

# RHODODENDRONS OF NORTH CHICKAMAUGA CREEK GORGE

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My first encounter with the cold, clear waters of the North Chickamauga Creek was by chance on a hot July day in my youth. As young lads in summer camp, we boys found a deep blue-hole, a rope tied to a tree limb, clothing piled on the boulders, and the icy cold water to skinny-dip. In my memory, I recall clearly the chilly first plunge and my lungs gasping for air. From somewhere deep within the millions of gray-matter cells of my brain, the faintest fragrance of the Sweet Azalea continues to bring those memories flooding back to me.

Of course, at the time I had no knowledge of native azaleas nor did I care, but for the past 30 years those jewels of nature have been a passion of mine. Each spring, my eyes glaze over and there is a strong urgency to jump into my truck and strike out for a wild azalea chase. Fortunately, the creek gorge is only ten minutes from my home. Also my hiking buddy, Burton Johnston, is an azalea nut like me, and all it takes is a telephone call to have us meeting for a hike.

North Chickamauga Creek Gorge is one of the most beautiful scenic places in the country with its steep sides, cold rushing waters, high rocky bluffs, and abundant native plants. At around 1900 feet, the top of the mountain looms over the valley. The headwaters of the creek are in Sequatchie County and in the span of 12 miles it drops 1250 feet, then meanders another 25 miles to the Tennessee River just below Chickamauga Dam.

All along the creek grow large colonies of *Kalmia latifolia*, *R. periclymenoides*, *R. canescens*, *R. arborescens*, *R. viscosum*, *R. maximum*, *R. catawbiense f. insularis*, and interspecifics. In small colonies we have found *Stewartia ovata* and var. *grandiflora*, a truly lucky find. A clone of the Swamp Azalea found a number of years ago in the gorge is now planted in my garden. It is covered with spicy scented white flowers during blooming that almost hide the bluish-green leaves.

Many such plants have been propagated from both cuttings and seed through the years of exploring the gorge. Some of the best Sweet Azaleas I have ever seen lurk along the forest edge and the creek banks. The strong pink flowers and spicy scent on some shrubs give hint of a friendly relationship with the Swamp Azalea. A number of shrubs have pink margins or strong pink stripes along the lobe mid-veins.

To get into the gorge a few years ago, one had to climb down several hundred feet from the road, then hike the short trail. Now there is a nice entrance provided by the Bowaters Company as a nature pocket with parking and even picnic tables. The trail system was expanded and marked on the north side of the creek, but the south side with a ford across that stream must be negotiated to reach the vast number of plants of interest.

For most of the early to mid spring, the creek water rolls and rumbles through the gorge with too much turbulence and white water to



*R. arborescens with pink margins*



*R. maximum*



*R. catawbiense f. insularis*



*Typical Sweet Azalea (R. arborescens)*



*N. Chickamauga Creek Gorge*

attempt a crossing, but come late June and early July those same waters have slowed to shallow pools and occasional riffles and foaming shoots between the huge boulders. It is at this time when one may cross over without getting the feet wet and journey up the gorge on the southern trail or venture up the creek bed boulder hopping.

Venturing into Chicamauga Creek Gorge is like a journey back in time. The steep sides of the gorge block out all signs of civilization except for the occasional over-flying aircraft. Huge Hemlock, massive Oaks, three species of our native Magnolia, and countless other species of trees and shrubs occupy this pocket of wilderness.

But, it's the rhododendron and azaleas of the gorge we go for, and they abound. Dense thickets of *R. maximum* line the creek banks with mountain laurel and *R. arborescens* competing for space and sunlight. There are several large shrubs of the Great Rhododendron that have bright yellow blotches and not a sign of green. Just above the ford on the south side I found several colonies of our lowland, heat-tolerant Catawba Rhododendron in full bloom on May 17, 1997. On the north side, the same grows along an upslope and the shrubs are so tall they arch over the trail in tunnel fashion.

