Thar's Honeysuckles in Them Thar Swamps

By Charles R. Andrews III—Lee County, Georgia

[Editor's Note: This is slightly modified from an article that originally appeared in *Azalea Blooms*, the Azalea Chapter ARS chapter newsletter.]

Our native azaleas, or "wild honeysuckles" are like gold. Georgia claims the most species. One can find some of her 12 species up near the Tennessee and North Carolina border and throughout the state down to the Florida border, 300 miles to the south.

Monica Williams found gold in her swamp down in Lee County. Not knowing about native azaleas, at first she did not know what she had found. Monica has a treasure trove on her hands.

Lee County (county seat Leesburg), in the southwestern part of the state [Figure 1: GA county map; Lee Co highlighted.], is situated immediately above Dougherty County (Albany). In order not to embarrass yourself, those of you not familiar with the pronunciation of Georgia town names need to know that this city is pronounced "Awl-Benny," with accents on both of the two, not three, syllables. It was once part of Creek Indian territory, ceded to the State of Georgia in 1825. A year later, the county was created and named after distinguished Revolutionary War cavalry commander Light Horse Harry Lee. Lee County's eastern boundary is the Flint River. Kinchafoonee and Muckalee Creeks are major tributaries. The county is in the Coastal Plain, with typical pine barrens, natural ponds, and swampy areas around the watercourses and drainages. In many undeveloped or uncultivated areas, undergrowth is periodically burned.

Figure 1: Lee County highlighted in red.

Photo 1: 40-yr-old *R. austrinum* in Johnny's yard. (Photo by Golden.)

Johnny Golden, a school official in Leesburg, seems to have been one of the few in Lee County to have developed an interest in native azaleas. He has been in love with native azaleas for years. Some of the azaleas in his yard are now over 40 years old. [See photo 1.] Johnny connected years ago with Smitty Smitherman of Auburn University, who would drive hundreds of miles in search of native azaleas. Smitty came to Lee County, where they inspected some sites. [See photo 2.] Johnny continued his contact with Smitty. Through my correspondence with Johnny, I was introduced to Monica and Lee County azaleas. Monica's property is on Muckalee Creek, not far from where it joins the Flint River.

The Flint River begins as a spring branch at Hapeville, just north of the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, draining under the tram tunnels to the concourses at the airport and then under I-285 west of the I-75 interchange. It flows generally south in a winding fashion paralleling I-75 until it begins to turn more to the southeast toward Fort Valley. From there it winds again more due south into Lake Blackshear. Leaving the lake, it begins a southwesterly flow down to Albany into Lake Chehaw. Another long winding, southwest stretch takes it into Lake Seminole below Bainbridge where it joins the Chattahoochee River and becomes the Apalachicola River. Many creek and branches join in along the Flint River's 344-mile-long journey. [See Figure 2: Flint River map.]

Photo 2: *R. canescens* in pine woods. (Photo by Golden.)

