

Georgia's Azalea Lady

Ken Gohring—Marietta, Georgia

One of the most picturesque sites in the South is the city of Newnan, Georgia, located about 40 miles southeast of Atlanta, boasting a population of more than 24,000 citizens.

Newnan features scores of attractive homes and is proudly known as the city of homes. Newnan is home of country music star Alan Jack-

son. The late writer-humorist Lewis Grizzard, raised in nearby Moreland, attended high school in Newnan. One of the current residents of this charming city is a delightful southern lady, named Joan Adcock. In fact, Joan was a high school classmate of Grizzard. She is a native azalea specialist, who over a period of 25-plus years has accumulated thousands of native azaleas.

Joan was first attracted to native azaleas through the influence of her late uncle and brother. The interest grew and expanded as she introduced her husband and later her two sons to her hobby. She was also influenced by the venerable Fred Galle, director of horticulture at the nearby Callaway Gardens. For several years, Joan attended seminars conducted by Galle, and many of her ideas and practices were learned from these sessions.

The Adcock garden, in full bloom, rivals any garden in diversity of color and bloom quality. The garden has an unusually large collection of natives that is probably the



▲ Joan Adcock

Photo Fred Covillion

largest private collection in the Southeast, if not the entire country. Most of Joan's azaleas have been collected from native areas nearby her Newnan home.

The Adcock garden is a part of an attractive small farm located in a rustic area south of Newnan. The home is surrounded by a large planting of mature native azaleas of varying colors that accent the home's perimeter. The home is situated in a sparse pine forest that filters direct sunlight, preventing sunburn of the plants but allowing good light to ensure good bloom set. The main garden is located at the rear of the home and extends into the pine understory.

The Adcock garden consists mostly of Oconee azaleas, *Rhododendron flammeum*, and most likely hybrids of Oconee and the Piedmont azalea, *R. canescens*. Joan's collection also includes other native species, including a large collection of Plumleaf azaleas, *R. prunifolium*. She also has *R. minus* var. *carolinum* in her collection.

The color range of the Adcock azaleas is quite broad, ranging from white to pink to yellow to orange and pure red, with many blooms having multiple combinations of these base colors. Some have described some of the colors as salmon, apricot, peach, butterscotch, and cantaloupe. Terms such as "washed flesh," "rolled gold," "watered rose," and "shrimp pink" are also descriptive of some of the colors present. A large majority of the plants have the most common *R. flammeum* color, orange, with many orangish red cultivars.

The garden consists of several sections with the older areas containing taller plants. The plants range in size from relatively short heights to ten feet, indicative of the mixed heritage of the plants. Normally *flammeum* azaleas top out at six to eight feet, while *canescens* grow up to 15

▼ 'Frosted'



Photo Joan Adcock

▼ 'Butterscotch Rose'



Photo Joan Adcock



Photo Joan Adcock

▲ 'Yellow Lace'



Photo Joan Adcock

▲ 'Six Petals'

feet or more. The taller growth of some of the specimens, as well as the wide variety of colors, are indicative of the hybrid nature of many of the plants. The fact that some exhibit a slight fragrance also indicates a hybrid nature. It is also possible that the genetic makeup includes *R. periclymenoides*, *R. alabamense*, and other natives found in mid-Georgia.

One distinguishing feature of the Adcock collection is the number of ball-truss blooms. This ball-truss feature is typically represented in a plant Joan named 'Apricot Ball'. This plant's blooms are a color best described as apricot, with light gold centers. These blooms form in a tight ball as large as a baseball.

Another particular Adcock favorite, 'Double Delight', exhibits a white to salmon center with a bright yellow blotch. A desirable red and orange plant, called 'Star', exhibits a petal form characterized as star shaped. One of Joan's favorites is a beautiful yellow form called 'Yellow Lace' which has mostly light yellow petals with one petal a brighter yellow and ruffled lace-like petal edges.

▼ 'Jaci's Pink'

'Canyon' has a light shrimp colored blossom with a single golden petal. It also features dark pink dots at points where the petals overlap. 'Frosted', a tri-colored bloomer, is a brighter pink with a bright gold petal and darker pink edges on each petal. The center of four of the petals is a light pink, almost white in color. Other unnamed plants in the Adcock collection feature hose-in-hose and double like characteristics.

