past the stop sign is 2166. Please park on the side of the street next to the house. If you have trouble finding the location, call me on my cell phone at 404-697-4940.

Thanks to all of you who have renewed your ARS membership for 2011. As of November 29, 52 have paid your dues. This is a slight decrease from last year, but our membership continues strong. Special recognition is extended to Ella Ruth Harris for her contribution to the Society in recognition of James Harris’ significant hybridization of azaleas. We also wish to thank Aileen Wieland, Carol Hanak, Pat Lecorchick, and Ken Gohring for their contributions to the ARS General Fund.

### What Did You Learn Today?

by Charlie Andrews

Thousands of times, parents and grandparents have asked children this question. Whether we consciously think about it or not, we adults learn every day too. As I play with my native azaleas and study about them, I am always learning something new. Sometimes, I learn something that is not obvious. Here are a few things I have learned:

The southeast is fortunate to have more species of deciduous azaleas than any other place in the world, and almost all the eastern United States species perform well here. They are a wonderful family of plants. Colors run in white shades, pink to lavender shades, and the full spectrum from yellow to red. Sometimes we can get all these delicious colors mixed together. Heights range from dwarf (less than 2 feet) to over 20 feet tall (rarely), with most in the 5-6 foot range.

Choosing the right plant can yield blooms in the Atlanta area from April till September. In contrast to the Asian evergreen azaleas, most native azaleas like sun. Many gardeners plant them in too much shade. All of the earlier-blooming varieties grow happily in full sun in the Atlanta area and are better plants for it. The later-blooming ones (June-September) need some shade as too much shade significantly reduces flowering.

Native azaleas are not limited to spring blooms. I am beginning to branch out from the big spring peak of bloom in late April by planting more of the Flame Azalea, *R. calendulaceum*, (May-June); Cumberland Azalea, *R. cumberlandense*, (late May-June); Swamp Azalea, *R. viscosum*, (late May-July); Sweet Azalea, *R. arborescens*, (June-August); Plumleaf Azalea, *R. prunifolium*, (late June-August); Hammocksweet Azalea, *R. serrulatum*, (July-September); and hybrids of these late species.



Most roots of native azaleas are within the 4-6 inches of the top of the ground and grow out well beyond the drip line of the plant. When we dig a wild plant on a plant rescue, we may be cutting off 95% of the feeder roots and should not hesitate to cut the plant back to 6 inches in height. Pruning the top back will not kill it, but cutting off most of the roots may very well doom the plant if it is not severely pruned. A good set of roots (and a little slow-release fertilizer) will



quickly regenerate new growth, and flower buds may develop by the end of that one growing season. If the hole from a dug plant is left open and not filled in, the exposure will trigger roots left around the hole to sprout and grow new plants.

These native plants are tough and programmed to survive. Fire usually does not kill native azaleas unless it is intensely hot and kills the roots as well as the top. I burned some dead grass and weeds in my garden late one winter, and in one spot the fire overran a group of *canescens* and *arborescens* before I could stop it. The stems above ground were killed, but vigorous new shoots came up from the roots the following spring. These plants are now fuller and more attractive than they were before.



Young plants are more tender and less hardy than mature plants. Native azaleas must have ample water, especially during the first three or four years from planting. Some sources state supplemental watering is necessary for only one year, but in my experience more than one year is necessary to fully develop a healthy, mature root system. After that, they become somewhat drought tolerant, but still need supplemental watering during periods of prolonged drought. Plants tell you when they need water.

We just need to pay attention to them. Our clay soil should be heavily amended with organic material such as fine pine bark. Azalea roots require both oxygen and water. All native azaleas like moist, well-drained soil, but too much water may kill them. Four species, however, can stand to have wet feet. They are the Coastal Azalea (*R. atlanticum*), Florida Azalea (*R. austrinum*), Pinkshell Azalea (*R. vaseyi*), and Swamp Azalea (*R. viscosum*).



All the southern-only species – Alabama Azalea (*R. alabamense*), *R. austrinum*, Red Hills Azalea (*R. colemanii*), Piedmont Azalea (*R. canescens*), May White Azalea (*R. eastmanii*), Oconee Azalea (*R. flammeum*), *R. prunifolium*, and *R. serrulatum* – will do well in the Atlanta area. Of the remaining eastern North American species – *R. arborescens*, *R. atlanticum*, Rhodora (*R. canadense*), *R. cumberlandense*, Roseshell Azalea (*R. prinophyllum*), *R.*

*vaseyi*, and *R. viscosum* – most of which are also found natively in Georgia, only *prinophyllum* and *canadense* cannot take our heat. (Would *prinophyllum* plants originating from Arkansas or Missouri grow successfully here?) In addition, *cumberlandense* and *vaseyi* do not perform well in South Georgia. *Arborescens*,

*calendulaceum*, *periclymenoides*, and *viscosum* from more southern sources should perform better in our area than the same species originating at the northern end of their ranges. Very few people have ever been successful in getting the Western azalea (*R. occidentale*) to grow in our area. Coyl Justice has one growing on his place near Dillard, Georgia, but I would not call it a vigorous, happy plant.

