

Deciduous Azaleas: A Collection That Started 45 Years Ago

Earl Sommerville — Atlanta, Georgia

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As a young man just out of the Air Force in 1960 I started to collect wild honeysuckle bushes north of Marietta, Georgia, in and around Lake Allatoona. (The old timers from this area called native azaleas “wild honeysuckles.”) In this area there were at least five species growing together, which made outstanding inter-specific hybrid plants with beautiful flowers. On that first trip I collected three plants: ‘Orange Carpet’, ‘Razzberry’, and ‘Earl’s Angel’. I still have all three plants. In the 60s and 70s it was all right to collect plants. In the 80s you had to get them before the bulldozer did.

In the early 60s I took up deer hunting and that expanded my territory to most of the State of Georgia. In the spring when I was looking for deer signs I would tag nice native azaleas. Then, if I returned that fall to hunt I would always take my shovel, and you can get a lot of azaleas into a 1960 Volkswagen. I have collected some plants that should have been red, but when they bloomed were yellow or pink, which meant someone switched my tags. Of course I never would do that to anyone else!

On one trip looking for plants in the north Georgia Mountains, in the early 60s (still in my old trusty Volkswagen), after a lot of rain I tried to ford a creek, lost

traction, and was floating down the creek big time. My partner and I jumped out and pushed the bug onto a sand bar and came out. On the return to the creek, on the way out, I had enough speed to skip across the water without incident.

In the late 80s the creeks got wider, the water colder, and the hills steeper, and my interest turned to seeds and propagation of native azaleas. In the past year I have taken up tissue culture. After 45 years of collecting native azaleas I have over 200 very nice plants ranging in age from 45 years to less than three years. I have been pressured to name some of the better plants and put them in the hands of good nurserymen in order to let the public have the opportunity to have these plants in their gardens. Following is an alphabetical list of the azaleas I’ve released and the nurseries that carry them.

Native Azalea Selections Named and Pending Registration

‘Ann Marie’ is a seedling (*Rhododendron serrulatum* x *flammeum* [red]). This plant is 5' high by 4' wide in eight years, a mid-season bloomer. A pinkish red flower with a



‘Elizabeth Lane’



‘Memory of James Thompson’



'Razzberry'



'Kate'

white tube and a yellow orange blotch. You will notice this plant from a distance. This plant is available at Mountain Shadow Nursery.

'Earl's Angel' is a natural hybrid (*R. flammeum* x *periclymenoides*) collected in 1960 at Lake Allatoona. In 45 years, the plant is 10' tall and 5' wide with a bloom that is white with a raspberry over-tone that turns white with age and has a yellow blotch.

'Earl's Gold' is an (*R. austrinum* x unknown) open-pollinated seedling of the late 70s that shows a lot of vigor. In 25 years the plant is 15' high and 8' wide. Gold-color flowers make a large ball truss that will get you to stop and take a second look. This plant is available at Rare Find Nursery.

'Ed Stephens' is a rhododendron seedling of unknown parentage; Mr. Stephens gave the plant to me in the mid-90s. The bloom is a very bright red-orange ball truss that looks like it is on fire, a mid-season bloomer. This plant is available at Mountain Shadow Nursery.

'Edith Marie' is a natural *R. flammeum* hybrid collected near Griffin, Georgia. The plant is only 3' high in 10 years, with very dark pink flowers.

'Elizabeth Lane' is a seedling (*R. flammeum* x 'Strawberry Ice') that produces a pink bloom with one top petal that is white with a gold blotch. The plant is 8' by 8' in 15 years.

'Evening Red Sun Set' is an *R. flammeum* collected near Milledgeville, Georgia, in the early 80s. This plant produces a beautiful red ball truss bloom, but the plant would only be a seven out of a ten rating.

'Evening Sun Set' is a natural *R. austrinum* hybrid collected in the southwest corner of Georgia near the dam at Lake Seminole in the late 70s. This plant will produce a large orange ball truss bloom. The plant will grow to 15' high by 12' wide in 25 years.

'John Conner' is an *R. prunifolium* collected in Harris County, Georgia, in the mid-80s, has very good color, and blooms in late July. The plant in 20 years is 10' by 10' and is a good performer year after year.

