

Natives Take Center Stage at Pennsylvania Nursery

Kelly Wilson — McLean, Virginia

I'll never forget the time I saw my first wild azalea while walking the roads of Floyd, Virginia. My aunt and I were out stretching our legs when we came upon a striking orange shrub. My eyes opened wide, not just because it was my favorite childhood Slurpee™ color, but because it was absolutely breathtaking.

Fifteen years later my co-worker suggested adding native azaleas to the estate grounds where we work. I couldn't have been happier when he sent me two hours north of Washington, DC, to Jim and Bethany Plyler's Natural Landscape Nursery. Jim started Natural Landscape Nursery 20 years ago when he purchased 44 acres in West Grove, Pennsylvania, located near such horticulture hot spots as Chanticleer, Longwood Gardens, and Mt. Cuba Center. Blueberry bushes, bottlebrush buckeyes, and fringe trees are just some of the East Coast native plants that are offered to wholesale buyers. But it is the native azaleas that are the heart and soul of the nursery.

It was after a 1980 visit to Gregory Bald, an exposed mountaintop area in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, that Jim fell in love with the wild azaleas and decided he had to grow them. Except for a few selections that are vegetatively propagated, all of their azaleas are propagated from seed. You'll find Jim and Bethany on seed collecting trips during the fall. In the past they've collected in the Pine Barrens, the Poconos, the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Delmarva region, West Virginia, and areas south of Asheville, North Carolina.

According to Jim and Bethany, all azaleas start easily from seed, but some like *Rhododendron calendulaceum* (flame azalea), can be a "little finicky" in pots and do better once established in the field. Both Plylers keep track of their



R. calendulaceum (flame azalea), more than likely that Slurpee™-colored shrub.

(Photos by Kelly Willson)

seed sources and enjoy observing the variability within and between wild populations. For instance, *R. arborescens* (sweet azalea) seed collected from the mountains will produce a more dwarf or spreading azalea that blooms earlier than those grown from seed collected in lower elevations. In contrast, the flame azalea plants grown from seed collected at higher elevations often bloom later than those from populations at lower elevations.

Walking around the 19 or so acres of cultivated beds, both Jim and Bethany are quick to point out one azalea from another by their distinctive buds. *R. vaseyi* with its round buds and downward facing seed capsules is best for fall leaf color. *R. prunifolium* and its characteristic chartreuse buds on dark stems has the distinction of offering up flowers later than most other native azaleas. Jim has been careful to position the beds to go with the grade to counteract any potential erosion problems and for easy access. He takes care of the beds and any tractor work needed. Bethany takes plant orders and

tags the plants out in the field. Five local workers handle the planting and hand digging of all the nursery stock for ten months of the year.

After being asked to divulge best sites for azalea viewing, Jim is again quick to point out Gregory Bald with all its many azalea hybrids. However, if it is the flame azalea you're after, Roan Mountain or the Blue Ridge Parkway "are great places," while the Susquehanna River, about an hour from the nursery, is a good place to find a disjunct population of *R. arborescens* cohabiting with the widespread *R. periclymenoides*, (pinxterflower).

Me, I'll be heading back down to Floyd, Virginia, to check out that orange-colored wild azalea with a newfound appreciation for our native azaleas.

Natural Landscape Nursery is located in West Grove, Pennsylvania, and is open by appointment only. Jim or Bethany can be reached at (610) 869-3788.

Kelly Wilson has been the cutting-garden manager at Hillwood Museum and Gardens for six years, having received her horticulture degree from Virginia Tech. She also has a love for native azaleas.



Beth and Jim Plyler at their nursery.