The bloom time for individual plants may change from year to year. Fred Galle and Ernest Koone inspected plants at Callaway Gardens one September 15 and tagged *serrulatum* and *prunifolium* plants blooming at that late date as possible specimens for unusually late bloom characteristics. In most years, it turns out, these same plants bloom earlier, but the green metal tags with "Sep 15" are still on them.

Likewise, flower color can change from year to year. A dark red from one year may appear so light orange in another year that we may wonder if it is the same plant. Some people have commented that a *cumberlandense* named 'Camp's Red' is not so red when moved to lower elevations. Elevation may be only one factor in flower color. Part of this color change may be just year-to-year color variation. If you are looking for a more dependable deep red, choose a good *flammeum* clone.

When analyzing a native azalea and trying to discern what species it may be, always keep in mind that most native azalea species interbreed with other species and many plants are, in fact, natural hybrids. Some of the most common natural hybrids are *alabamense* x *canescens*, *canescens* x *flammeum*, *canescens* x *periclymenoides*, *cumberlandense* x *arborescens*, *atlanticum* x *periclymenoides*. Other combinations have occurred naturally, including some with more than two species in their DNA. When in 1951 from March to August Henry Skinner traveled 25,000 miles back and forth across the southeastern United States, from as far north as Pennsylvania and as far west as Texas, observing hundreds of thousands of native azaleas, he found frequent evidence of natural hybridization. Gregory Bald in North Carolina, near the Tennessee line, is renown for the breathtaking hybrid swarms found there.

If we have a plant that is a seedling and not a clone, we probably have never met its parents. Clarence Towe's practical advice is that if it quacks like a duck, it is probably mostly duck. Some argue, and it is difficult to refute, that all current species were at one time hybrids of earlier species that may have died off, but these hybrids have so intrabred that they have become stabilized as species.

And speaking of species, we must realize that the botanical classification system first developed by Carl Linnaeus is not exact science. There is no natural law of classification like the law of gravity. Grouping plants into a genus and species (e.g., *Rhododendron alabamense*) is just one way, somewhat arbitrarily, based on similarities and differences, of categorizing the wide diversity of plant life. Botanists go back and forth advocating whether a group of plants should be classified as a distinct species or as a hybrid group and whether to group one type of plant with similarities but also notable differences within a species or to define it as a separate species. To be considered a species and not a hybrid, seedlings from a self-propagated plant should have common characteristics

within the variability of that species, while a self-pollinated hybrid should yield some seedlings with characteristics of one parent and other seedlings with characteristics of the other parent. For example, a self-pollinated *canescens* x *flammeum* hybrid should have some seedlings that look like pure *canescens* and some that look like pure *flammeum*. Some of the seedlings could look like the hybrid parent itself, and all variations in between.

*Azalea* was considered at one time a separate genus. In fact, Linnaeus himself placed the first known American azaleas into the genus *Azalea*. Since that time, azaleas have been moved back and forth into and out of and back into the genus *Rhododendron*. *Canadense* was originally placed in a genus called *Rhodora*. *Vaseyi* was originally placed into a genus called *Biltia* (named to honor the Biltmore Estate). At the moment, all azaleas, evergreen and deciduous, are lumped with *Rhododendron*.

Botanical taxonomists fall into two categories themselves, lumpers (*Botanica taxonomus* var. *lumperi*?) and splitters (*Botanica taxonomus* var. *splitteri*?). The lumpers tend to include plants like *R. serrulatum* into existing species, like *R. viscosum*, while the splitters tend to identify new species, like *R. eastmanii*, that some suggest may be a disjunct form of *R. alabamense*. We should not take these people so seriously that it ruins our love of a plant that did not read *Hortus Third*. University of Georgia professor of horticulture, Dr. Michael Dirr has called taxonomists, “botanists who live in broom closets.” Well-known rhododendron and azalea expert, Dr. G. G. Nearing, disturbed by the renaming of *R. nudiflorum* (now *periclymenoides*) and *R. roseum* (now *prinophyllum*) through rules which he thought lacked common sense and had lost the original purpose of naming plants but conveniently served the personal vanities of some taxonomists, noted that “Taxonomists include some of the most admirable minds in science, but the majority tend to a peculiar type of nuttiness.... some taxonomists have incalculable vanity.”

Whether a plant is considered by some as a species plant or a hybrid does not take away its natural beauty. And regardless of any taxonomic decree that *serrulatum* is or is not part of the *viscosum* clan, we know from a horticultural viewpoint, distinctive differences exist between the two, including bloom time.

Yes, I play with my native azaleas (and talk to them too). Don't you?