
Plant Hunting for Azaleas in Southern California

Mike McCullough
San Jose, California

There is more to *R. occidentale*, the Western Azalea, than the northern California forms. The following is the log of my 13th plant-hunting trip to southern California.

It is June 20, 1992, and I am off on the southern leg of my plant-hunting trips for this year. Earlier trips took me to Oregon, northern California, and places closer to home like Mt. Tamalpais State Park, and Big Basin Redwoods State Park. The peak of bloom of the Western Azalea in southern California is approximately June 21, and the plants are usually found above 4,000 feet, near streams or rivers. Since this is the 13th year of my active plant-hunting, and to show my contempt for the number 13, I intend on discovering at least 21 new plants this year. My previous record was ten plants in my tenth year. So far this year, up north, I have already discovered 15 plants.

The first stop is Cuyamaca Rancho State Park in San Diego County. From the 5,612 feet Cuyamaca Peak, you can see the ocean, Mexico, and the Anza-Borrego Desert. Unlike a desert, here it is like the Sierras, as it is in all of the azalea areas, with incense cedar, white fir, four varieties of pine, oaks, willow, alder, sycamore and azaleas. According to Carl Deul, a member of the Southern California Chapter of ARS, who is familiar with the azalea areas of southern California, the 19th-century plant hunter William Lobb collected seed of *R. occidentale* in this area.

I set up camp at the Paso Picacho Campground-Picnic Area, elevation approximately 4,600 feet. Then hiked 1.3 miles up the Azalea Glen Loop Trail to where Cuyamaca 403 is located at approximately 5,000 feet. This plant, the best of the plants I found in this area, has 2-1/2" pastel pink and white candy-striped flowers. Some flowers have six petals instead of the five that the Western Azalea usually possesses. Cuyamaca 1008, and the May-blooming Cuyamaca 801 are nearby. I took cuttings, made some crosses on Cuyamaca 403, and will collect seed in the fall for the ARS Seed Exchange. I use a similar numbering system as Britt Smith and Frank Mossman. Cuyamaca 403 is the third plant I discovered in my fourth year of plant hunting. The name before the number represents the location.

About halfway between camp and Cuyamaca 403 the trail crosses a dry creek, next to which is a lonely *R. occidentale* that is in too much shade to bloom. Last year at this time, I headed up this dry creek and found the only areas of azaleas in bloom at Cuyamaca. Cuyamaca 1204 is one of these. The winter of 1990-91 was so cold that it set back the blooming cycle of plants at Cuyamaca and the Idyllwild area, and to a lesser degree at Mt. Palomar. Halfway between the trail and Cuyamaca 1204 I discovered a tall floriferous plant that I noticed last year but with no flowers; this year it was in full bloom. I numbered this plant, which has 2-1/4" white flowers, pink tube and rays running the length of the petal, orange flare, 16 per truss, Cuyamaca 1316.

The next day, June 21, the peak day for azalea bloom, I went north along Highway 79. At Lake Cuyamaca, I headed east on Engineers Road until I reached Azalea Creek. Here are the July blooming Cuyamaca 207 and 208. Cuyamaca 208

is eight feet tall, and has 2-1/2" white flowers, orange flare with some yellow spreading onto adjoining petals, 15 flowers per truss, and good fall foliage. There were no blooms, but I took cuttings. I would be back on the weekend after the Fourth of July. Between Engineers Road and the old gold-mining town of Julian there is a vista point from where you can see the Anza-Borrego Desert.

I headed north on Highway 76, then up Road S7 to Mt. Palomar. Not far below the Palomar Observatory, 5,550 feet, is the Observatory Campground of the Cleveland National Forest. Along Fry Creek, not far from Campsite 40 is the pinkish Palomar 1205 which was in full bloom this time last year, but now was almost finished blooming. I set up camp.

Mt. Palomar has about 40" of rainfall a year, and there is snow during the winter. Besides azaleas, one can find big-cone spruce, white fir, incense cedar, Coulter pine, Jeffrey pine, western dogwood, wild lilac, goldenrod, lupine and poison oak.

