

The Cutting

After removing the cutting from the refrigerator, remove the tip and all but four leaves. Next, cut off one-half of each of the remaining four leaves, and dip the cutting into a Malathion-Captan mix before placing it into the medium. By July, the cutting will begin to show new growth, and by the first of October, it will have grown an additional six to eight inches in length. In the middle of October, move the rooted cuttings to a cold frame covered with white polyethylene for the winter season.

Potting Up

Wait until the following spring to pot up the rooted cuttings.

Conclusion

Conventional wisdom discourages the possibility of rooting native azaleas, but the formula I have developed after years of trial and effort has consistently provided a respectable level of success. While each of the steps involved in the process is important, there are three areas that require the most attention: the timing of taking the cuttings, using the refrigerator, and fertilizing properly. Giving these three steps the utmost attention to detail will greatly increase the your chances of success.

References

- McDonald, Dr. Sandra. Summer 1992. "Native Azaleas of Georgia." *Journal American Rhododendron Society*. 46 (3): 146-149.
- Sommerville, Earl A. Summer 1998. "Propagating Native Azaleas." *Journal American Rhododendron Society*. 52 (3): 126-127.

Earl A. Sommerville has been a member of ASA since the early 1980s and of ARS since 1966. He says he started collecting native azaleas in 1960, and in the late 1980s, "The creeks got too wide, the hills too steep, the water too cold, so after that, all a person can do is talk about collecting plants. Most all of my crosses were made by the bees, and they do a very good job."

Consult his website for many images of natives:

www.mindspring.com/~earlsommerville/home.htm

Fire on the Mountains

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[Two trips into the mountains form the basis for this record of plant exploration for native azaleas, Ed.]

As the spring of 1999 approached, there was an expectation that bordered upon total and delirious excitement rising within my spirit. The year was a celebration of 30 years into plant exploring and, in particular, azalea chasing in the southeastern United States.

It was in 1969 that my friend and mentor Clifton Gann introduced me to those jewels of nature, the native species azaleas and rhododendron. I was hooked. I was so intrigued by those marvelous shrubs that Clifton and I traveled perhaps a thousand miles or so to see and experience azaleas in the wild, in their native habitat, and in all their beauty and glory. It was Clifton who taught me to recognize the species and propagate them from seed and cuttings. In a few years, my own home landscape was becoming filled with native azaleas. To some, it is a malady or weakness to be so engrossed by a plant; but, in my case, I prefer to call it a sublime fascination.

Early Season Hunting

My fascination on April 17, 1999, had me rolling from bed before five in the morning. This was to be the first field trip of the season, and I did not want to be late for my appointment with nature on the Cumberland Plateau, a 40-minute drive from my home in Hixson, Tennessee. I had my daypack loaded with plant tags, bright ribbons, a notebook, extra rolls of film, and my cameras.

The early morning air was chilly for mid-April. With my truck loaded and my usual mug of coffee in hand, I departed for Dunlap, Tennessee, on State Route 111 where it joins SR-8 and the long road to the plateau top. At the Hardee's Restaurant, Burton Johnston joined me.

For early flowering azaleas, one must think pink and white, for they are the predominant colors of *Rhododendron canescens*, *R. periclymenoides*, *R. alabamense*, and *R. prinophyllum*. In early May to early June, one may find *R. arborescens*, *R.*

cumberlandense, *R. calendulaceum*, and large numbers of interspecific and intraspecific hybrids.

In my home gardens, the earliest were past prime bloom, and I was searching for near peak flowering on the Cumberland, often two weeks behind my garden plants. In a mile or so, before SR-8 turns off at the Skyline Coal Company mines, I started noting a few random pink and white flowering shrubs and knew we were right on schedule.

One mile beyond the turnoff, we stopped and started exploring the woodland edges where sun exposure gives the azaleas a boost in flower bud production. There were some seductive pink-flowering Pinxterbloom (*R. periclymenoides*) and Piedmont (*R. canescens*) azaleas. One group of five plants, all looking alike, had dark pink margins on the lobes, while the leaves had almost fully emerged.

A few yards away, 10- and 12-foot shrubs of pure white flowers drew my attention. A sweet fragrance pulled me close, and I saw plant characteristics I could use to identify Pinxterbloom. Back in the understory were a number of shrubs with scattered bloom, but these were a delicious dark rose pink with reddish filaments twice as long as the flower tubes.

Burton and I made many stops at prime locations we had previously identified. To our surprise, we found large numbers of shrubs in various states of bud and flower. Some plants were still in tight bud with others in soft or full flowering.

It was no surprise to us that we found many shrubs of mixed genes between species, for this is the same area that confused Henry Skinner in 1951, on his extensive search for native azaleas. Burton and I saw this mixture of natural hybrids, and I must say the result is quite delightful.

Within an hour of search and study, I burned two rolls of slide film at 36 exposures each and was working on my third when I noted very nice pink flowers with yellow blotching, on a low growing shrub. A close study could not determine a specific species, but something between the Alabama (*R. alabamense*) and Piedmont azaleas was my best guess.

