

# Rhododendron arborescens on Hurricane Creek

Charles Andrews, Cumming, Georgia

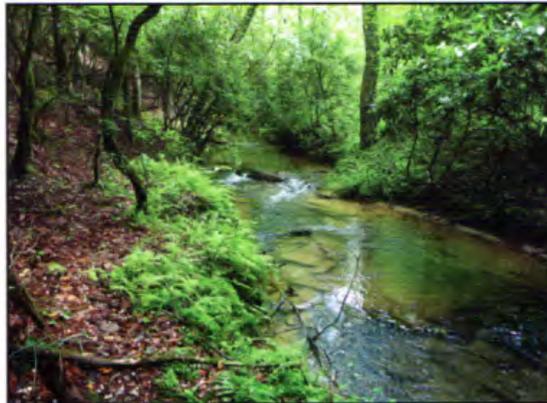
Georgia is an azalea paradise. Few azalea species or cultivars will fail to find a comfortable home somewhere within the state. In the mid-1800s, some fortunate soul discovered that tender hothouse azaleas from Asia make wonderful outdoor garden plants in the Southeast. Fruitland Nursery in Augusta, Georgia, was one of the first in the South to offer evergreen azaleas for Southern gardens. Of the native azaleas, probably every county in the state (and there are 159 counties in Georgia) has *Rhododendron canescens* growing in the wild. Only *R. canadense*, *R. prinophyllum*, *R. occidentale*, *R. vaseyi*, and *R. eastmanii* have not been found natively in the state. We are still looking to find that *R. vaseyi* and *R. eastmanii* have crept over our political boundary, which means nothing to a plant.

Hurricane Creek begins at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near the southern end of the Appalachian Trail. I am fortunate to have a small piece of this paradise: a mix of hardwoods and pines scattered over hilly ridges and draws in North Georgia. Springs and seeps are plentiful, their waters gently accumulating, flowing and bouncing down the hollows on their way to join Hurricane Creek. In addition to the trout in the stream, we find white-tailed deer and wild turkey in abundance. Black bear, red fox, red-tailed hawks, and pileated woodpeckers also make their home here. Native azaleas—thousands of them—are the most amazing aspect of the delightful flora.

We have found three different species on the property: *R. canescens*, *R. calendulaceum*, and *R. arborescens*. To date we have confirmed no *R. periclymenoides* or *R. viscosum*. We may be too far north for *R. flammeum* and too low in elevation for *R. cumberlandense*. Each spring in April and May, large numbers of *R. canescens* and *R. calendulaceum* go wild with colorful blooms. They always overlap in bloom, and the many triploid hybrids found on the property show there is a close, intimate relationship between the two species. The *R. arborescens*, however, bloom later, beginning after almost all the oth-

ers have finished their bloom.

For some reason, many of us ignore the sweet azalea (*R. arborescens*) for our gardens. It does not bloom during that grand peak in spring when many of the other species are blooming. Biding their time, it waits for June and July when its dark green leaves are completely developed. Then it puts on a fragrant display of brilliant white blossoms with contrasting red stamens and pistil. In Georgia one can also find a form that does not even begin blooming until August. At lower elevations of the southernmost limit of its range, these, sometimes called *R. arborescens* var. *georgiana*, are the last of the sweet azaleas to bloom.



Hurricane Creek

Until this past year, we did not know just how plentiful the *R. arborescens* are on the property. On May 30 and June 8, 2013, we more carefully explored Hurricane Creek for them. **Ted Meredith, John Kohli, Joe Coleman**, and I explored on May 30, while Ted and I systematically walked the creek bank on June 8.

We now know there are many along the creek. Almost all are within a few feet of the creek bank, many with their feet dangling in the cool water. We saw only three exceptions, and they were 10 to 30 feet from the creek. All of these plants are along the main stream, in the bottomland. When the canopy along the stream becomes dense (in



*R. arborescens* hanging over Hurricane Creek, giving trout a place to hide



Azalea hunters: Ted Meredith, John Kohli, and Joe Coleman in front of a nice mountain laurel



Large blossoms, pointed petals, red stamens and pistil



Pointed petals, glandular tube (note insect stuck on tube)



Only *R. calendulaceum* found in bloom on May 30. This is a tested tetraploid, but it certainly looks like a hybrid.

the upper end), the *R. arborescens* seemed to stop. To date we have found none up the side hollows and draws. None have been seen on the hillsides. Yet, there are plenty of *R. canescens* and *R. calendulaceum* in these places. Apparently the sweet azaleas are fond of stream banks.



Tight *R. arborescens* flower bud on June 8



Left: White stamens  
Right: Here the stamens are mostly white

The sweet azaleas at a ford just below Tom's Pump Hollow Branch have been on our radar for several years. We also have been monitoring a low but large plant hanging over the creek below the ford. It was not until June 8 that we saw well over 100 of them, most in early bloom, on both sides of the creek. On May 30, with *Kalmia latifolia* in full bloom, only a few of the sweet azaleas were beginning

to open, and seeing a *R. calendulaceum* or a *R. calendulaceum* hybrid blossom on that date was a singular event, well upstream from the highest-known *R. arborescens*. June 8 was still early for them, not yet at peak, while the mountain laurel was well past peak. Ted and I saw many fingers and fat, just-opening buds. Ted also found



Above: Frilly blossom edges; a very attractive plant Below: Tubes sticky, with many glandular hairs; style dark purple almost black This is a tested tetraploid, but it certainly looks like a hybrid.



