

# Native Azaleas

by Diane Meucci & Wolfgang Marquardt

By definition all azaleas are truly *Rhododendron* and are so botanically named. All of the *Rhododendron* that we are familiar with are large leaved, evergreen shrubs, found in North Carolina with huge clusters of flowers. The Azaleas familiar to most of us are small and medium evergreen shrubs, covered with masses flowers in spring, these are ASIAN AZALEAS.

NATIVE AZALEAS (which are botanically *Rhododendron*) are NATIVE TO THE SOUTHEAST, are medium to large, upright, sculptural, open and tree-like in form. Deciduous, graceful shrubs, their flowers are delicate, airy and often fragrant.

Native Azaleas fill a niche in southern shade gardens. They are a welcome addition under large trees in mass, between perennials and low shrubs for accent and height, in front or near dogwoods and under understory trees. They are especially effective against a background of large evergreens. In a foundation planting in the shade or near the house on a northern or eastern exposure they are worthy of a prime position and break the monotony of low shrubs with reserved grace.

Native Azaleas are taller than wide, ranging in height from two to twelve feet. The flowers occur on the end of the branches generally before the foliage, giving them the appearance of floating in mid air. Reminiscent of honeysuckle in form and fragrance, individually or in small bouquets, the flowers are like small trumpets, their stamens extending beyond the petals, giving them a lace appearance, can extend from March through June and even July by using several varieties.

Fall foliage ranges from yellow to orange, russet to purple, according to variety. Winter interest is great with their often arching, twisting and bending natural shapes. Forcing them into crowded spaces only enhances their unique forms as they are accommodating .

Native Azaleas require full shade or morning sun and afternoon shade. They delight in moist *well drained soil*. Where drainage is poor they will drown. They will tolerate drought, but will neither flower nor thrive. They greatly appreciate a shallow, very wide planting hole that has been generously amended with manure, pine bark mulch and bone meal. They have few disease and a moderate growth rate (ten feet in ten years). Finally *they resent moving* so plant them in

permanent positions.

Be sure to consider this plant as a welcome addition to any shade garden. Don't hesitate, plant one or ten or twenty. Here is a list of varieties to consider.

These first six azaleas are fairly easy to get in the nursery trade

*Rhododendron arborescens* the Sweet Azalea, has white to blush pink flowers with red stamens, and a very strong fragrance similar to heliotrope. It blooms in late spring to early summer and individual flowers measure 1.5 to 2 inches across. Blooms in June, 8-20 ft. An excellent landscape plant, *R. arborescens* can perfume a wide area when in bloom.

*Rhododendron austrinum* is known as the Florida Azalea and blooms in early spring before as the leaves are beginning to expand. The fragrant blossoms come in shades of orange through gold and yellow, and measure approximately 1 to 1.5 inches across. This species has very long stamens and the tube of the flower is often flushed with red but there is no blotch. Fast growing 8-10 ft.

*Rhododendron canescens* the piedmont or Florida Pinxter Azalea, is a striking native species. The fragrant flowers are 1 to 1.5 inches across, and come in shades of pink to white with usually no blotch. The stamens are quite long, usually twice as long as the tube. Blooms in May, up to 10-15 ft.

*Rhododendron prunifolium* the Plum Leaf Azalea, is one of the latest native azaleas to bloom. The orange to vivid red flowers open in late summer and measure .5 to nearly 2 inches across. Flower buds for the next season are usually formed before the current season's blossoms open. 8-10 ft. slow growing.

*Rhododendron serrulatum* 'Hammock Sweet Azalea' blooms in July, white, 6-10 ft., slow, exceptionally fragrant.

*Rhododendron viscosum* now includes two closely related forms that were previously considered separate species, *R. serrulatum* and *R. oblongifolium*. The fragrant flowers are generally white to pale pink, and bloom after the leaves have fully expanded. The species has a wide distribution from Maine to Florida, and westward to Texas. The next three varieties can still be obtained in the nursery trade.

*Rhododendron alabamense* or the Alabama Azalea, has snowy white flowers with a prominent yellow blotch. Blooming in midseason, the flowers have a distinct lemon-spice fragrance and measure .8 to 1.5 inches across. Blooms in May, 4-6 ft.

*Rhododendron calendulaceum* also known as the Flame Azalea, is surely one of the most spectacular native shrubs of the Appalachian Mountains. The flowers are larger than most of the natives, measuring from 1.5 to 2.5 inches across, and come in a wide range of colors from clear yellow, through shades of orange, to brilliant red.

*Rhododendron flammeum* (synonymous with *R. speciosum*) is a southern native azalea commonly referred to as the Oconee Azalea. Its blossoms are approximately 1.2 to to 1.8 inches across and come in shades of yellowish orange, through orange to deep red. This species is a heat tolerant shrub of the Piedmont region of Georgia and South Carolina, and holds much breeding potential where hot summer stress is a problem.

The next plants are almost impossible to find at all.

Please do not dig them from the wild!!

*Rhododendron cumberlandense* (synonymous with *R. bakeri*) is commonly known as the Cumberland Azalea. It has a relatively isolated natural range on the Cumberland Plateau in Kentucky south to Tennessee and the mountains of Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina. The flowers are not large, about 1.5 to 1.75 inches across, and typically range from yellowish-orange to deep red.

*Rhododendron periclymenoides* (synonymous with *R. nudiflorum*) is the common Pinxterbloom Azalea found in the lower Appalachian Mountains, Piedmont and Coastal Plains from Massachusetts to north Georgia and Alabama. The white to pink flowers open in mid spring as the foliage is expanding, are they slightly fragrant. This species is often confused with *R. canescens*.

*Rhododendron prinophyllum* (synonymous with *R. roseum*) can be found from southwestern Quebec, through New England and northern Ohio, to Appalachian Mountains at the higher elevations. The flowers are typically rose pink measuring 1.2 to 1.8 inches across and are very fragrant, clove scent. Blooms in May, 8x8 ft.

Medium to fast grower.

*Rhododendron vaseyi* the rare Pinkshell azalea, is one of the first species to bloom in the spring. Its delicate pink to white flowers are typically flat-faced, about 1.5 to 2.25 inches across, and have some prominent spotting in the throat. Most of these I have personally grown with great success. *R. periclymenoides* and *R. prinophyllum* are native to our area (within four counties) and should be especially adapted to our climate. Be sure not to miss the best viewing of full grown *Rhododendron canesens* in April at the Memphis Botanic Gardens just east of the Japanese Garden. They are 10-12 ft tall and breathtaking. We will send out an email to our visitors and customers to see our many mature varieties in bloom at our garden. There is usually a two week window to see them and when they are done in late May our Hydrangeas will start with their stunning show. Hope to see you!

Diane & Wolfgang

At last a great reference site by Donald W. Hyatt:

<http://www.tjhsst.edu/~dhyatt/azaleas/>

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