We tagged and flagged many superb shrubs, though often not directly on the subject shrub. Experience has taught me that a flagged plant will quickly be dug and removed, and thus the gene pool is lost to us all. While in the area, we stopped a few minutes at my acreage tract on SR-8, where in 1993, a number of mature shrubs were lifted out and donated to Reflection Riding Arboretum and Botanical Garden. Now, around the open holes we had left were numbers of new shrubs about two feet tall, each replacing the removed shrubs.

Burton and I turned back to Dunlap where we parted, he to Signal Mountain and I to Hixson. As I drove back to my Middle Valley home, I felt delightful warmth in my body as I recalled the day's adventure. Perhaps now one will understand the title of this article, for the fire is not literal, but figurative. It's a compunction or compulsion to search for and locate exquisite azaleas in the wild. Clifton Gann told me many years ago, "It becomes a fire in the belly that only the search will quench."

As I pulled into my drive and parked, I knew I must wait for June and July to continue my search on Wayah, Gregory, and Copper Balds in North Carolina and up in the deep gorge of the North Chickamauga Creek. The question in my mind was, how could I stand to wait? The answer was simple: work in my garden and nursery would fill the time.

Late Season Hunting

June 20 came and I was again heading out for the mountains. Burton and Betty Johnston joined me on this journey to Wayah Bald. At Cleveland, Tennessee, I turned the truck eastward onto US-64. This highway takes us through the Ocoee River Gorge and on to Murphy, North Carolina, where I was pleased to see Vernon Carpenter had arrived before us

and made the first day of a two-day adventure. We traveled to Andrews and took the short cut to the Nantahala and the approach road to Wayah.

The indicator shrubs near Nantahala Lake were in good bloom and this gave me a feeling for what we would be seeing at higher elevations. I navigated the slow winding road until we reached Wayah Gap, and I made the right turn to Wayah Crest for a short stop to rest and check out the few azaleas in that area. Ronald and Nancy Hooper arrived a few minutes later, and we warmly greeted them.

Burton and I were saddened to note the slow decline of a beautiful *Cornus alternifolia*, the Alternate-Leaf Dogwood, we had watched for years. Around the area were many fine *Kalmia* in good bloom and a few orange Flame Azaleas (*R. calendulaceum*). After 10 or so minutes, we decided to drive on to the top of Wayah.

My normal method is to drive slowly to the top, then, on the way back down, to make frequent stops. For the next mile to the top, we were greeted by bright colors from clear yellow to deep red. Orange was the predominant color, with many shades between yellow and orange of *R. calendulaceum*. There were so many excellent examples in bright flower, I stopped frequently. The rest followed into the woodland edges to have a close-up experience with a beautiful azalea.

One such shrub brought us all to a gravel-skidding stop, and we all stood around an exquisite 10-foot shrub with large trusses of bright reddish-orange flowers, and in each, one or two bright yellow blooms. The color effect was stunning, and we all were quickly jockeying for position to take photographs. What was normally a 15-minute drive turned into an hour. By the time we arrived at the parking area, James and Judy Dennis, from Knoxville, were pacing with a little irritation and anxiety over our late arrival. I apologized and explained how we were delayed by the excellent azaleas. Judy just nodded with a little understanding.

The year 1997 was a very bad year for flowering on Wayah. However, 1998 was the best in 30 years, and 1999 was a sure second best. In 30 years, I missed only one journey to Wayah, and I still found a sense of wonder as I looked at this mountain and its fiery azaleas. This area is close to where I made my first trip here with Clifton Gann in 1969, and I had to chuckle, then smile as I recalled his reaction to my wide-eyed wonder.

In 30 years' time, the mountain and her plant life have changed much. Many of the azaleas from which Clifton and I took cuttings are no longer there. When the road, new parking, and picnic areas were rebuilt, many shrubs were dug and removed to various universities and arboreta. The exquisite red Flame Azaleas on Wine Springs Bald on the west side of the road that Clifton and I walked around in the early 70s have been slowly choked out by the invasive brambles. The *R. arborescens* var. *richardsonii* located around the stone tower on Wayah were in some cases over head-high now, while in 1969 I had walked a path through them and noted a bronze survey marker with elevation stamped into it.

This day, our group of azalea nuts strolled the mountaintop savoring the cool air, the views, the azaleas, and mountain laurel, and most of all, the good time together. After a good lunch, we started the slow, intermittent drive down with a side adventure to Wine Springs Bald to see the azaleas and delightful blueberries. These latter plants have fine violet-pink new foliage and would make excellent shrubs for the home landscape.

The clear-cuts on the Forest Service Road 711 were calling, so we drove on after seeing the last azaleas on Wayah. Winding FS-711 is a 17-mile journey that ends at the turnoff to Burningtown Gap. At several locations, there are clear-cuts where the timber was removed in 1997, which has increased the growth and visibility of the azaleas. The large area covering approximately 15 acres was on fire with Flame Azalea. Bright burnt-orange colors were mixed with clear, bright yellows. To one side, an apricot cluster of blooms caught my eyes. Other shrubs had the appearance of the Cumberland

Azalea with smaller flowers and tubes, thinner texture of the lobes, and the slightly crinkled look to the dark green leaves.