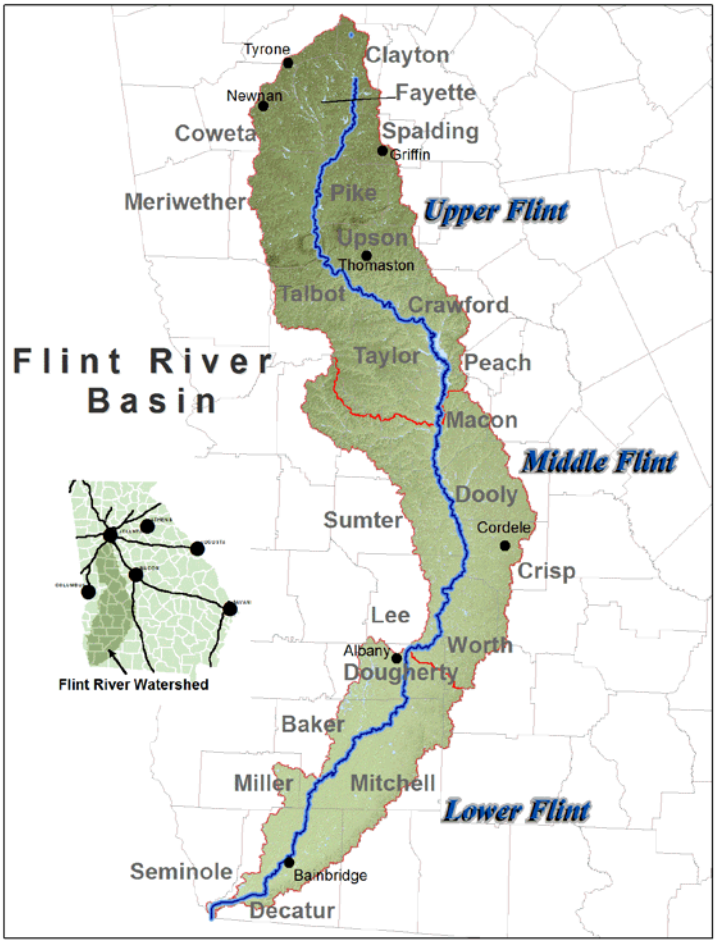


Figure 2: Flint River Basin

In 2017, Johnny published in the *Lee County Ledger* an informative article explaining various species that might be in Lee County and asking anyone who may have azaleas on the property to contact him. Monica saw the article and contacted Johnny. Monica, a respiratory therapist, and Ed Williams, a pharmacist, purchased a 77-acre tract adjoining their home in the south end of the county in 2015. Their swampy tract, bordering the Muckalee, had been clear-cut and was re-growing into a dense thicket. Monica discovered some attractive plants blooming on the property and started googling wild flowers: "bushes, white,

Figure 3: Georgia *R. alabamense* counties in bright green. More counties may have Alabama azaleas. Some reported sites may be incorrectly identified.

tubular, fragrant, spring." She was led to native azaleas. Until that moment, she never knew there were native azaleas in Lee County. One type was called swamp azalea; Monica had a swamp. She was satisfied with "swamp azalea."

When Monica called, Johnny came to see her. She was excited to meet someone who knew about native azaleas, and he was delighted to see her and her swamp. Johnny thought her "swamp azalea" was actually *Rhododendron alabamense*, the Alabama azalea. She wanted to learn more. Johnny invited Monica to see the native azaleas in his yard and generously shared articles and books on the subject. Johnny and Monica began working as a team locating more native azalea populations in Lee County. Johnny called on Patrick Thompson, who had gone into the field with Smitty Smitherman.

In the spring of 2018, Patrick Thompson, arboretum specialist from the Davis Arboretum at Auburn University, came to see the azaleas, especially *R. alabamense*. Patrick confirmed that Monica's swamp did indeed have the Alabama azalea. This is important because it is the easternmost site yet recorded for the species. *R. alabamense* is not common in Georgia; in fact, it is not common in Alabama. It is found scattered in some counties of western Georgia. [Figure 3.] Patrick reported on his trip on Facebook, where our azalea group found out about it.

After off and on communication with Johnny for a year or so, I asked if I could come down to see the winter floral buds, then return later during bloom season. Our conversations revealed that there are much more than just *R. alabamense* there. Though I expected the Piedmont azalea (*R. canescens*), there seemed to be Florida azaleas (*R. austrinum*) and swamp azaleas (*R. viscosum*). Could they also have Oconee azaleas (*R. flammeum*) and Red Hills azaleas (*R. colemanii*)? I shared with Ron Miller the conversations and photos Johnny and Monica had sent. The possibility of finding these species intermingling there in Lee County piqued his interest. This led to our trip November 6-8, 2020.

Photo 3: Sutton's Landing.

Friday

Ron suggested we meet at Sutton's Landing on Kinchafoonee Creek, south of Leesburg. [See Photo 3.] He would be driving up from Pensacola, FL, with his boat. I would be driving down from Cumming, GA. Ron was late arriving because he had trouble restarting his truck after getting gas —a portent of things to come. At the landing, the truck would not restart. Fortunately, we easily transferred boat and trailer to the hitch on my vehicle.