I proceeded to Palomar Mountain State Park, after having an avocado sandwich at Mother's Kitchen. Took the Doane Pond, Scott's Cabin, Chimney Flat, Doane Pond circuit. South of the ruins of Scott's Cabin, I took the path which goes to the Park Headquarters. This path crosses Azalea Creek, where Carl Deul mentioned *R. occidentale* could be found. On an earlier trip, I went downstream and only found shaded out azaleas, not even a bud. But this time I went upstream and discovered Palomar 1317. At Chimney Flat, elevation approximately 5,200 feet, I looked southwest across the flat and saw something that looked like a dogwood in full bloom. It was completely covered with white flowers. I decided to investigate, a good dogwood would make an excellent candidate for seed collecting in the fall for the ARS Seed Exchange. When I got closer, I found out that it was an azalea, quite tall and broad, with white flowers, pink

tube and pink at the tips of the petals, yellow flare, with the trusses arranged like a floribunda rose. As at most stops, I collected cutting material, and in this case put pollen on this plant from northern California forms of *R. occidentale*, and several eastern azalea species. For quite some time I have crossed the more colorful northern forms of *R. occidentale* with the more heat tolerant southern California and Big Basin forms.

In the approximately two-mile hike from Chimney Flat to Doane Pond, there is more diversity in the azaleas than in any place I have found in southern California.

From not far north of Chimney Flat to Palomar 402 is an azalea meadow on either side of Chimney Creek, which the trail crosses, then follows. Here are found Palomar 105, 106, 605, and 402. The yellow from the flare of Palomar 605 spreads to the adjoining petals. Palomar 402, approximately seven feet tall, has six petals per flower, the upper two being orange; there is a fair amount of pink in the flower. Palomar 402 is my favorite plant at Mt. Palomar. Further north, the trail is fairly steep, and goes through a scattering of azaleas and poison oak. Further north is a glade with quite a few azaleas with pink tubes. Next to a fallen log is one of these, Palomar 303, a low grower.

From the sign that has on it 0.8 miles to Doane Pond, walk 24 strides south, then walk 19 strides east across Chimney Creek. Here is Palomar 1319, a fairly tall, broad, floriferous plant. Not far from here Chimney Creek joins Doane Creek, then the trail parallels Doane Creek.

At Thunder Spring and further north where Palomar 101 is located are azaleas with five- to six-inch long leaves, about twice as long as found on other forms. From Thunder Spring the main trail goes away for a while from Doane Creek. There is a path that goes closer to Doane Creek. In the fall of 1990, when I was collecting seed, shortly after spotting a bobcat, I

found a ten-foot tall plant that was loaded with seed. I investigated this plant the following year and found it very floriferous and in full bloom, and it became Palomar 1206. This year, I was here at approximately the same date, and the plant had already finished blooming. This plant, which has a fair amount of pink in the flower, can be reached from the main path by going 67 strides north of the Thunder Spring Sign, then going 47 strides east. This plant also is covered with flowers.

Within sight of Doane Pond, where a tree with three trunks is growing next to the trail, is a dry creek where most of the azaleas have long leaves. Here are the first azaleas I discovered, Palomar 101 and 102. Palomar 102 has 3" white flowers, yellow flare that fades with age, 14 flowers per truss. Nearby, Palomar 1006 has 3-1/2" to 4" flowers. These plants tend to bloom in early to mid-June.

Early in the morning of June 22, I hiked from the Observatory Campground to the Fry Creek Campground, and headed up a fire road. Not far from the first restroom at Fry Creek Campground, and across Fry Creek is the May blooming Palomar 802. Further up, past the gate on the fire road heading straight, you can see where the forest fire was stopped. The fire came within ten feet of the pastel pink Palomar 606, which has 3" flowers.

Later in the day I went back to Palomar Mountain State Park. About one mile downstream of Doane Pond, where Doane Creek joins French Creek, is the Wier. The path to the Wier crosses an area that was hit by a major forest fire which spread into the Cleveland National Forest, and was stopped at the fire road which is next to Palomar 606. Near the Wier are Palomar 1205 and 1320. Palomar 1320 has 2-1/2" white flowers, yellow flare, 16 flowers per truss. On the path that leads to the Wier is an azalea with good fall foliage which I shall probably number when I find it in bloom.

