

“Say, Isn’t that an Elephant in the Living Room?”

—*Rhododendron colemanii* at Callaway Gardens

Ron Miller—Pensacola, Florida

Even folks who wouldn’t know a honeysuckle from a honeywagon know about *Rhododendron prunifolium* at Callaway Gardens. The end of July to early September brings a pilgrimage of azalea enthusiasts and ordinary sane citizens to the gardens where hundreds—perhaps thousands—of red to orange azaleas offer customers a spectacle such as no plant hunter has ever viewed in the wild, nay, not even in Providence Canyon. The management, conscious of their award-winning signature collection, capitalizes on this grand display by dedicating a peak weekend to showcase their resort and their collection.

It was, however, during an off-season week this year, while on my annual early May trek to find new Red Hills azalea sites and to gather DNA samples, that I detoured by way of Callaway to revisit a row of *Rhododendron colemanii* seen two years before during *R. prunifolium* season. Though Clarence Towe (who never exaggerates) had assured me that many more would materialize at bloom time, I was amazed to find the median of the main entrance road lined by four- and five-foot *R. colemanii* plants in full array. Entering, amazement changed to dumbfoundedness. Almost tree-sized Red Hills azaleas popped up everywhere: around the chapel (mostly pinks), along the roads, by the lakes, in clearings, here and there, often displayed in lines where truly monster plants grow. Not only that, there were flower forms quite as fine as, if not better than, anything encountered in the wild. Perhaps there was a lower percentage of yellows than seen elsewhere in a few choice spots, but the big flat-faced, blotched whites were often wide indeed; and the pinks—ah, the pinks—were the best ever.

How many are there, total? Sipping my second drink the evening after, I guessed maybe one thousand. Over coffee in the cold light of the next dawn, five hundred plus, at least. In numbers, the *Rhododendron prunifolium* plants probably exceed them; but since a sixty-year-old, multistemmed Red Hills azalea is a far heftier brute than any plumleaf azalea, *R. colemanii* surely tops *R. prunifolium* at the gardens in sheer



▲ The entrance to Callaway Gardens includes an iconic sign featuring a white azalea.

biomass. Does no one, including the management, visit Callaway around May Day? Can anyone ignore such a spectacle simply because the azaleas were once of an uncertain kind or were once dismissed (as some of the very few labels indicate) as hybrids? In early May, if one sees a white or pinkish azalea above eye level at Callaway, it’s doubtlessly *R. colemanii*. I, if anyone, know that species up close and personal, and I have the scratches and the tick bites to prove it.

Though, as one gathers, these plants were hauled in during Callaway’s midcentury hoarding period as *Rhododendron alabamense* or *R. alabamense* x *R. canescens*, a tour of the Gardens turned up a single, remote, puny patch of genuine *R. alabamense*—which seems rather telling, since *R. alabamense* is downright common just west of Pine Mountain along the Chattahoochee. That stray *R. alabamense* may well be native.

The gardens certainly have *R. flammeum* in abundance from nearby counties to the east. Fred Galle and company must have thought that the ingathered whites satisfied their Alabama azalea imperative, an understandable miscue before those “alabamense” became 25 feet tall and grew several 3- or even 4-inch stems. At this date, we have no excuse. Dr. Tom Ranney of North Carolina State University has tested a number of samples and has found them to be tetraploid. Besides their reluctance to reach pulpwood-timber size, true *R. alabamense* and its hybrids are rather stubbornly diploid.

