



The Azalean

The Newsletter of the Azalea Society of America

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THE GROWING POPULARITY OF DECIDUOUS AZALEAS

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To the general public, "azalea" means an evergreen shrub of medium height which for an all too brief period in early spring is covered with attractive flowers, usually red, but sometimes pink or white.

Up until the last decade, even relatively sophisticated gardeners knew very little about deciduous azaleas--species or hybrids--or the fact that most of the species are native to our own country and that the magnificent European hybrids have mainly been derived from our native species.

This situation has changed vastly in recent years. Whereas 20 years ago, only one or two nurserymen sold deciduous azaleas, now at least half a dozen mail order firms can furnish a wide variety of species and hybrids; and scores of professional and amateur hybridizers are developing new hybrids which provide a wider range of flower color and size than the evergreens. They also possess a delicious fragrance, and the blooming season, with various sorts, can last from earliest April through August. Some also possess colorful autumn foliage.

One reason for the growing popularity of deciduous azaleas is that plant scientists and skilled amateurs have developed methods for propagating them from cuttings, thus permitting superior forms to be reproduced in quantity. Another reason is the increasing attention given to them by specialty garden societies, arboreta, and the general gardening and home-decorating magazines.

Dr. Henry T. Skinner, recently retired from the directorship of the U.S. National Arboretum, is perhaps the leading pioneer in the field of deciduous azaleas, particularly the species native to the United States.

A passage excerpted from an article by Dr. Skinner in the Brooklyn Botanical Garden's Handbook 27, Number 2, welcomed the earliest upsurge in garden usage of the natives:

"Perhaps the brightest aspect of this reawakened interest in American wild azaleas (is) their increased reuse in breeding projects ... the loveliest European hybrid may amount to little in the gardens of Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, or New York ... (but) recombining the best performers of Europe's hybrids with the best of our wild species can evolve new races of garden azaleas equal to the finest from overseas, with attractive habit, flowers of good quality, and the ability to perform with minimal care."

By "European hybrids", Dr. Skinner is referring, of course, to the large-flowered Ghent, Knaphill, Exbury, and Ilam groups now being grown widely in the Atlantic seaboard area from Massachusetts to northern Georgia. Unfortunately, these lovely plants are difficult if not impossible to grow in the warmer Southern states. Also, many of the best cultivars are highly susceptible to powdery mildew, which turns foliage to an ugly shade of grey.

The secret of obtaining beautiful natives is to grow them in large quantities from seed, and selecting the best forms for retention, to use these as woodland garden ornaments of superb grace and beauty. A second use is for hybridizing purposes.

The author proposes to submit future articles to The Azalean on obtaining good native seed and growing the plants to flowering size; reports on some results of his own and other hybridizing work; and descriptions of the use of deciduous as well as evergreen azaleas as modified Bonsai subjects for display on patios, brick steps and walks, and the like.

Basic knowledge of the native species themselves, however, is necessary as a preliminary to these refinements. The following descriptions are derived from the author's own observations, plus extensive reading of such authors as Frederick Lee, Dr. Clement Bowers, Skinner, and Dr. Fred Galle.

At the outset, one must understand that most of the U.S. species are highly variable--i.e., mixed up through interbreeding. Both the species, and individual plants within a given species, vary greatly in quality. They are in what might be called a state of genetic flux. This makes growing them from seed all the more interesting. You never know but what the next seedling may be something really good. And this prospect is enhanced when you start hybridizing the various species with each other, or with the European hybrids, all of which have extremely complicated ancestry.

Although there is some difference of opinion as to the number and categorization of native species, the following list is most generally accepted among the authorities. It contains all of the most interesting and attractive examples of the native species.

ALABAMENSE is a rare azalea found in open woodlands of northern Alabama and central Georgia. Low to medium in height, it blooms in the Washington, D.C. area in early May. The flowers are distinctly tubular, pure white, usually with a yellow blotch, and pleasantly fragrant. It is hardy to minus 5 degrees (F.) according to Skinner, who also reports that it roots easily from cuttings.

ARBORESCENS, also Sweet Azalea, is native to moist uplands from Alabama and Kentucky northward to New York. The plant is tall and upright; foliage a deep, glossy green which colors nicely in the fall. It blooms in the Washington, D.D. area in June and July. Flowers are usually white, sometimes pink flushed, and often with a yellow blotch. They are fragrant and very hardy. Judged by many as the best native white, it is widely used in hybridizing programs.

ATLANTICUM, or Coastal Azalea, is found in damp coastal areas from Pennsylvania south to the Carolinas. It is low to medium height, with tidy, insect-proof foliage which colors attractively in the fall. In the Washington, D.C. area, it blooms in early May, pure white to pale reddish flush, sometimes with yellow blotch. It is noticeably fragrant. Skinner rates it very highly among native whites and reports that it roots easily from cuttings. Very hardy.

AUSTRINUM is native in the low coastal plain belt in northern Florida and straight westward to southern Alabama and Mississippi. It is medium to tall. The flowers, which open in May in the Washington, D.C. area, are very small but in large clusters which in the darker shades of yellow can be rather attractive and with good fragrance. It is hardy to Zone 7a, and Skinner reports that it roots easily from cuttings. Crosses with Exburys have produced attractive flowers on plants which have thrived for ten years in south Mississippi.

BAKERI, also Cumberland Azalea, is found in open woodlands of Kentucky eastward to northern Georgia. It is a medium to tall grower, with low, spreading forms also. An example of this low form in my own garden has small, deep green foliage almost totally resistant to insects and fungal disease. *Bakeri* flowers in the Washington, D.C. area in June and early July. It is yellow to deep red, but mostly shades of orange. The flowers are quite similar to *calendulaceum* but slightly smaller. Very hardy, this native is badly neglected since it is one of our best garden shrubs and a good parent for hybridizing. The author has had many seedlings bloom two years after germination.

CANESCENS, or Piedmont Azalea, is found in moist coastal plains from North Carolina to Florida and westward to Texas. Tall, vigorous, it is hardy to Philadelphia. Flowers appear in late April and range from white to pink, often with a yellow blotch. The long tube often is pink, and it has a distinctive fragrance. Good forms are attractive garden subjects.

NUDIFLORUM, commonly known as Pinxterbloom, is found at lower elevations from Massachusetts south to Tennessee. Medium to tall in height, it is very hardy, and blooms quite early in the Washington, D.C. area--mid-to-late April. The flowers are smallish but in large clusters white to pink, often with bright pink tubes. The books say it is stoloniferous and fragrant, but the author's plants are neither (and therefore may be hybrids of some kind). Old bushes can be quite attractive in a woodland setting.

OCCIDENTALE is a beautiful azalea which thrives along coastal hills from Oregon south to southern California. For no known reason, it refuses to grow in the midwestern and eastern states. This may be changed through hybridizing with eastern natives, and those experiments are now in progress at many locations.

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