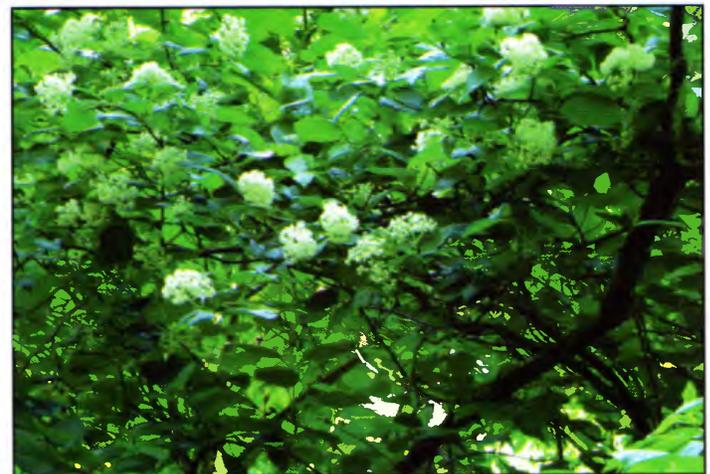
a late one that was still in very tight bud, several weeks or more away from blooming. We plan to monitor the bloom time of this the latest *R. arborescens* we know of on the property.

These plants have large, pointed, pure white blossoms. You can smell their perfume from a distance. The literature says they have a fragrance of heliotrope, but I have never smelled heliotrope. One online source says “its delicious scent oscillates between marzipan, vanilla, cherry pie, and almond.” On some blossoms, the edges of the petals are frilly. We really did not see any small-flowered plants. They look nothing like a long tube, small-lobed *R. viscosum*. These tubes gradually, not abruptly, open into the lobes. The tubes on this group of azaleas are sticky with many glandular hairs. We saw no yellow blotches or



*R. arborescens* with 5+ inch trunk leaning over Hurricane Creek

any pink or yellow flushes, just snowy white. Occasionally, the tubes have a greenish appearance. The stamens and style appear to be thinner in diameter than on *R. calendulaceum*. Published descriptions for the typical plant say the stamens and style are red. On these plants, we often saw white style and stamens or just slightly pink



Above: Climbing hydrangea (*Decumaria barbara*) leaning on a dogwood trunk

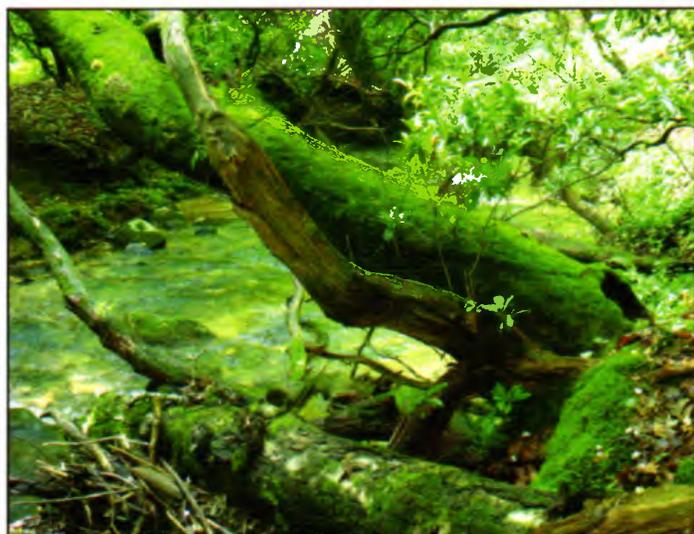
Below: Cream-colored Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*)





Partridge berry (*Mitchella repens*)

toward upper third of their length. Stamens were more likely than the style to be white or mostly white. Sometimes both stamens and style have the classic dark red color. The stigma is a large dark purple, almost black, flattened ball. The significant rain and, I suppose, accompanying winds were a little rough on the blossoms in 2013. The leaves are noticeably glossy and smooth, not fuzzy. They are a darker green than the leaves of *R. canescens* and *R. calendulaceum*. The young stems are smooth, with no hairs.



Moss-covered tree (still alive)

We found plants that were two-foot seedlings as well as big, old plants. One we found earlier this year had a trunk over five inches in diameter.

The facts that Hurricane Creek *R. calendulaceum* are no longer in bloom as the *R. arborescens* begin their bloom and that *R. canescens* are often seen blooming alongside *R.*

*calendulaceum* suggest that the Hurricane Creek hybrids are more likely *R. canescens* x *R. calendulaceum* hybrids. Yet, even a 1 in 10-year bloom overlap could result in some natural *R. arborescens* x *R. calendulaceum* hybrids. I often wonder from what the nice yellow *R. calendulaceum* on the creek, a tested tetraploid, obtained its pleasant fragrance.

The other flora along Hurricane Creek are quite enjoyable. There is not just the eye-catching *Kalmia latifolia*. Ted and I saw *Decumaria barbara* in full bloom, several *Itea virginica* plants in bloom, including a creamy yellow one, *Mitchella repens*, *Hydrangea arborescens*, *Ilex verticillata*, *Cornus amomum*, *Hexastylis shuttleworthii*, a large tree trunk covered with bright green moss leaning over the creek, an old Indian trail tree, running cedar, and a million luscious ferns enjoying the damp creek bottoms.

You should join us when you can. It is an azalea lover's paradise.

*Charles Andrews* is a nature lover who spends time in his garden, in the woods looking for native azaleas, and on trout streams. He is a member of the Oconee Chapter ASA and the president of the Azalea Chapter ARS.



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