

Older Knap Hill Azaleas That Do Well in the South

By Will Ferrell —Winston-Salem, NC

It is reasonably well-known that the great mass of older Knap Hill azaleas do not do well in the Southeastern US (unless perhaps in the mountains). I speculate that this is because they contain the blood of such species as *Rhododendron luteum*, *R. occidentale*, *R. prinophyllum*, etc.—to wit, Knap Hills have parents who on their own would struggle in the South. Additionally, when a hybridizer living in a mild/cool climate such as England focuses on big, beautiful flowers (and indeed Knap Hills accomplish that), it is easy to lose the traits of robustness for plants confronting hotter climates and heavier soils.

In attempting to research which older Knap Hills do thrive in the Southeast, I posed the question to a good few experienced Southern gardeners. Almost all of them off the cuff said “none of them” would thrive here. But bits of evidence such as the list of good-doers for American Rhododendron Society (ARS) Southeastern chapters¹, my observation of many gardens, and my own experience all indicate that a handful of early Knap Hills can thrive.

At least some evidence indicates that ‘Gibraltar’, ‘Homebush’ (see Figure 2), ‘Balzac’, ‘Brazil’, ‘Golden Eagle’, ‘Strawberry Ice’, ‘Knap Hill Red’, ‘Buzzard’, and ‘Hotspur Yellow’ will do well in the Southeast. My 22-year-old ‘Homebush’ would be 15' here near Winston-Salem, if I didn't prune it closer to eye level. There is a healthy 30-year-old ‘Buzzard’ in Charlotte, NC.

‘Klondyke’ (see Figure 3), is more of a “maybe.” I've grown it in outstandingly organic soil pretty well, and observed other successful plantings of it, but I've seen it die more often. Similarly, I've seen one gardener grow ‘Lady Roseberry’ successfully but other gardeners lose several. I have what I think is a ‘Toucan’ that has thrived for me, and it is listed as a good performer for the Mid-Atlantic (Virginia) ARS chapter. And I've heard rumors that ‘Orangeade’ and ‘Satan’ do okay.

Also deserving of mention are ‘Daviesii’ (see Figure 5) and ‘Narcissiflora’, which tend to be indelicately marketed as roughly Knap-Hill-synonymous “Exbury”² azaleas when they are sold. They are more properly categorized as Ghents, sort of Knap Hill precursors. Most Ghents are poor Southern plants like Knap Hills, but these two do thrive in the South. The *R. viscosum* blood no doubt helps ‘Daviesii’, and there



Fig 1. ‘Ilam Peachy Keen’. Photo by Will Ferrell.



Fig. 2 ‘Homebush’ backed by *Camassia*. Photo by Will Ferrell.

is a similar ‘Viscosepala’ (sharing appearance, 1840s roots, and *R. viscosum* blood with ‘Daviesii’) that I have seen thriving in Boone, NC.

In Galle's masterwork on azaleas³, he draws a demarcation of Knap Hills introduced before 1960, and I'm using that here in defining “older Knap Hills.” Most of those introduced after that time are also challenged as Southern plants, but certainly some of the hybridizing using Knap Hills as the base, notably Ilam and Girard hybrids, produced some very good Southern doers. Ilam hybrids ‘Melford Red Letter’, ‘Ilam Peachy Keen’ (see Figure 1), and ‘Ilam Primrose’, and Girard hybrids ‘Pink Delight’ (see Figure 4), ‘Girard's Mt. St. Helen’, and ‘Girard's Apricot’ are stellar examples.

A three-gallon deciduous azalea isn't cheap—nor should it be, given the time and care needed to produce it. And the frustration of carefully planting and



Fig 3. 'Klondyke' backed by 'Elsie Lee'. Photo by Will Ferrell.



Fig 4. Girard's 'Pink Delight'. Photo by Will Ferrell.

caring for a plant over time just to see it fail is expensive in terms of a gardener's time and emotional energy. So I just offer these brief observations on what has worked and what has not with this in mind.

Notes and References

1. *Good Performer Plant List for ARS District Ten Chapters* <https://www.rhododendron.org/performers10.htm> American Rhododendron Society. (GA, FL, AL, TN, NC and SC).
2. Many people refer to any highly hybridized deciduous azalea as an Exbury. I am following Galle's convention of grouping Exbury's as a subset of Knap Hills, though more precisely they were the heirs to



Fig 5. 'Daviesii' backed by a Consolini rhododendron Photo by Will Ferrell.

what the Waterers began at Knap Hill Nursery, furthered by Lionel de Rothschild at his Exbury estate rather than Knap Hill.

3. Azaleas by Fred C. Galle 1987.

About the Author

Will Ferrell navigates the conflict between having a harmonious garden design and wanting too many azaleas, rhododendrons, and camellias...on an acre near Winston-Salem, NC. He can be reached at Bearrun3@triad.rr.com.












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