

The Native Azaleas on Gregory Bald

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The top of Gregory Bald, a 4,949' mountain in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, is an open grassy meadow of perhaps a dozen or more acres. What makes this bald unique is that it is populated with native azaleas of the most incredible diversity and beauty. From mid-June into early July thousands of azaleas on this mountain come into flower. Many of us in the ASA now make an annual pilgrimage to the mountain to see the place in bloom.

The azalea population on Gregory Bald is called a "hybrid swarm," a natural occurrence where several species have been crossing with one another for an extended period of time. On Gregory Bald, botanists suspect that four native species, *Rhododendron cumberlandense*, *R. arborescens*, *R. calendulaceum*, and *R. viscosum*, have apparently been cross-breeding for perhaps a hundred years or more. Although the original species are hard to identify, they have now produced natural azalea hybrids in almost every color imaginable... white, cream, pale pink, rose, deep pink, lavender, purple, fuchsia, cherry, scarlet, coral, orange, salmon, gold, and yellow.

I have joined with the members of the Species Study Group of the Middle Atlantic Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society (MAC-ARS) who have been making annual trips to Gregory Bald since 1995.

Since then, I have tried to get back at least once each season. It is not an easy hike, at least for many of us. The Gregory Ridge Trail seems gentle at first as it leaves the trailhead at Cades Cove. It crosses Forge Creek three times, winding through virgin forests and thickets of *R. maximum*. Then it becomes much steeper as it heads relentlessly up the mountain to the bald. From the parking area to the top of Gregory Bald is 5-1/2 miles and involves a 3,000' change in elevation, so I usually allow 3-1/2 to 4 hours each way. It is important to be prepared for the hike by taking ample fluids and rain gear. It is also wise to travel with a group so others are around should there be an emergency. Bears do frequent the park, but "azalea talk" on the trail keeps them away.

First Impressions

I remember my first impression as I stepped into that open bald for the first time. I was incredibly tired after the grueling hike, questioning my sanity for enduring such agony just to see another wild azalea. However, the magnificent vista and the sweet fragrance of the gorgeous flowers all around me completely numbed my pain. For the next hour, I strolled among acres and acres of the most spectacular native azaleas I had ever seen. I was completely awestruck.

Shortly after we reached the bald that day, I also could hear a threatening rumble of a distant thunderstorm. A passing park ranger warned, "You don't want to be on top of this mountain when that storm hits." That thunderstorm moved in quickly, so we reluctantly began our descent as swirling clouds reached down from above to grab the peak. I huddled under my umbrella while heavy rains turned the trail into a slippery stream of mud. Loud thunder echoed all around and I thought to myself, "If I am struck down by lightning today, at least I had witnessed perfection." In recent years, I have tried to avoid hiking in stormy weather.

Many years before my first trip to Gregory Bald, I remember the late Fred Galle speaking of this natural treasure. Now that I have become familiar with the bald, how I wish I could talk with him and learn from "the master." We could discuss specific plants, and I would love to know how the bald had changed during his lifetime. What was it like up there 50 years ago? Fred must have had favorite azaleas on Gregory, but which ones? Are the plants still there? I do remember Fred mentioning an incident that happened on Gregory Bald while he was a graduate student. He was working on his doctoral thesis studying the native azaleas when a bear invaded his camp and dragged off a pack containing all of his research notes. As a result, Fred never completed that degree, but he certainly didn't need a piece of paper to lay claim to the title, "Mr. Azalea."

Favorite Azaleas

After a decade of studying these plants, trying to document the incredible variation by taking photographs and writing notes on specific forms, I do have some favorites. Every time I go to the bald, though, I feel as though I am trying to judge the most colossal flower show. Each season I visit old favorites to see how they have fared over the winter. I photograph them again and record impressions of flower and plant characteristics. I also find new treasures each time, too.