Photo 4: Kinchafoonee Creek *R. austrinum*.

We called Johnny, who spent all Friday morning and into the afternoon helping us find a mechanic. It appeared to be something causing a shorted circuit. The best we could do is have Ron's truck taken in to a shop that afternoon to be worked on the following Monday. Nothing else could we do but go look for azaleas.

We first put the boat in the water at the landing and in just a few hundred yards up and down from the boat ramp found quite a few plants of *R. austrinum* and one *R. alabamense*. [See photo 4.] Near the bridge on US 19 above Sutton's Landing we stepped ashore and found a colony of *R. austrinum* a short distance away from the creek in dense shade. The plants were spindly and almost totally void of flower buds. After a quick look along the creek near the landing, we left for Monica's swamp, where Monica and Johnny gave us a tour.

On her property, beavers keep the drainage flowing into Muckalee Creek dammed, creating a pond and keeping the area swampy. Ed cut cart paths through the property. Using the cart paths, Monica has been continually finding new azaleas in the overgrown brush. The area is quite dense with re-growing sprouts of southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), southern live oak (*Quercus virginiana*), sand laurel oak (*Q. hemisphaerica*), redbay (*Persea borbonia*), and seedings of red maple (*Acer rubra*), pawpaw (*Asimina parviflora*), inkberry (*Ilex glabra*), American holly (*I. opaca*), yaupon holly (*I. vomitoria*), sweetshrub (*Calycanthus floridus*), swamp titi (*Cyrilla racemiflora*), sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*), fetterbush lyonia (*Lyonia lucida*), red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), deerberry (*Vaccinium stamenium*), and Elliott's blueberry (*V. elliottii*).

The azaleas were completely hidden in the dense undergrowth. Monica began spotting more plants and clearing out around them. Monica would spy a blossom or flower bud and cut and slash her way to the plant. This would open up one or more plants. She has discovered many more plants since Patrick's visit. The primary azaleas fighting for survival in the thicket are *R. austrinum* and *R. canescens*. There are also many *R. alabamense* and at least one patch of *R. viscosum*.

The *R. viscosum* there most certainly appears to be var. *aemulans*. This distinct, early blooming, fuzzy-budded variety has gone into obscurity since it was merged into the species *R. viscosum* without any taxonomic recognition. The plants at Monica's are identical to those Ron has seen from Florida to East Texas, with one exception. Some of these plants in the peaty, boggy area have grown to a height of 8 feet. *R. viscosum* var. *aemulans* is considered a low-growing plant. Monica's *R. viscosum* var. *aemulans* had a few open blossoms and like all *aemulans* is quite stoloniferous. Some branches had as many as 7 flower buds crowded on the terminal ends, not unusual for this plant. [See photos 5-7.]

Photo 5 (at left): Ron Miller, Johnny Golden, and Monica Willians inspecting *R. viscosum* var. *aemulans.*
Photo 6 (in middle): *R. viscosum* var. *aemulans* blossom. Photo 7 (at right): *R. viscosum* var. *aemulans* winter buds.

Photo 8: *R. austrinum* in Monica's swamp.
(Photo by Williams)

From pictures Monica shared, we know there are many Florida azaleas on the property. Pictures show the yellow blossoms in varying shades and our inspection found glandular hairs on the new growth and leaf petioles. [See photo 8.] The photos of her pinks actually vary from white through white with pink tubes to strong pinks. [See photo 9.] *R. austrinum* is a tetraploid while *R. canescens* is a diploid. One big question is whether some of the pinks on the property are pink tetraploids, which may be a pink form of *R. austrinum* and not *R. canescens*. Photos sent to us after the trip confirm at least some pinks are *R. austrinum*. We need to inspect pinks in bloom to find more pink tetraploids.

Photo 9: *R. canescens* in Monica's swamp.
(Photo by Williams.)