Proceeded towards the village of Idyllwild. The only place on the route that the elevation dips below 2,000 feet is at Aguana, elevation 1,940 feet, and this is northwest of the Anza-Borrego Desert. Idyllwild is located northeast of here, in the San Jacinto Mountains at 5,394 feet between Riverside on one side, and Palm Springs and Palm Desert on the other. In Idyllwild the highest temperature is 99 degrees F. in July, the lowest is 4 degrees F. in January and the average yearly moisture rate is 26.42". The warm summers that the southern California and Big Basin azaleas face may mean that azaleas from these warmer locations are more heat tolerant of east coast locations than the Northern California and Oregon forms. Granite is everywhere. In many areas in the mountains, it looks like fields of granite boulders. The soil is composed of decomposed granite mixed with loam. To the north of Idyllwild is San Jacinto Peak, elevation 10,831 feet the highest place in the California State Park system.

Near the three-mile post on the scenic Highway 243 is a path leading to Idyllwild 206 which has roundish leaves like *R. williamsianum*. After obtaining cutting material, proceeded to a store in Idyllwild, obtained supplies. Headed to the County Visitor's Center, where west and between posts 4 and 5 on the Yellow Pine Forest Nature Trail, along Lily Creek, are found Idyllwild 905 (excellent white trumpet-shaped flowers, orange flare), and the pinkish 1106. Then went to Black Mountain Road, then up Road 4S02 where I made camp, not far from some of my plants, where Road 4S02 is blocked by a gate.

On June 23, I did an early morning walk up to the bend of the road where Idyllwild 205 (with orbicular leaves), and the pinkish Idyllwild 302 are located. Not far from the juncture with Black Mountain Road is a large floriferous azalea that I discovered on my fifth plant hunting trip. This plant would have been Idyllwild 504; I even took a ground photo of Bill Jenkins, Ted Tassop, and myself in front

of it, but was unable to take measurements and did not go back to that plant. Due to the drought, the results of the 1990-91 cold winter, etc., I was unable to number this plant until 1992. This plant, Idyllwild 1321, has 2-1/2" white flowers, orange flare, 21 flowers per truss. Since I wanted to number certain other plants, and I already reached 21 discoveries for the year, I decided to try for 25, a number that is still far less than the 90 that Britt Smith and Frank Mossman discovered in their second year of plant hunting. The large plant east of Idyllwild 1321 was numbered Idyllwild 1322.

Then proceeded to the Dark Canyon Campground, elevation 5,800 feet, the best place to see *R. occidentale* in the Idyllwild area. On the northeast side of the bridge crossing the North fork of the San Jacinto River (the sign is misnamed Dark Canyon Creek) is the floriferous Idyllwild 502, a six-foot tall plant with 13 white 3" flowers per truss, and a highly visible large bright orange flare. The trusses are arranged like those of floribunda rose. A spray of this could very likely win first prize at a rhododendron show. At the 1992 California Chapter Rhododendron Show in May, someone entered a truss of one of my discoveries; and at the 1992 Strybing Arboretum Plant Sale, a seedling of one of my plants was in full bloom, way before it should have been. Idyllwild 502 is a plant that I usually make crosses on.

Further up the San Jacinto River there is an impressive array of azaleas which impressed Bill Jenkins and Ted Tassop when I took them there during my fifth plant hunting trip. Not far down a creek heading towards the San Jacinto River from between campsites 17 and 18 is Idyllwild 503.

Next I went to where Highway 243 crosses the San Jacinto River, one mile or so downstream of Dark Canyon. From the highway there is a short fire road that turns into a poorly maintained path which goes to Dark Canyon. I have only explored this area once before, during the drought. Not

far from Highway 243 I discovered Idyllwild 1323 which has white flowers, pink tube and faint pink rays running the length of the petal, 14 flowers per truss. In the fall and winter, the road to Dark Canyon is closed; the preferred route I use in my seed collecting trips in the fall is to hike up along the San Jacinto River.

Then proceeded to the most northerly place in the Idyllwild area, at Bay Tree Spring, and from there worked my way South to my camp on the spur of Black Mountain Road.

In front of the water pipe at Bay Tree Spring is a plant with good fall foliage that was probably discovered by Carl Deul, the person who gave me some insight as to where I could find *R. occidentale* in southern California. Above the pipe is the floriferous Idyllwild 201. If one climbs further up, avoiding poison oak (the only place in the Idyllwild area I have seen poison oak), you come to a poorly maintained path that leads upstream. Growing out of a large granite boulder is Idyllwild 202 with 2-1/2" white flowers with an orange flare. Further up, next to a pine tree, is the first pink azalea I found in southern California, the five-foot Idyllwild 301 which has 2-3/8" white flowers, pink tube, pink rays like that of *R. rhabdotum* [also known as *R. dalhousiae* var. *rhabdotum*, ed.] running the length of the flower, orangish yellow flare, 17 flowers per truss. Further up is Idyllwild 1010 which has trusses similar to Idyllwild 502, but is not as floriferous.