The very first azalea that caught my eye on Gregory Bald will surely rank among my all-time favorites (Photo 1). I call it Gregory Blush*. The plant sits back to the right, just as the Gregory Ridge Trail enters the bald. It has lovely rounded trusses of fragrant 2-1/4" flowers that are white brushed with pink, with a light yellow flare. The stamens and pistils are pink, and it reminds me of *R. arborescens*, a likely parent. Some of the plant's characteristics are unlike the species, though, so I am certain it is a hybrid. Situated next to Gregory Blush is a lovely rose pink we call Gregory Pink Star*. Its 1-1/4" flowers are deeper pink at the edges but fade to white toward the center of the petals giving a picotee effect. It has a light yellow blotch and is lightly fra-

grant. The two plants make a perfect pair, as though someone had carefully selected them for that landscape.

None of the original species that created the swarm are pink in color. Maybe that is why some of us are drawn to the wealth of hybrids in the pink color range. My favorite pink is among the last azaleas to bloom, usually opening in July. We call it Gregory Candy Stripe* because we typically saw the plant in the bud stage before the flowers had opened fully. The buds are deep pink to almost rose-red, and boldly striped with greenish white. The foliage is a bluish green. In the bud stage the plant looks like it is studded with striped peppermint candies, hence the name (Photo 2). Its fragrant 2" flowers open clear soft pink with a light yellow flare, and at that stage the striped effect is no longer visible, and the name seems inappropriate, but we continue to use it anyway.

Another eye-catching pink is one we call Gregory Bright Eyes*. Its flowers are almost 2" inches across in a medium rose pink shade. The blotch is very striking with a broad white area that almost covers the entire dorsal petal. In the center of that field is a bright golden eye, often split down the center by a narrow pink line. The effect reminds me of the wide-open eyes of a cartoon character, which inspired the name.

One of the largest pink azaleas on Gregory Bald grows along the trail near the center of the bald. Anyone who has passed along that trail when the plant is in bloom will surely remember the display. It has gorgeous flowers that are rich rose pink with an orange blotch. We started calling that plant The Pink by the Path*, and unfortunately, continue to refer to it by that name. It surely deserves something more elegant.

Some of the plants have picked up dreadful monikers. For instance, we have admired another lovely, fragrant white with a yellow blotch. The stamens are pink and the buds have a pink blush. It is located in an area where a fellow hiker nearly stepped on a large rattlesnake one year so we started calling it Rattlesnake White*, but it certainly deserves a better name (Photo 3).

Since *R. cumberlandense* is the predominant species on Gregory Bald, admittedly the majority of the azaleas there are in the orange to orange-red range. I really have not had time to study the thousands of orange azaleas up there to determine which forms are the best, but that just means there is more work to do. In 2003 when 75% of the azaleas in the southern Appalachians had blasted buds due to a severe summer drought followed by a rough winter, we did notice one really outstanding orange with 2" ruffled flowers of excellent substance.

The clear reds have garnered more attention, and my favorite is one we call Gregory Christmas Red*. Its flowers are not very large, only 1-5/8" across, but the color is a deep, poinsettia red. Its foliage is dark, glossy green and almost looks like holly. This plant is one of the largest azaleas on the bald and is the likely parent of many other excellent reds growing nearby.

An earlier blooming red azalea that may be the "second best" red on the bald we call Gregory Big Red*. Its flowers are large, in excess of 2" in diameter, but not quite as deep in color. Its foliage is a lighter green and tends to twist slightly. Unfortunately, in 2005 we noticed that this plant had been broken off almost to the base with only one small branch remaining. We have no idea what happened, but we hope it will recover in time.

A plant that will surely make my top-ten list we call Gregory Fuchsia*. Its flowers are star-shaped and larger than average, about 2-1/4" in diameter. When we first saw it, the color seemed to be a deep fuchsia pink, but weather conditions can affect color expression. In some years the flowers of this azalea are just a light rose-red and lack the purple tones of fuchsia. It does have a nice yellow blotch, and its foliage is absolutely wonderful, dark green and glossy. Fuchsia or not, this plant is a winner.

Many of us have admired a small plant with large, star-shaped flowers of reddish purple. It is near the path at the opening of the bald and we called it Gregory Purple*. The color doesn't compare with the brilliant purples of evergreen azaleas, so more recently we have been calling it "Gregory Royal Star" instead. Unfortunately, this azalea is one the most threatened on the bald. Some nearby azaleas of lesser distinction, as well as a host of robust blueberries and brambles have already over-grown this plant. If something is not done soon, this outstanding azalea will soon lose out to its more aggressive neighbors. It would be a shame to lose such a beauty.