In a relative high area in the swamp where water occasionally overflows during periods of heavy rain, we were taken to a plant that might possibly be *R. colemanii*. We collected samples for ploidy tests (results: diploid, not *R. colemanii*). Monica showed us another plant that was probably a hybrid. [See photos 10-11.] Within a few feet we found a Piedmont azalea and an Alabama azalea. We also collected samples of this one for tests (results: diploid).

Photo 10: *R. canescens-R. alabamense* hybrid? in Monica's swamp.

Photo 11: *R. alabamense* seed capsule in Monica's swamp

In another amazing area, a large group of Florida azaleas and Alabama azaleas were growing together, side by side. Neither Ron nor I had ever see these two species mingling like this. This patch is a place to look for natural triploid hybrids in the springtime.

Over near and along Muckalee Creek, *R. alabamense* appears to dominate. Monica took us to an area at the creek and pointed to a magnificent

Photo 12: *R. alabamense* "The Queen."

azalea, 12 feet tall. "Bow to the queen," she commanded. We have never seen such an Alabama azalea. With 20 to 30 trunks, an inch or two in diameter, and smaller stolons on the outer perimeter, the giant shrub rises up from a wide-spreading crown and arches out over a 25-foot area. The leaves were in their fall transition from green to an amber-yellow. [See photo 12.] In the immediate area along the creek bank and nearby were many smaller Alabama azalea plants. The pleasant distraction and learning experience of Friday afternoon began to ease the tension from Ron's truck problems.

Saturday

On Saturday, we put the boat in the water. Ron has often observed that many azaleas are accessible from a boat that are not from land. One has the option of beaching the boat and walking as well. From Sutton's Landing, we eased down the Kinchafoonee and then up the Muckalee. Along the stream banks, the most prominent tree was bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), draped in moss. [See photos 13-14.] We also saw river birch (*Betula nigra*), sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*), sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana* var. *australis*), southern live oak, sand laurel oak, overcup oak (*Q. lyrata*), red maple, redbay, hollies, swamp titi everywhere, deerberry and Elliott's blueberry, and witch-hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana* or maybe *H. macrophylla*). Also common on the sandy banks was saltbush (*Baccharis halimifolia*), with its late fall-flowering fluffs of snowy white flower heads. We saw occasional clumps of taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), a non-native, invasive tropical plant loosely called elephant-ears. In one particular spot along the water's edge, we saw a large, attractive spread of swamp marigold (*Bidens aristosa*). [See photo 15.]

Photo 13: Bald cypress on Kinchafoonee Creek.

Photo 14: Red maple on Kinchafoonee Creek.

Photo 15: Taro and swamp marigold on Kinchafoonee Creek.

Photo 16: *R. alabamense* on the Muckalee

Photo 18: *R. canescens* on the Muckalee.

Photos 17: *R. alabamense* on the Muckalee

Photo 19: *R. canescens* on the Muckalee.

Our eyes, however, were scanning the banks for the telltale sign of azalea buds and fall leaves. Once we spotted a plant, we inspected the buds and leaves to determine the species. We found *R. austrinum* (large canescent buds and glandular new growth) and *R. alabamense* (small ovoid buds with brown border along scales) along the banks of the Kinchafoonee. [See photos 16-17.] From the mouth of the Muckalee up to the Williamses' area, we found *R. alabamense* and *R. canescens* (canescent buds and non-glandular new growth) [See photos 18-19.], but no *R. austrinum*. On most all the azaleas, winter buds were plentiful. Seed pods were almost nonexistent.

This experience with the Alabama azaleas was eye-opening. We are used to seeing Alabama azaleas as hillside plants, up on the sides of often dry ridges and away from the bottoms of the draws. They are described as a plant that seems to prefer dryer soil than Piedmont azaleas, which are sometimes found nearby, often lower down in more moist conditions. Here the Alabama azaleas are often in a few feet of the water line or up somewhat farther on the banks. I repeat what I have said many times. One should never make absolute statements about our native azaleas. They will often make a fool of you!

