

Azalea Companions

Gene Bush - Depauw, Indiana

Interested in azaleas from my early days as a gardener, collecting did not begin in earnest until about seven or eight years ago. The fervor was awakened by two events that began about the same time. I happened upon a breeder and collector of native azaleas who wanted to trade starts from her gardens for plants from my nursery. Each November it was as though Christmas had arrived early. A big box would arrive and I would cut strings and tape and pull out paper, to find surprises she just knew I needed. The starts were potted up, held over in the greenhouse for the first year, then found a home in my gardens. She also introduced me to the book *American Azaleas* by L.C. Towe. In three or four years my collection jumped from three to fifty-one. And, I am still looking for more room on my hillside as I become aware of that next “gottahave.”

Then followed the secondary satisfaction of what came after my azalea purchase or trade. Once transplanted there was all that space in front of, between and behind those blooming shrubs that cried out “fill me.” Being the rescuer that I am, I jumped right in there to fill those voids. Remember those movies where couples always smoked a cigarette afterwards? Yeah. Satisfaction somewhat like that.

When working with transplanting and creating new spaces in my gardens I tend to work in vignettes that tie into existing ones. I am more interested in sequen-



photo: Gene Bush

▲ *Iris cristata*

tial bloom somewhat resembling what you would find walking through a “wild garden” than having everything pop at the same time. I do know that I want plants flowering before, during, and after my azalea blooms.

Groundcovers - deciduous

When using groundcovers I usually plan on more than one level for the show. A drift will typically be broken by plants coming up through the ground hugger. That way there is a show going on over a longer period of time, the drift does not become boring when not in bloom, and you can purchase twice the number of plants for a single space.

The list of perennials I could mention is almost endless. I will narrow my selection to three favorites in my gardens. *Phlox stolonifera*, or creeping woodland *phlox*, is high on my list for its adaptability and maintenance free performance. It grows as a two-inch mat of deep green that rambles and crisscrosses creating a drift of ground-hugging foliage. In May and June blooms are on stems about eight inches above the leaves. All those I have grown are heavy bloomers. Look for ‘Blue Ridge’, ‘Bruce’s White’, ‘Home Fires’ in pink, and ‘Sherwood Purple’.

Primula kisoana wanders between larger perennials and my azaleas in extensive drifts. Easy to grow,



photo: Gene Bush

▲ *Phlox divaricata* and ferns



photo: Gene Bush

▲ *Delphinium exaltatum*

just give it the loose mulch you use at the base of the azaleas for it to scramble about. Foliage and stems are fleshy and covered with hairs. The one leaf to a stem in pink reminds me of an African violet my mother grew in a window. Blooms are deep rose-pink, topping off the plant at six inches. It is perfectly hardy, very showy and as exotic as plants come.

Iris cristata has been a favorite in my garden from the beginning and it grows in several locations. It must be a favorite of lots of others for there are many named cultivars. My favorites are the species, and 'Powder Blue Giant' along with 'Tennessee White'. Roots scamper across the top of the soil, rooting at nodules as they cross and re-cross. Blade-shaped foliage is only eight inches or so with crested blooms just above the green swords.

Ground covers - evergreen

Gaultheria procumbens is the perfect groundcover. It is a native plant which loves the pH of the soil and mulch used for azaleas. Only six inches tall, it creeps about on woody stems of red and brown with highly polished leathery leaves. Urn-shaped blooms of white become scarlet-red berries in fall and winter. Also, you can chew the leaves and berries as *Gaultheria* is the source of wintergreen.

Pachysandra procumbens, or Allegheny spurge, is a native plant that should be used more often, but gets

crowded out by the Japanese species *P. terminalis*. Once established, our native takes care of itself without becoming a wandering nuisance. Large leaves are felt-green, highly mottled and veined. Flowers resemble sea foam rising from last year's leaves in frothy shell-pink with white and tan. It blooms in my garden the first part of March, or last of February during warm late winters.