Joan and her husband Harry started a program of collecting azaleas using a discipline that assured the survival of the collected plants. They worked with timber company personnel to remove plants that would likely be destroyed when sites were timbered. In other cases permission to collect was obtained through acquaintances made with contacts established at the hospital where Joan was employed. Joan's collection discipline includes the following practices:

- a) Collection of plants in bloom. This insures that the collected plant is desirable and worthy of her collection.

▼ 'Canyon'



Photo Joan Adcock



Photo Joan Adcock

- b) Severe pruning of plant. This technique includes the removal of earth around the plants roots and severe cutback of the plant's branches. In his book, *American Azaleas*, Clarence Towe describes this method. In a personal conversation, Clarence revealed that he described Joan's technique, discussed in more detail below.
- c) Planting of collected plants in rotted sawdust. The sawdust is collected from abandoned sawmills and consists of mixed woods. The material is well aged and is likely 20 to 25 years old.
- d) Assurance of adequate watering and fertilization. No fertilizer is applied the first year. Newly planted specimens are watered about every three days. After the first year the plants are usually well established and are not watered on a regular basis. In periods of drought like the experience in the Southeast the last two years, the plants are watered periodically.



Photo: Joan Adcock

▲ 'Apricot Ball'

The Adcock method consists of using a spade to cut the roots around the plant's shaft, getting as many roots as possible. The plant is dug to a depth up to eight inches or more. The dirt around the roots is shaken off, taking care to preserve as many roots as possible. The plant is then placed in a large plastic bag for transportation to the planting bed. Care is taken to prevent any drying of the roots by moistening the roots and placing water in the plastic bag.

Removal of dirt from the roots helps prevent the growth of any wild weeds, and placement in the bag with the dirt removed helps prevent damage. The plants are placed in the rotted sawdust beds. All of the plant's foliage and small limbs are removed, and a decision is made as to how much of the main stalk to preserve. If the amount of roots is substantial, then all of the main trunk up to six feet is preserved. However if there are concerns that the root structure may have difficulty supporting the full trunk, it is shortened, in some cases to six inches. The plant is watered adequately and periodically, especially in dry seasons. Many times the rescued plants will quickly exhibit new growth and sometimes set buds for next year's flowers.

Truly the Adcock garden is a place of beauty, and Joan welcomes visitors. It is a popular site visited by numerous groups from the Newnan area such as master gardeners and senior groups. It is also visited by others interested in native azaleas who travel significant distances to view the plants. At present none of the cultivars are available in the nursery trade, but Joan is considering making some of the select plants available. Such action will enhance our gardens as the plants are truly outstanding.

Ken Gohring is a member of the Oconee Chapter of the ASA and serves as president of the Azalea Chapter of the ARS. His primary gardening interest is native plants, particularly native azaleas.

Rescuing Wild Plants

While collection of plants from the wild is frowned upon by many plant enthusiasts, it is a practice that saves plants from destruction in many cases. The organized plant rescue program of the Georgia Native Plant Society was discussed in a recent article published in the *Journal of the American Rhododendron Society*, Summer 2008. That program is directed toward rescuing plants from areas being developed primarily in rapidly growing areas of Atlanta, where land is cleared of vegetation in the construction process.

In many cases exceptional cultivars of native azaleas have been saved from destruction. Examples are discussed in Galle's writings, in particular when he describes an area west of Atlanta, that yielded the unusual cultivar 'Chattahoochee' and other plants that were relocated to Callaway Gardens. Prominent azalea authority Earl Sommerville recently registered several outstanding native azaleas that he rescued several years ago from the site of present day Lake Allatoona, located north of Atlanta.

Without such activity these plants would not be available. The primary concern regarding extraction of plants from the wild should be directed toward the wholesale removal of plants for commercial purposes, which usually results in the destruction of plant populations. The aforementioned program of the Georgia Native Plant Society restricts the commercial sale of rescued plants. Exceptions are made for the Society's plant sale which supports the group's programs. These programs include site restoration and the supplying of natives for public gardens.