After our boat ride, we drove to a park on the Muckalee called Pirates Cove Nature Park. [See photo 20.] In the park along the creek is a section about 100 yards or so with a large number of *R. alabamense*. These are similar to others farther down the creek. Here, though, the quantity is perhaps greater than any other section. Residential development has taken its disastrous toll on native plants along Muckalee Creek, including the rare *R. alabamense*. One must ask, how many Alabama azaleas were there along these banks years earlier? We hope Lee County authorities will take action to protect this treasure.

Photo 20: *R. alabamense* in Pirates Cove Nature Park.

Photo 21: Flint River in November.

Sunday

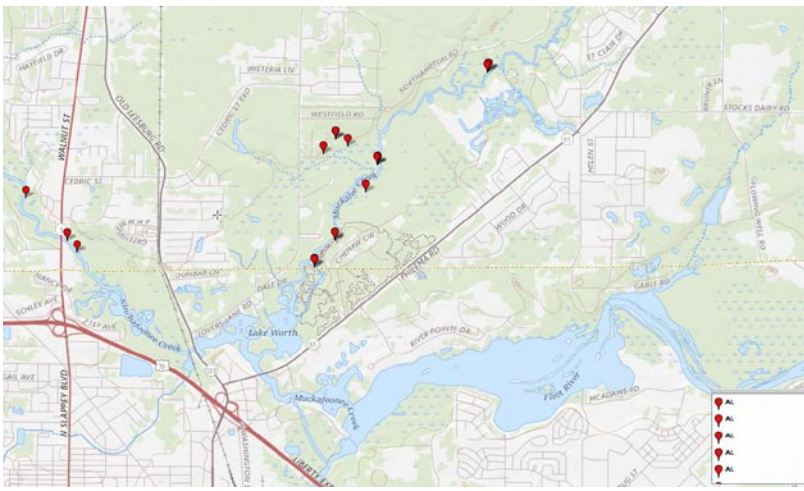
Sunday we explored several sections of the Flint River, first below and then above Lake Blackshear. Ron found and photographed *R. flammeum* above the lake 15 years ago. Below the lake, low water levels prevented us from journeying up more than a couple of miles. Above the lake, we launched at a landing where Ron camped in years past. The Flint is a beautiful, scenic river, with occasional bluffs as it winds and twists its way along to the Chattahoochee. [See photo 21.] We enjoyed the boat ride. This time though, we found no azaleas. We will have to wait until spring to find them.

Monica found gold in her swamp. Her and Ed's azalea paradise requires some attention, but what a find! The undergrowth needs to be controlled. Desired plants must to be located, identified, and given breathing room from the dense surroundings. They should be allowed to strut their stuff. One thing is certain: there are many more azaleas in her swamp, fighting against the competing vegetation. What will she find? Natural hybrids? Additional species?

For me this was an enlightening trip. Lee County needs more exploration. I found *R. alabamense* and *R. viscosum* var. *aemulans* do not read their plant habit and habitat descriptions in our plant books. Lee County is near the limit of northeast distribution for *R. austrinum* and the eastern limit for *R. alabamense*. Yet both species seem to be found in significant quantities. One would think as the limits of distribution are reached that a plant becomes scarce. *R. alabamense*, particularly on the Muckalee, seems plentiful up to Pirates Cove Nature Park, except where residential development along the creek has destroyed the natural habitat. [Figure 4: Map of *alabamense* R & C saw in Lee Co]

Monica and Johnny were gracious and excellent hosts. I left late Sunday for a long drive home. Ron, unfortunately, had to remain for several more days, waiting on his truck. He drove it home Tuesday. A week later at home in Pensacola, his truck again would not start. For a man whose calling card says, "Have boat, will travel for plants," Ron was not a happy camper.

Figure 4: *R. alabamense* locations seen by Ron Miller & Charlie Andrews. Pins may represent more than one plant. (Map GPS locations generated by Miller.)



About the Author:

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All photos in this article are by Charles Andrews, unless noted.