

Hybrid Native Azaleas on “Pace Bald”

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Over the last several years the Vaseyi Chapter of our society has had a number of programs by Ed Collins and others concerning native azalea hybrids on Copper and Gregory Balds. The color ranges of these special azaleas always bring “Oohs” and “Wows” from the audience, so the authors were inspired to make a trip. With both of us having been to Copper, we knew the hike and decided that Gregory was too strenuous.

2004 Trip

We figured mid- to late June should be good timing, so on June 20, 2004, we made the 100-mile drive from Hendersonville, North Carolina, and started hiking from Burning Town Gap shortly after 9:00 am. Expectation rose during the hike when we saw *Rhododendron calendulaceum* and *R. arborescens* as we headed towards Copper. By 11:00 am, we began our search of Copper by using the paths of previous visitors. Copper has too much shade, so we knew not to expect the full blooms that are found on



Seen on Copper Bald June 14, 2005.

Gregory. After spending an hour, we saw very few hybrids and wondered if we were too late or too early. Why were we finding such a low bud set? We decided that too much shade was probably the best explanation. It was high noon, a beautiful day, but very few Copper hybrids—what a disappointment! Conventional wisdom told us that past the right turn of the trail at upper Copper there are no hybrids. However, one year we had seen some nice flame azaleas (*R. calendulaceum*) about a half-mile past Copper at the rock outcropping viewpoint. So we agreed to spend a little more time and see them this year. Low bud-set again!

There we were, past Copper and still seeing few blooms. Since the trail was level, we continued walking. About 300 yards past the viewpoint, we arrived at a spot

that was not too steep. There we found a flame and a sweet azalea (*R. arborescens*, also known as the smooth azalea) in bloom. Entering the woods, we soon found a double Cumberland azalea (*R. calendulaceum*, formerly *R. bakeri*) and a single—both red, red. These were the best blooms of the day!

At this point time was getting short, so we started the return trip to the gap and Hendersonville. Discussing the trip, we began to think about the area where we found the *R. cumberlandense*. We had seen no tags, no paths, and yes, no hybrids; but, three species in bloom led us to think that there should be hybrids. We decided to search during the bloom of 2005.

2005 Trip

During the winter months we frequently thought about our approach to searching for hybrids. To facilitate our conversations, we named the area “Pace Bald” in honor of Leon’s thin hair! In true forestry terms the area is not a bald, but Copper is also not as much a bald as is Gregory. Our winter plans demanded secrecy since we had no desire of looking foolish before finding hybrids! With the encouragement of our wives, we decided to go to the Pace Bald every week beginning June 7, 2005, so as not to miss any blooms.

Our expectations were fairly low on June 7, when we made our first trip. Passing through Copper we did see some of the pink *R. arborescens* hybrids, but the bloom was sparse. Going the extra three-



Seen on Pace Bald July 6, 2005.

quarters of a mile to Pace, we were pleased to find our first hybrid: a *R. arborescens* with a yellow flare (blotch). We found several other typical flames and *R. arborescens*, which only increased our anticipation for future trips.

For our June 15 trip, a dear friend, Allen Clague, joined us so that he could see Copper for the first time. Driving up, we discussed with Allen the potential of Pace Bald.

Rather than requiring a blindfold, we accepted his declaration of secrecy. That day Copper had a very sparse bloom and was a disappointment to all of us! Continuing to Pace, we found a wonderful yellow flame and hybrid *R. arborescens*, but the double *R. cumberlandense* of 2004 was a single this year. However, Allen soon found a double *R. cumberlandense* that was as red as red can be. He declared Pace Bald far superior to Copper.

For our next trip on June 22, noted native azalea expert Ray Head joined us. After some explanation that our real destination was beyond Copper, we swore Ray to secrecy and he agreed to help us explore the area. We discovered more *R. arborescens* hybrids, another *R. cumberlandense* and other hybrids with good color and flares. We also saw tinted pink *R. arborescens* of different shadings and some nice oranges and reds with flares. (Copper continued its weak blooming year.) During the trip home, we asked Ray about his thoughts of Pace Bald. In his usual laid-back fashion, he said, "You boys have found some very nice plants."

We looked forward to June 29, our fourth trip, because Ray was joining us again, and we expected the *cumberlandense*-type hybrids to be great. (Unfortunately Ray's transmission went out, so he went home riding a wrecker while we continued the search.) My favorite *R. arborescens*, a glowing pink with prominent yellow flare was the find of the day! Hybrids of *R. cumberlandense*

hybrids and other *R. arborescens* made this day another special one.

During the bloom season we made two additional trips: July 6 and July 20. We made more finds on each trip. Ray, who also went along on July 29, even put a label on one flame hybrid, so you know it was a good late bloomer.

On each of the six trips, we had found hybrids, and we had seen hundreds of azaleas that did not bloom. We had expanded the search area each trip, but have only covered an area maybe 400 yards long and 50 yards wide. The area is thick, but to this point, we have not seen any snakes.

Why are we now sharing our experience with Pace Bald as well as the location? We did consider keeping it a secret another year, but we decided that the beauty of God's hybrids should be shared. Is Pace Bald better than Copper? For 2005 absolutely! Do we plan additional trips looking for hybrids—yes, several, and we hope to see many of you on the mountain!

Doley Bell and Leon Pace are charter members of the Vaseyi Chapter of the ASA and both are members of the ARS. Both are avid gardeners with numerous azaleas and rhododendrons. Hiking to see native azaleas has become a passion.

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accompanying CD with digital images of the azaleas on Gregory Bald. A second session will focus on hybridizing, leading off with some of the plants developed by local hybridizers in our region. Join us for the discussion, bring some pictures of your own to share, and make some new friends.

Plants

The hosting chapters have been actively propagating many of the convention plants for the sale. We are anxious to showcase rare azaleas and rhododendrons from our region including hard-to-find clones, seedlings and selections from the wild, and new introductions from local hybridizers.

We will offer many new azaleas and rhododendrons developed by our local hybridizers including **Dr. Sandra McDonald, Pete Vines, Buck Clagett, Joe Klimavicz, Jane Goodrich, George Ring, the late Augie Kehr, Bob Stewart, Walter Przypek,** and others. We will have some rare clones from the late **Joe Gable, the late Weldon Delp,** and **Russell and Velma Haag,** too. As banquet favors we are raising native azalea and rhododendron seedlings from rare forms observed in the wild.

Since people may not be familiar with varieties in our sale, we are preparing a CD with color images of the plants in bloom that will be available prior to the convention.

Banquets

We have arranged sumptuous banquets with keynote speakers for both Saturday and Sunday evenings. Saturday's will be less formal, a buffet featuring two favorites, roast beef *au jus* and grilled salmon with lemon caper sauce. Naturally, the chef will prepare a wide array of elegant side dishes.

The Sunday dinner will be a more formal banquet featuring a choice of entrees: red snapper served with coconut infused Thai rice, or roasted pork tenderloin and lavender wine reduction served with sweet potato stack *au gratin*. Be sure to save room for dessert, hazelnut torte with Grand Marnier sauce.

Closing Thoughts

Please join us this spring for an exciting joint convention designed to bring our two organizations closer together. We want to encourage younger families in our societies to visit Washington, DC, so we are waiving the basic registration fee for children under 12 when accompanied by parent or guardian. For additional information to help plan your trip, as well as expanded descriptions of the gardens on tour, including many pictures, please check our convention Web site: www.arspvc.org/2006.