'Kate' is an *R. austrinum*. I do not remember from where it came, but I've had this plant for over 20 years. It is a very heavy bloomer with a darker orange color than most *austrinum*s. The plant is 8' high by 8' wide, a little on the twiggy side.

'Magenta Rose' is an *R. flammeum* collected near Milledgeville, Georgia, and given to me by Mr. Ed Stephens in the early 90s. This plant is the closest to almost a purple that I have seen. When the bloom dries, the color is a very dark blue. The plant is 8' high by 5' wide in 13 years.

'Mallory' is an (*R. flammeum* x *flammeum*) grown from seed. The color is orange red with a strong yellow blotch. The blooms make a small but showy ball truss. The plant is 8' wide by 8' high in 15 years.

'Memory of James Thompson' is a rhododendron of unknown parentage. Mr. Thompson gave this plant to me in the late 70s or early 80s. A very strong grower and heavy bloomer, the plant is 12' high by 11' wide, with a medium-sized bright gold flower with a darker gold blotch that forms a ball truss.

'Orange Carpet' is a natural hybrid rhododendron (*R. calendulaceum* x *flammeum*) collected in 1960 at Lake Allatoona. The plant, in 45 years, has grown to a size of 18" high and 8' wide. The limbs grow horizontally, but do not attach to the ground. The flowers are upright orange

in clusters or ball trusses. Plant will not set seed and is very difficult to propagate. This plant is available at Rare Find Nursery.

'Pink Ember' is an (*R. bakeri* x *viscosum* x *arborescens*) seedling from the late 70s. A mid-season pink bloomer with a strong yellow blotch; but, if one looks at this plant from 50 feet or more you would say that it is a yellow flowering plant. In 25 years the plant is 3' by 3', on a very twiggy plant with new growth only 3" or less each year.

'Razzberry' is a natural (*R. flammeum* x *periclymenoides*) hybrid collected in 1960 at Lake Allatoona, plant is 4' high by 4' wide in 45 years. The flowers are raspberry in color, with a bright yellow blotch. This plant is available at Rare Find Nursery.

'Sommerville's Pink' is an *R. flammeum* collected in the mid-80s in Spalding County Georgia near Griffin. The mid-season bloom is a very rich pink. The plant is 12' high by 8' wide in 15 years. It is available at Mountain Shadow Nursery.

'Sommerville's Sun Rise' is an *R. austrinum* collected near Quincy, Florida, in the early 80s. The plant, in full sun, is 8' high x 8' wide in 20 years. It is a light yellow bloom with a red pistil. This plant, like most of my collection, makes a ball truss.

'Verdie Sommerville' is an (*R. flammeum* x 'Strawberry Ice') seedling that produces a red-yellow flower with a gold blotch. The bloom will last for three weeks and is very showy. Plant is 7' high by 5' wide in 10 years. This plant is available at Mountain Shadow Nursery.

Earl Sommerville joined the ARS in the mid-60s, the ASA in the mid-70s, and again in the late 80s. He has been collecting native azaleas throughout Georgia since the early 60s. Through the years he has made a few crosses working with native azaleas. In the past two months he has registered 25 native azaleas plants with Jay Murray (ARS Plant Names Registrar), including all of the ones in this article. Besides his work with azaleas and rhododendrons, he started working in fire sprinkler systems in 1950, retiring in 1994. He was in the Air Force from 1951 to 1960.

Pictures of all of Earl Sommerville's plants can be viewed at: <http://www.pbase.com/azaleasociety/sommerville>

Sources for Earl's Hybrids

Rare Find Nursery
957 Patterson Road
Jackson, NJ 08527
support@rarefindnursery.com
Web site: www.rarefindnursery.com

Mountain Shadow Nursery
8617 Tobacco Lane, SE
Olympia, WA 98513-4615
Phone: 360-459-4116
Fax: 801-720-9360
Steve@MtShadow.com
Web site: www.mtshadow.com

[This is a wholesale only nursery; 250 minimum quantity of a variety; also does microcuttings.]



'Orange Carpet' (close up)



'Orange Carpet'