Tiarella cordifolia, also known as foamflower, has several named cultivars of interest. All are good ground covers with attractive foliage that changes color as seasons come and go. Lots of black, rust reds, and purple-blacks along and between veins, sometimes in patterns. Star-shaped flowers are held in frothy sprays well above the leaves. My favorites are 'Running Tapestry' and the newer 'Happy Trails' and 'Appalachian Trail'. Bloom is in May with azalea flowers.

Feature perennials:

Actaea / cimicifuga I enjoy for they are all late bloomers and make statements in size for the rest of the garden season. There are many species to use, both native and non-native, as well as many named cultivars. Most notable among named cultivars are those with "black" foliage. They emerge in April and steadily grow into large mounds of cut foliage. From June thru September, depending upon species, they carry tall spires of white "candles." They definitely make a statement in between two or three azaleas as they go into fall foliage colors. My favorites are 'Black Negligee', 'Chocoholic' for fancy foliage, and *rubifolia*, Kearney's bugbane, for species.



photo: Gene Bush

▲ Frost on *Gaultheria procumbens*

Delphinium exaltatum is the perennial that keeps on giving, and just happens to be a native plant. Nice typical *delphinium* foliage is on stout stems that do not need staking. At the top will be spires of lavender-blue flowers in abundance. First flush is in mid-to-late June and, if kept deadheaded, it will still be in bloom come first of December. Since it is native from Canada to Georgia, you can count on it being very adaptable in gardens.

Helleborus species and hybrids are a must for the late winter and very early spring garden. You can have blooms from December through April or May dependent upon weather and selection. Foliage is of evergreen, saw-toothed polished leather. There are blooms of white, red, black, blue, and yellow, with and without contrasting color spots. There are single and double flowers and picotees in pointed and rounded petals. I cannot image my garden without *hellebores* in bloom during our periods of gloomy overcast monochrome skies in winter.

Bulbs & Tubers:

Hardy *cyclamen* is not seen much here in the mid-west and I cannot understand why. There are at least 3 species and many named cultivars that perform in my gardens. Shooting star-shaped blooms are one to a stem, usually in some shade of pink or white. With age individual tubers can have 50 to 100 blooms. Foliage stays close to the mulch at only 4 to 6 inches. Ivy-shaped leaves are deep green and often splashed with silver or pewter. Some can have leaves of all silver, others leaves of silver with a deep green “Christmas tree” shape in the center. Transplant in drifts as they are small. Look for *Cyclamen coum*, *C. hederifolium*, and *C. purpurascens* if you can locate them.

Galanthus, or snowdrops, flowers are often encased in ice as they bloom end of February and into the first of March. There are many species and named cultivars, but unless a connoisseur of *Galanthus*, go for obvious show. They are small tubers with daffodil-like foliage that have hanging flowers of snow white held at the end of a stem just above the leaves. They are clumpers that quickly build up in show. All traces of the plants will be gone by June. They are an absolute must with hellebore blooms before azaleas awaken.



photo: Gene Bush

▲ *Cyclamen* hedge with *Corydalis*

Corydalis solida is a tiny tuber that blooms in very late winter and early spring, then quickly disappears for the rest of the year. It is a favorite of mine for the tiny fern-like foliage of deep green in mounded outlines. Topping off the tightly packed leaves are spurred flowers in lavender-purple for the species, pink or red for cultivars ‘Beth Evans’ and ‘George Baker’. They will make offsets as they age and will gently sow seed that may, or may not, come true to parent. They are very easy to grow, dependable year after year and a good show until the azaleas awaken.

Do come visit and walk the gardens here at Munchkin Place. We can then talk more plants at greater length.

Gene Bush owns Munchkin Nursery & Gardens, LLC. and was a speaker at the annual 2011 convention in Evansville. His talk there covered azalea companions in greater depth. He is a nationally known speaker, gardener writer, photographer and gardener. Read more at his monthly newsletter Garden Clippings’, and a weekly blog, Shade Solutions. His website is www.munchkinnursery.com.

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