

Native Azaleas in the Midwest

John Migas—Saugatuck, Michigan

The only way native azaleas arrived in the Midwest was by United Parcel Service or Federal Express. The nearest nursery selling native azaleas is 400 miles away, so it's definitely not your ordinary "let's see what's at the nursery" kind of drive.

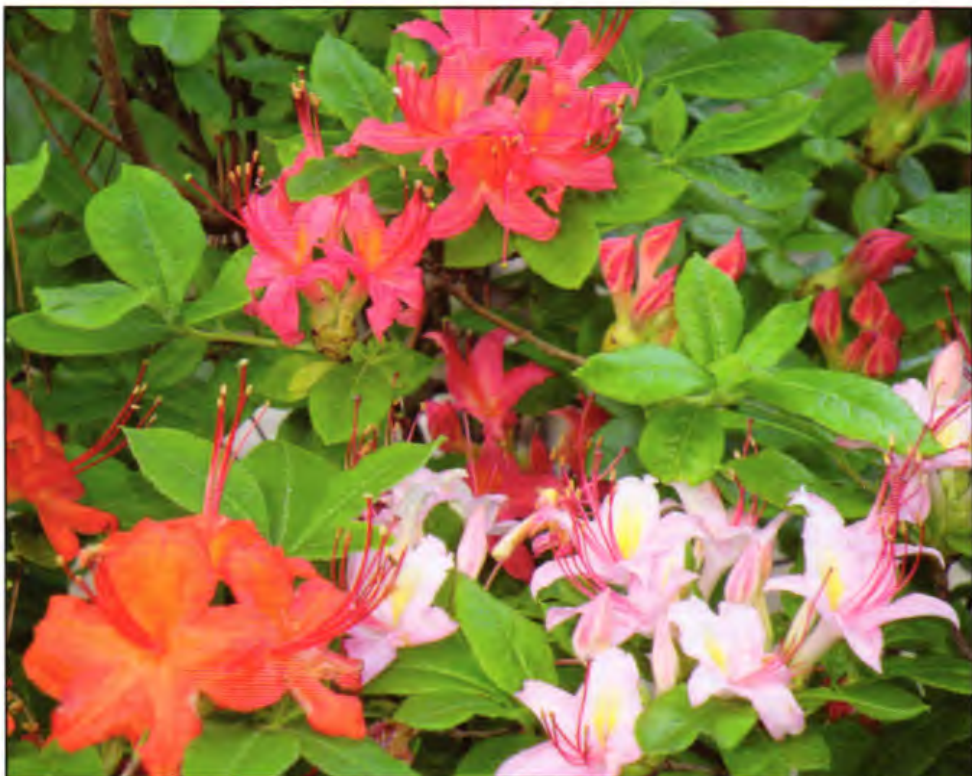
I was fortunate to purchase my first true native azaleas at a plant sale in 1998 hosted by the Midwest Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society. I acquired eight of the saddest looking plants I've seen, but they were true natives.

My first encounter with a blooming native azalea occurred in the garden of Midwest Chapter Member Gene Paschall outside of Chicago, Illinois. It was early May 1997, and it was my first visit to his garden. At the time, I was new to the world of azalea enthusiasts, and I constantly asked "what's this and what's that."

We spent hours walking in a garden that would normally take 45 minutes to visit. I remember saying to myself "if this grows here, I know it could grow back home in Michigan."

Earlier that year, I attended the annual Azalea Society of America convention in Atlanta, Georgia. While there, I did not understand the hype about native azaleas. The next few conventions were held in Virginia, South Carolina, and Alabama. I do not remember many native azaleas. Then came 2001 in Asheville, North Carolina. The theme was native azaleas.

We did not hit the bloom at its peak but it was one heck of a time. On one of the bus tours into the mountains, I remember Don Hyatt jumping out of his seat and shouting: "Look on your right—a flame azalea." The bus driver suddenly pulled over, allowing our group to get out and take pictures. Then away we went.



▲ Gregory Bald seedlings received from Vivian Abney.

▼ *Rhododendron cumberlandense* seedling from Catoosa Wildlife Reserve received from Bill Pinkerton.



The next year, the convention was held in Atlanta, Georgia, and I had the opportunity to purchase several native azaleas. I bought them in pairs—two *Rhododendron atlanticum*, two *R. viscosum*, two *R. austrinum*, two *R. periclymenoides*, and so on. I felt like Noah. The only thing I didn't have was the Ark.

The plants were young, but true natives. I also purchased some large plants—crosses from **Earl Sommerville**. Every plant has survived in my garden.

At the 2003 convention in Chattanooga, Tennessee, there were plenty of native azaleas for everyone. I learned quickly that you have to be “quick on the draw” to get native azaleas. If you snooze, you lose. If you think that it will be there later, forget it. It will be gone. It's like feeding time at the zoo. Charge! Get out of the way or you will get run over. After all the chaos I still managed to purchase some plants for home.

The following year, **Bill Pinkerton** and I visited **Joe Schild's** home in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Before leaving we were fortunate to obtain a few of Joe's pure native azaleas and some of his crosses. I was really starting to collect some great plants, including Gregory Bald and Webb Mountain seedlings from **Vivian Abney** of Sevierville, Tennessee and *cumberlandense* seedlings from the Catoosa Wildlife Reserve on the Cumberland Plateau from **Bill Pinkerton** of Crossville, Tennessee.

In the spring of 2006, the plants started blooming. After all those years, it finally hit me. The beauty of the plants was awesome. Thanks to **Joe Schild**, I had to call and tell him about the plants. They were gorgeous, fragrant, and beautiful.

The Gregory Bald seedlings from **Vivian Abney** bloomed and no two were the same. **Bill Pinkerton's** *cumberlandense* seedling bloomed red and became a deeper shade of red each day. Seeing the plants bloom each day was a real treat.

If you haven't been bitten by the native azalea bug, you should attend



▲ Gregory Bald seedling received from Vivian Abney.

▼ *R. arborescens* x *R. cumberlandense* received from Joe Schild.



one of the ASA conventions and participate in one of the native azalea discussions, tours, or plant sales. Just remember to get out of the way when you hear someone yell “charge.”

John Migas lives in southwestern Michigan off the beautiful shores of Lake Michigan. A carpenter by trade since 1978, he operates a small nursery and landscape service in the Saugatuck-Douglas-Holland area. He is currently president of the Lake Michigan Chapter of the ASA and has just completed three terms as president of the Midwest Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society.