

Rhododendron semibarbatum: Not Your Mother's Favorite Azalea

John and Sally Perkins—Salem, New Hampshire

The small and nearly hidden flowers of *Rhododendron semibarbatum* are not showy enough for just anyone, let alone your mother, to consider it among her favorites. Normally reference books classify *R. semibarbatum* not as an azalea but in a monotypic subgenus *Mumeazalea*. Yet, *R. semibarbatum* has five stamens as do many azaleas. Moreover, current DNA research by Loretta Goetsch, Andrew Eckert, and Benjamin Hall indicates that the genus *Menziesia* as well as *R. vaseyi*, *R. albiflorum*, and *R. semibarbatum* ally with the proposed expansion of subgenus *Azaleastrum* including the sections previously classified as *Azaleastrum*, *Viscidula*, *Sciadorhodon*, and *Tsutsusi*. *R. semibarbatum*, having always been considered by rhododendron experts as a loner and an outsider, may in fact be merely the first “false azalea” to be correctly recognized as a rightful member of the genus *Rhododendron*.

R. semibarbatum is a rare species native to mountainous regions of Japan's Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu providences, growing in thickets and forests. Although normally maturing at two to six feet, *R. semibarbatum* may occasionally be as tall as 10 feet. The plant habit is erect; being taller than broad. The deciduous, paper-thin, wavy-edged elliptic two-inch leaves are especially attractive when in its yellowish orange to red fall color. Pat Halliday in *The Illustrated Rhododendron* captures the beauty of this unusual species.

This species is unique in having five dimorphic (unequal) stamens where the two shorter stamens are densely pilose (having dense soft hairs) with globose-ovoid anthers. In fact “semibarbatum” refers to these partially bearded stamens. The small (1/2 to 3/4 inch), white, rotate flowers are borne in clusters of one to three flowers in the axils after the leaves are fully expanded. The seeds are unwinged.

R. semibarbatum was first sent by the Japanese collector called Tschonoski to the Botanical Garden in St. Petersburg, where it was named by Maximowicz in 1870. Seed was collected by E.H. Wilson in 1914 and sent to the Arnold Arboretum and later to Kew in Britain.

In the fall of 1991 we purchased a seedling of *R. semibarbatum* at the Arnold Arboretum Case Estate's plant sale. Our little plant was not given winter shelter in a cold frame but instead planted on a northern slope with dense shade. We thought it would die and were surprised to notice it pushing little green buds late the following spring. The first week of July in 1994 we noticed small white flowers had fallen to the ground near *R. semibarbatum* and we wondered from where. Amazingly, hidden in the foliage were two more flowers. We quickly consulted Davidian's *The Rhododendron Species Volume III* and were pleased to



▲ *Rhododendron semibarbatum* matures at two to six feet.

▼ The small white rotate flowers are borne in clusters.



find that the label fit the description. It has flowered in June every year since, making *R. semibarbatum* one of about 50 rhododendrons that have bloomed for more than 10 straight years in our garden. In 2006, although having its best bloom ever with flowers on nearly every branch, one still had to get close to appreciate the floral display lasting nearly a month.

Our plant is four feet high by five feet wide in 15 years and has never shown any significant winter damage blooming fully at 17°F defying the Zone 7 hardiness rating usually assigned to the species. In 2004 after a very cold January where night time temperatures hovered near or below 0° F for more than 20 days, *R. semibarbatum* experienced partial flower bud blast but no foliage damage, performing better than many rhododendron species commonly grown in New England such as *R. degronianum*.

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Letters to the Editor

Congratulations on your recent appointment as Editor of *The Azalean*. I am a member of the Oconee Chapter near Atlanta, and I collect and grow many hundreds of azaleas here in White Plains.

I am acquainted with James Harris, and he has sold me many azaleas in the past from his home in Lawrenceville. I realize that many cultivars of azaleas, especially with Satsuki blood, give varied bloom presentations from year-to-year. My question regards the azalea picture on the cover of *The Azalean*, Volume 28, Number 3, Fall 2006.

I grow 'Ann Lee McPhail', and it is a pale rose, sort of salmon tipped. It is difficult to describe actually; but the magazine cover picture is almost identical to 'Fascination'. I attached an image from Long Mountain, a couple images from the gallery at the ASA and one from Camp Hill. Assuredly, they do differ somewhat maybe from camera techniques, lighting, culture etc., but they don't resemble the cover. Please advise.

I take my avocation of growing azaleas very seriously and proper identification is key as much as possible. Thank you for your time and interest to my inquiry.

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Editor's Note:

According to Barbara Stump, former editor of *The Azalean*, the plant appearing on the cover of the Fall 2006 issue had a 'Ann Lee McPhail' nursery tag. The flower description in *IRRC* is light purplish pink (RHS 55C). And while weather, season and even soil can contribute to color variations, we would love to hear more about this topic from our readers. Please e-mail your responses to: pamfitch@myway.com or mail to Pam Fitch, 10006 Homestead Ave., Lubbock, TX 79424.

R. Semibarbatum

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In contrast to our experience of finding the species easy to grow, the Arnold Arboretum has never been able to permanently establish *R. semibarbatum* in their collection and University of Maine at Orono field studies indicate that the species is killed to the ground at -20°F. As far as we know, no other New England based member of the ARS Massachusetts Chapter living in Zone 6 or colder grows this species; however, since 1998 *R. semibarbatum* has grown at the Polly Hill Arboretum on Martha's Vineyard.

This species has no well-known cultivars and has not been used in hybridization. Although not difficult to propagate by cuttings, *R. semibarbatum* is usually grown from seed and is sometimes available from the Rhododendron Species Foundation. Although more of a curiosity than a horticultural gem, *R. semibarbatum* is hardy enough and easy enough to be tried by the adventurous grower who wants to add a deciduous late bloomer to their "evergreen azalea" collection even before the taxonomists



Shown are various pictures of 'Ann Lee McPhail'.

▲ Above are two photos from the ASA gallery.

▼ Below (left) is a photo from Long Mountain Nursery, and (right) a photo from the Auburn University's Piedmont Substation located at Camp Hill, Alabama.



end their debate over where this species actually belongs in the genus.

Considering that DNA research also indicates the *Pentanthera* section and *R. canadense* may move to subgenus *Hymenanthus* which includes *R. maximum* and *R. catawbiense*, "azalea" growers may well need a few new azaleas to add to their garden. So why not give *R. semibarbatum* a try before your mother's favorite deciduous azalea is reclassified as merely just another large leafed rhododendron?

John and Sally Perkins live on Canobie Lake in Salem, New Hampshire, enthusiastically growing 1,500 rhododendrons and azaleas on their tiny property. They are members of the Vaseyi Chapter of the ASA and the Massachusetts Chapter of the ARS running the chapter Web site www.rosebay.org. They may be contacted by e-mail at: sjperk@comcast.net.