As I strolled through the area, I couldn't help thinking a number of these shrubs were interspecifics, for the colors were so varied in shade. The sound of camera shutters clicking was all about as we all took photographs. Burton and I took cuttings, bagged them, and placed those treasures in ice coolers for rooting in two days.

By the time we pulled back onto FS-711, it was nearly time to head for our motel in Andrews, where several of us enjoyed the evening by sitting in rocking chairs on the wide front verandah. It was peaceful looking out to the Snowbird Mountains, and a sweater felt good in the cool air. Fun conversation about our day on the mountains filled the evening with frequent digressions about what we might find on Copper Bald the next day.

Later, I slept fitfully, for I was somewhat anxious about leading our group up Copper and finding we were too early or too late. Nature has a way of playing games with my field trip schedules as happened in 1996, when the peak bloom was almost three weeks later than normal.

After checking out, we started our drive to Burningtown Gap and the trailhead to Copper Bald. As we passed the intersection with FS-711, I saw several bright red Flame Azaleas on the high bank to the left. Further up the road, we turned onto a narrow gravel road that eventually led up to a parking area and the trailhead. We arrived on the dot, 30 minutes from the motel.

To our delight, there was a cooling breeze that made the heat of late June bearable. I inspected my daypack one last time to assure myself of having everything I needed, then pulled out my trusty hickory walking stick Burton gave me several years ago. For this mile-and-a-half hike, Burton led this party on a section of the Appalachian Trail. I often refer to this group in jest as the Geezer Troop, for all but the Hoopers are 60-plusers. If I'm wrong, please forgive me.

By the time we reached the Cold Springs Shelter, all were ready for a rest stop and to settle down for a quick snack and some bottled water. The near-by spring is listed as "potable" on the trail maps, but without purification tablets I wouldn't drink it.

About a quarter mile up the trail, we started seeing azaleas in bloom. I noted many shrubs in tight bud and I began to worry that we were too early. As we made a turn in the trail, we were greeted with a bright flush of red and orange on the lower trailside, and then an eight-foot shrub overhanging the trail was adorned in bright pink. We had arrived at the cluster of natural hybrids and all about were beautiful azaleas in many shades of pink, white, orange, and red. Most of the pink-flowered shrubs were on the up-slope to our right with their feet hidden by dense fern growth.

As if a hand grenade had been thrown into our midst, everyone dispersed, each pushing through the fern and shrubs to get "up close and personal" with the azaleas. Edward Collins of Hendersonville, North Carolina, is making an in-depth study of this azalea population and has promised an article to be published in the future. For me, it is a truly stunning population of shrubs that needs further study, and, from my conversations with Ed, we agree that nature ran wild with the pollen between several species. There is ample evidence that *R. calendulaceum*, *R. arborescens*, *R. viscosum*, and *R. cumberlandense* were much involved.

After exploring the area for about two or three hours, our party reluctantly headed down the trail with a stop at the shelter to eat lunch. I do not recall who brought up the subject of ice cream, but we decided to return home by a somewhat different route. This change would take us to Robinsville for the ice cream, then 51 miles over the Snowbird Mountains on the Cherhala Skyline Parkway to Tellico Plains, Tennessee. This drive is a truly stunning passage. We found many azaleas in full bloom on the mountain and due to the curving nature of the road, found it necessary to pull off several times to keep lunch down! The highest point appeared to be a bald at 5,300

feet. The views were magnificent with deep gorges far below.

At Tellico Plains, the Hoopers and Dennises headed north to Knoxville, and the Johnstons and I turned southwestward to Chattanooga and home. The long drive home gave me time to think about our two-day adventure. I thought about the past 30 years, and how many times I had led folks into the wild to experience our native azaleas in good bloom.

Now in January, as I write this article and work on the year 2000 field trips, I'm of a firm belief that some of my greatest joys in nature are those moments when I see a newcomer's face light up at seeing thousands of azaleas in full flower. It is during those moments when the fire on the mountains is really felt. It is heart-warming and so very fulfilling to introduce people to one of my life's loves, and I will continue to do it until I can no longer walk. Come walk with me and feel the fire.

Further Reading

Skinner, Henry T. 1955, "In Search of Native Azaleas." *Morris Arboretum Bulletin*. January: 8.

Joe Schild has been involved in the nursery business for 30 years, and operated his own business since 1988. He is currently the vice president of the Azalea Society of America, a member of the Tennessee Nursery and Landscape Association (TNLA), and just retired as the Landscape Manager for Reflection Riding Arboretum & Botanic Gardens in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He presents programs on azaleas, rhododendrons, and native plants to garden groups, other ASA chapters, and TNLA training groups. He was founding president of the Tennessee Valley Chapter of the ARS, and currently serves as its vice president and program chairman.