About a half-mile south of Bay Tree Spring is Lake Fulmor, elevation 5,200 feet. The lake is stocked with fish. Downstream of the dam, along the poorly maintained K1-I-Wah Trail are Idyllwild 203, 204, 1008, and 1009. Idyllwild 204 has 2-3/4" to 3" white flowers, light yellow flare which fades completely with age, 19 flowers per truss.

A good place to have a picnic lunch among azaleas is at the Fuller Mill Picnic Area, elevation 5,300 feet. But to see an outstanding sight (when there is no drought) is to take a path



Top: Azaleas at Dark Canyon
Left: *R. occidentale* Idyllwild 502

up the south side of the creek until you reach a waterfall. To the left of the waterfall, growing out of a huge granite boulder, is the seven-foot tall Idyllwild 501, which has white 2-1/4" flowers, yellow flare with the yellow streaking into the adjoining petals, 17 flowers per truss. On the north side of the creek, and up another path, is Idyllwild 1007. After obtaining cuttings, I headed back to camp to get ready for tomorrow's big hike.

On June 24, I had only one event planned, a hike to Suicide Rock, which overlooks the village of Idyllwild, from 7,528 feet. The trail starts at the Idyllwild County Visitors Center (where Idyllwild 905 stands) located just north of the village, and approximately at the same elevation. It is a fairly steep two-mile climb along the Deer Springs Trail to the junction with the Suicide Rock Trail. Along the way can be seen manzanita, incense cedar, Coulter pine, and black oak. At two places the path crosses streams which have azaleas growing nearby. At the first stream, discovered Idyllwild 1324. The Suicide Rock Trail is fairly level. About halfway along the trail is a creek that goes over a waterfall. Not far from the waterfall I discovered Idyllwild 1325 with 2" white flowers, pink tube and pink extending to the tips of the petals, yellow flare, ten flowers per truss. This is the highest elevation at which I have discovered azaleas. Next proceeded to the end of the trail, where I looked down on the Village of Idyllwild, and across the valley to Tahquitz Rock, elevation 7,973 feet.

After completing the five-hour hike, I headed down Highway 243 to

Banning (which is not far from Palm Springs), then headed home.

If you are driving to or from Los Angeles on Interstate 10 in late June or early July, at Banning take the scenic route to the Southern California Azalea Country.

Nurseries Which Feature *R. occidentale*

(1) Bay Laurel Nursery, 1554 Bean Creek Road, Scotts Valley, CA 95066. They have some Smith and Mossman (SM) and McCullough forms. Wholesale nursery.

(2) Bovees Nursery, 1737 S.W. Coronado, Portland, OR 97129. SM forms.

(3) Farwell and Sons Rhododendron Nursery, 12983 Bodega Highway, Freestone, CA 95472. SM forms.

(4) Garver Gardens, P.O. Box 609, Laytonville, CA 95454. SM forms, Germain, Tatem, and McCullough forms.

(5) Oregon Rhododendrons, 6613 N.E. Pittibone Drive, Corvallis, OR. Wholesale and, according to Dick Cavender, tissue culture is used in the propagation of the azaleas.

(6) Red's Rhodies, 15920 S.W. Oberst Lane, Sherwood, OR 97140. SM and Tatem forms. Also Dick Cavender makes crosses between the best forms of *R. occidentale*.

(7) Rhododendron Species Foundation, P. O. Box 3798, Federal Way, WA 98063-3798. SM forms.

(8) Strybing Arboretum Society, Strybing Arboretum, 9th Avenue and Lincoln Way, San Francisco, CA 94122. SM forms and seedlings of some McCullough forms have been featured at some of the plant sales.

*Mike McCullough is Secretary of the Monterey Bay Chapter of ARS and has been interested in *R. occidentale* since 1977. He has taken part in field trips led by Britt Smith and Frank Mossman, and Gene Germain. 1993 will be the 14th year of his active plant hunting. □*