The heady fragrance of *R. arborescens* pulls one to explore the creek edge, for there these shrubs abound in such numbers as to make it nearly impossible to fully examine each. Most have the usual flowers: white with typical red filaments and style. Other native shrubs grow beside them such as Virginia Willow, Buttonbush, Smooth Alders, and many more. At the ford, there is a colony of shrubs with delightful pinkish flowers and a spicy scent. Even though the limbs are smooth like Sweet Azalea, that color and scent must have *R. viscosum* in the genes.

Tucked below huge, house size boulders, one finds *R. arborescens* growing to 12 feet in height with dark, glossy green foliage so large it reminds one of large leaf-rhododendron. At the shrub's feet, Royal, Cinnamon, and Lady Fern grow and thrive. Further away from the stream, wildflowers are thick and beautiful as understory plants.

About three miles up the gorge from the ford, Burton and I found a good stand of *Stewartia ovata* about six years ago. In 1997, we again searched out these plants and were rewarded with something totally unexpected. As we moved slowly through the understory, our feet walked on a carpet of Partridge Berry so large as to make it unreal. I slowly moved to a slight rise where I thought the *Stewartias* were located when a sight caught my eyes. A 12-foot tree lay on its side and there were huge flowers on it.

From my hollering, Burton came on the run, perhaps thinking I had stumbled upon a copperhead snake, which does also occupy the gorge in large numbers. My trembling hand pointed to the large, white flowers on the tree. At first I thought this find might be *S. malacodendron*, but was later pleased to find out it was *S. ovata* var. *grandiflora*, a much nicer specimen with almost five-inch blooms, purple filaments, and yellow anthers. Each of the petal lobes had the texture of heavy fine crepe with the crinkling effect. Cuttings were taken and we flagged the area to return in 1998 for more examination.

With cuttings tucked in our day packs, we moved to the creek edge and looked about. The wide pool of water before us was like green glass. A short distance above, the water foamed and roared from a side channel, a sound and sight so pleasing we sat down on the huge, exposed roots of an ancient Sycamore to relax and just listen while eating a sandwich. This same pool several years ago was a great source of relief as I soaked my aching feet in the icy water after exploring a side branch all the way to the bluff line.

Our eyes caught glimpses of dashing Goggle Eye Bass and Rainbow Trout darting from below large rocks to capture a meal. This is as much a part of azalea chasing as finding the superb shrubs. Just becoming a part of the natural setting without leaving footprints is key to a relaxing and eventful day in early summer. Too often, we azalea chasers (caught up in what I call June Madness), do damage to the wild places we explore. This is unfortunate, because a shrub dug from the wild will never be seen again

in all of its natural glory by others desiring that special experience of discovery. Propagation from seed or cuttings will take a little longer, but will leave that special shrub for future generations.

Further up the gorge a transition happens. Near the bluffs grow our *R. cumberlandense* in soft pastel shades as understory shrubs, while in sun the colors are rich and vibrant shades of orange and red. There are not many of the Cumberland Azalea in this area, but those located many years ago are very nice.

The intense heat and humidity soon causes us to turn around and head back down the gorge. At 1:00 PM, not even the slight breeze coming from the creek can cool us, but the heady fragrance of the azaleas does make the hike out tolerable. As we pass the old gorge entry, Burton and I are thankful we no longer must make the hard climb out at the end of this long hike. We stow our packs away in our trucks, say our goodbyes, and head off in different directions for home to stick those cuttings and hope for good success.

For those desiring to hike this wondrous place, come to Chattanooga, Tennessee, drive US-27 North to the Thrasher Pike Exit, turn left on this road and go to Old Dayton Pike, turn right and go to Mobray Mountain Road and turn left, drive to the entrance of the Bowaters Natural Pocket, turn left and park. The trail head is on the right. If you desire a guide, contact me at the address or telephone number given below.

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*Photographs by the author*