Rhododendron alabamense: The Star that Fell on Alabama

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The Alabama Azalea was from its beginning intended by the Creator to be the State Flower of Alabama. Millions of years before stars fell on Alabama in 1833, He sprinkled seed for the 13 species of the native rhododendrons onto the landscape of Alabama, generally considered to be endowed with the fifth most diverse plant population in the United States of America.

Seeds for *Rhododendron alabamense* fell on the territory almost exactly within the outline which now defines the State of Alabama, with only a few sprinkles scattering into the four adjoining states: Tennessee, Georgia, Mississippi, and Florida (Towe, 2004).

The white, intensely fragrant Alabama Azalea was earlier considered the *Alba* form of *Azalea nudiflora* (Mohr, 1901) (*R. periclymenoides*, ed.). The unique-

▲ *R. alabamense*

▲ *R. alabamense* x *R. occidentale*

▼ *R. alabamense* x *R. flammeum*

▲ *R. molle* x *R. alabamense*

▼ *R. alabamense* x *R. canescens*

ness of the plant was determined by Wilson and Rehder (1921) for their monograph on azaleas. The assigned scientific name *Rhododendron alabamense* Rehder and common name reflected the fact that *R. alabamense* was distributed almost exclusively within the state and was widespread on acidic upland soils derived from sandstone and chert (Lacefield, 2000). Even in Alabama's Black Belt of alkaline soils, ancient geologic upthrusts and oceanic deposits have provided havens of residence for the Alabama Azalea.

Unfortunately, this yellow-blotched beauty with spicy/lemony fragrance, which can alert the passerby to its presence from hundreds of feet away, is being rapidly decimated by hardwood timber harvest, by real estate development, and by herbicide use on rights-of-way.

To prevent the further loss of genetic material from the remaining sub-populations of the Alabama Azalea, the author, with collaboration from private and public entities, is in the process of assembling a research/display collection of *R. alabamense* at the Davis Arboretum at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. Specimens of certified origin from across the entire range of distribution are being solicited. He is working with other arboreta, botanical gardens, and nature preserves to execute a plan to increase availability of the Alabama Azalea through directed seeding and vegetative propagation, while maintaining genetic diversity.

Further efforts will involve publicizing the rapid decline of the entire rhododendron genus in Alabama. (A recent trip to five sites identified from Auburn University and University of Georgia herbarium records for *R. alabamense* was devastating. All five sites had been wiped out by hardwood timber harvest).

Plantings of *R. alabamense* in public places, using seedlings or cuttings, are being planned to help raise awareness of this unique plant, while sustaining the genome. An effort is being organized to raise the Alabama Azalea to its rightful position of Alabama State Flower, replacing the exotic *Camellia japonica*. This activity, likely to be controversial, is projected to bring attention to the threatened/endangered status of many of the Southeastern native rhododendrons.

Breeding Potential of the Alabama Azalea

The Alabama Azalea, which starts bloom from the second to third week of April, depending on latitude, is hardy in both sun and shade and is one of our best for the garden. This promiscuous diploid (Jones et al. 2007) can be crossbred with Exbury hybrids (usually tetraploids) such as 'Gibraltar' and 'Klondyke', or with its southeastern cousins—both diploids and tetraploids. Further, *R. alabamense* genes can be combined with those of *R. molle* from Asia, or those of *R. occidentale* from the West Coast of the United States, producing excellent, hardy, long-lived hybrids. Whereas, neither of the exotic parent species will survive more than two to three years in Alabama.

For all (especially fellow Azaleans), I encourage the use of *R. alabamense* in the garden and in your breeding efforts. Finally, I ask for your help in conserving this important azalea, and would welcome any information which might lead to an addition to the genome/research/display collection in the Davis Arboretum at Auburn University.

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