Another of our favorites on the bald has gone through several name changes already. It is a large plant with ball shaped trusses composed of many small, 1-1/2" flowers. We first called it Gregory Salmon Balls* because its light orange color reminded us of fresh salmon. Later, we decided the color was closer to that of a ripe cantaloupe, so we managed a name change and started calling it Gregory Melon Balls* instead. Now, having observed it for many years, we realize the flowers can be heavily overlaid with pink in some years, a lovely hue, but nothing remotely related to the color of melon or salmon. Perhaps we should change the name again.

Yellows on the bald are rather rare. One is truly exceptional with large, rounded flowers of the clearest hue. I consider this plant to be the best yellow native azalea I have seen anywhere in the wild, regardless of species. Originally we called it Big Yellow*, since the flowers approached 2" across. Recently, I have been trying to use the name Gregory Sunshine*. Unfortunately, vigorous azaleas growing all around this plant will threaten its existence over the long term. It would be a shame to lose such a wonderful plant.

Many of the plants on Gregory Bald are wonderful pastels and multicolor blends that really defy color description. One of my favorites is a plant we call Gregory Kaleidoscope*. It grows in a thicket of blackberries to the

left of the Gregory Ridge Trail entrance, and I worry that it might get lost. The flowers are a lovely blend of pale yellow and pink blending to near white toward the center of the flower, with a deep gold blotch. The stamens and pistil are red, which adds to the overall floral effect, and its foliage is excellent, dark green and glossy (Photo 4).

Conclusion

The native azaleas on Gregory Bald are indeed special plants. The varieties presented in this article are just a few of the many I have admired most over the past decade. That list has grown to over 50 selections that are in my estimation truly exceptional. I am sure those of you who have been to the bald have your own favorites. If you have names for any of the ones presented here or others you have admired, I would appreciate hearing from you.

For many of us who have been to Gregory Bald, we seem to be drawn back to it again and again. On one hike, I remember speaking to two elderly gentlemen as I passed

on the trail. They must have been in their late 70s or 80s, and were struggling up that mountain with canes in hand and cell phones for emergencies in their backpacks. They admitted that they had to see the mountain in peak bloom just one more time. Perhaps one day you and I will meet on the trail to Gregory Bald. If you have not made the hike, you have missed one of the most spectacular natural floral displays anywhere in the world.

Editor's Note:

*Since the azalea names given in this article are not cultivar names, they are not enclosed in the single quote notation that indicates a cultivar name.

Don Hyatt has been an avid hybridizer of azaleas and rhododendrons for nearly 40 years and was a former director for both the ASA and ARS. He recently retired from teaching mathematics and computer science after 33 years and now maintains a personal Web site that features native azaleas at: <http://www.donaldyatt.com>.



Photo 1. Gregory Blush*. (Photo by Bob Stelloh.)



Photo 3. Rattlesnake White*. (Photo by Don Hyatt.)



Photo 2. Gregory Candy Stripe*. (Photo by Bob Stelloh.)



Photo 4. Gregory Kaleidoscope*. (Photo by Bob Stelloh.)

Aerial Photograph of Gregory Bald Available at 2006 Convention

In 2005, the MAC-ARS group arranged to have an aerial photograph taken of the bald during peak bloom. Many of the special plants we had admired over the years can be easily identified in the image, except for a few tucked under trees near the perimeter. This new resource will help people visualize the bald and its very rare flora. It will serve as a benchmark to help document the evolution of the bald in the years to come.

There is also a picture that is a 'zoom' of a section of the larger aerial view, a place where we have admired several plants including a lovely lemon yellow, a peach pink, and a larger rose pink. These three azaleas can be picked out in the aerial photograph, and the pictures show the same plants as they are growing on the bald. Having such an aerial photograph will indeed be an asset when studying the Gregory Bald azaleas.

Convention attendees can purchase a copy of this photograph at registration.