

The Rebirth of Rebloom

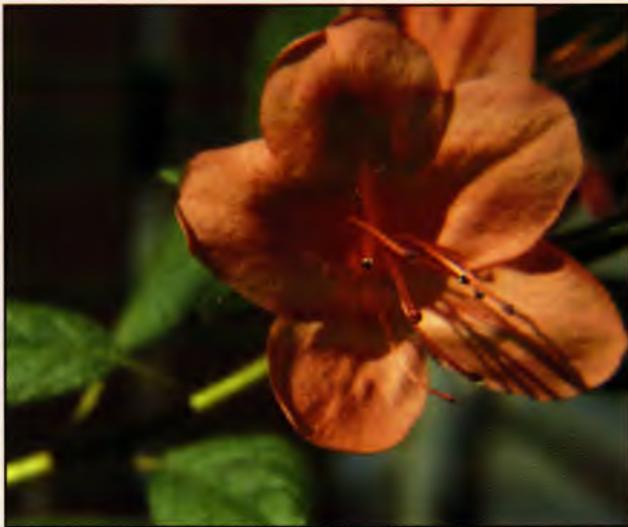
How *Rhododendron oldhamii* has Given Azaleas an Extra Season of Color

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Azaleas are generally known for their spring flowering glory and can have limited ornamental appeal in other seasons—except maybe as a forced florist crop. Most species occasionally bloom off-season, producing a few flowers from buds intended for the next spring. However, this flower show is typically unreliable and unspectacular.

Generally it's the more subtropical species used for forcing, such as *Rhododendron indicum*, *R. tamurae*, *R. scabrum*, and *R. ripense* var. *mucronatum*. [The latter is now reclassified as *R. mucronatum*, ed.]



Rhododendron oldhamii flower close-up.
(Photo by William C. Miller III)

I have not mentioned *R. oldhamii*, native to Taiwan. Until recently it has not interested breeders, because it's a tender species. It's a red-flowered azalea, common in Taiwan in upland meadows around 2,000 feet elevation and higher. In one instance I found it on a cliff-side at 7,200 feet.

The plant is not particularly attractive because of its straggly, upright growth and hairy stems and foliage, but it is distinct in that it flowers all year in its native habitat. It has been collected infrequently and is found only in a few botanical collections.

During a 1967 collecting trip to Taiwan, I observed the continual flowering of *R. oldhamii*. I made several seed collections from various elevations in open meadows in October, usually from plants

with good displays of flowers.

Catching On

Recently, the status of *R. oldhamii* has changed because of the exciting new Encore line of azaleas marketed by Flowerwood Nursery in Loxley, Alabama. These

patented varieties were developed by breeder Robert E. "Buddy" Lee of Independence, Louisiana, and have become popular in the trade in the past few years.

Members of Encore are 'Autumn Amethyst', 'Autumn Bravo', 'Autumn Carnival', 'Autumn Cheer', 'Autumn Coral', 'Autumn Embers', 'Autumn Empress', 'Autumn Monarch', 'Autumn Princess', 'Autumn Rouge', 'Autumn Royalty', 'Autumn Ruby',



R. oldhamii has been used in developing the new Encore™ azaleas, including the newly introduced 'Autumn Debutante'. (Photo by Robert Lee)

'Autumn Sangria', and 'Autumn Twist', with more to be released in the next few years.

I'm growing 'Autumn Royalty' in my test garden in the mountains of western North Carolina. So far, it has performed well. From September through mid-November the plant was covered with clusters of bright-purple flowers, increasing in profusion as winter approached.

It provided a colorful addition to the usually dull garden shrub menu of late fall, except for fall-blooming *Camellia sasanqua*.

Credit for this promising addition to the array of azaleas goes to Lee, a prominent member [now president] of the Azalea Society of America. He first saw *R. oldhamii* "in flower in midsummer at a friend's nursery" in 1982, he said. Through a series of crosses with 36 cultivars, mostly southern types, Lee produced massive seedling populations that through an extensive evaluation program, resulting in a reduced population of 7,000 seedlings in 1992.

Because of the extent of the project, these seedlings were transferred to Flowerwood Nursery. After further evaluation of 100 superior seedlings for flower quality, cold hardiness, and field performance, 12 clones were selected in 1995 for final evaluation.



The stem and foliage hairs of *R. oldhamii*. This characteristic has been transferred to many of the Encore azaleas.
(Photo by Donald Hyatt)

In 1997, these selections were named as cultivars making the original Autumn series.

While it's recognized that the Encore line was developed for the coastal region in USDA Hardiness Zone 8, they've been proven hardy in Zone 7 and worthy of trial in Zone 6. Hopefully, they'll have good cold resistance, much like other borderline plants such as *Loropetalum*, which has thrived beyond its usual range.

Plants with Potential

There are more opportunities in azalea breeding, for those willing to take the initiative. For years I've grown an interesting specimen of *R. kaempferi*, which flowers from June to frost. I obtained it in Japan among hundreds of collections of this variable species. These collection trips took place over several decades.

In the wild, I've observed *R. kaempferi* specimens with hose-in-hose and double-flowering characteristics, and in colors ranging from white to purple. Because of its great distribution, from southern to northern Japan, many natural hybrids exist where it cohabits with other azalea species.

With my specimen, as each flower opens and the vegetative buds develop below the terminal, these new shoots promptly develop new flower buds and repeat the process throughout the summer. Unfortunately, the petals are highly distorted, though both stamens and pistil are present.

My immediate thought is that it might be a suitable parent to hybridize with the Encore selections to add a degree of hardiness. This specimen is well suited for that, as its flowering season coincides with the Encores.

I sent Lee cuttings from my *R. kaempferi*, and hopefully he can add another dimension to his breeding program.

John L. Creech is former director of the US National Arboretum and is on the board of the North Carolina Arboretum.

References

Brown, William L. 1991. "Breeding for Everblooming Azaleas." *The Azalean*. 13 (3): 51-52.

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Dr. John Creech sees new breeding potential in fall-blooming *R. kaempferi*, native to Japan. The species is highly variable as shown by this photo taken by the late George Ring III, taken in Suzuki's nursery in Japan. He also caught a close-up of a *kaempferi* selection, 'Dorsett'—made by Hollowell from seed obtained from Japan (PI 8571) and listed under US National Arboretum number NA 273481, according to Galle—in an early snowfall.