If S. D. Coleman Sr., was indeed the supplier, he must have collected seed or runners near his home at Ft. Gaines, Georgia. Such variety and quality could only have come from a very diverse colony or colonies



Photo Ron Miller

near at hand. I have poked around the immediate Ft. Gaines area for an extensive colony and at most have stumbled upon sites at Georgetown and north. Some day—

A number of azalea enthusiasts have asked me, as species author, to escort them to *Rhododendron colemanii* in the flesh. Though it's fun to show off one's children, such an indulgence carries two downsides. First, it means that I am obligated to play tour guide during the brief window when hunting alone for Red Hills azalea's genetic and geographical variants can be efficient. Second, and far more important, colonies of *R. colemanii* are often small and vulnerable. I've already rued my naiveté in showing colonies to trusted friends, only to return for replicate DNA samples to specific sites, stepping instead into those tell-tale round holes that all of us recognize and most of us have dug. Hidden inside every azalea enthusiast while admiring a remarkable plant in the wild is a demonic digger whispering "mine mine mine" and plotting a stealthy return later.

Thus, Callaway Gardens represents an ideal alternative. It precludes temptation. No tour guide is needed, only a car and 15 bucks. It is closer to population centers than are the native Coastal Zone sites where the ticks and the fire ants wander and the catbriars and the poison ivy grow free. With

▲ Callaway Gardens features an extensive collection of *Rhododendron colemanii*.

▼ Almost tree-sized Red Hills azaleas popped up throughout the gardens.



Photo Ron Miller



Photo Ron Miller

▲ ▼ Colonies of *R. colemanii* are often small and vulnerable. Callaway represents an ideal alternative.



Photo Ron Miller

handy restaurants and flush toilets, Callaway shares none of the rigors that characterize unpaved nature red in tooth and claw. And it simply holds more *Rhododendron colemanii* than I have seen altogether elsewhere, period. Try May 1, plus or minus a week.

You would think that the Callaway management might consider giving their world-class collection-by-accident a marquee billing alongside that of their intentional *Rhododendron prunifolium* hoard. Well, it seems encouraging that as I left the gardens, I noticed that their iconic sign displays a white azalea.

Ron Miller (rhodokiller@cox.net) is a retired professor of English Renaissance literature, a frustrated grower of cool-climate azaleas and rhododendrons in Zone 9, a superannuated plant hunter, and the species author of *Rhododendron colemanii*.

Callaway Gardens® Admission

Admission gate opens daily at 9 a.m. Closing times are: 5 p.m., January 1 to March 18; 6 p.m., March 19 to Sunday preceding Labor Day; and 5 p.m., Labor Day to December 31.

Directions

Callaway Gardens® is in Pine Mountain, Georgia, 60 minutes southwest of Atlanta and 30 minutes north of Columbus.

If using an online mapping service like MapQuest, please use the address "5887 Georgia Highway 354." Please note that this address is for the Real Estate Office entrance, very close to the main entrance of Callaway Gardens.

If you are traveling from:

Columbus, Georgia (30 miles) - Take Interstate 185 North to Ga. Hwy. 18 East (exit 34). Turn right off Hwy. 18 to the entrance of Callaway Gardens.

Atlanta, Georgia (70 miles) - Take Interstate 85 South to Interstate 185 South (exit 21). From Interstate 185, exit at U. S. Hwy. 27 (exit 42). Follow Hwy. 27 South to Pine Mountain. In Pine Mountain, turn right onto Hwy. 354 West. Proceed to Ga. Hwy. 18 and turn left into Callaway Gardens.

Lodging

Four types of accommodations are available at Callaway Gardens:

Mountain Creek® Inn features tastefully decorated guest rooms, and is conveniently close to restaurants, shops and attractions.

The Lodge at Callaway Gardens features 150 guest rooms and suites. Exterior balconies with a view of the surrounding forest or beautiful gardens from every guest room bring the beauty of the outdoors inside.

The Cottages at Callaway Gardens are ideal for family vacations. Nestled among tall pines, each features a living and dining area, fireplace, full kitchen, screened porch and deck. Cottages are available with one or two bedrooms.

The Villas at Callaway Gardens feature a spacious living and dining area, fireplace, full kitchen, separate bath for each bedroom, sun deck, washer/dryer and screened porch or patio. Villas are available with one, two, three or four bedrooms.