

# Mountains of Native Azaleas

A Trip through Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee

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Wow! What a spectacular journey! June of 2014 was the first time Paul and I experienced the annual trek through the mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina, enjoying the pleasures of seeing deciduous azaleas blooming in their native habitat. **Don Hyatt**, **George McLellan**, and **Karel Bernady**, veteran guides, who have been making these pilgrimages for decades, led us through our travels.

## Day 1

On Wednesday morning we arrived at Appalachian Native Plants (ANP), a nursery located in Mountain City, Tennessee, and owned by J Jackson and Lindy Johnson. First, we had a tour through their facility, including a greenhouse packed with thousands of seedlings, and hoop houses filled with plants that had been up-potted. After much contemplation, I selected a number of flats of wonderful azaleas, like *R. vaseyi* (pinkshell azalea), *R. periclymenoides* (Piedmont azalea or pinxterbloom azalea), *R. calendulaceum* (flame azalea), as well as some Zo Warner natural hybrids. The latter are descendants of the Gregory Bald swarm resulting from Mother Nature's work, crossing at least four native species, including *R. cumberlandense*, *arborescens*, *viscosum*, and *calendulaceum*.



Paul Beck, Don Hyatt and George McLellan



One of the goals of ANP is to preserve native ornamentals, predominantly from the Southern Appalachians. To that end, J and Lindy have searched for plants, documented pertinent information, and mapped GPS coordinates for many notable specimens and populations. After collecting seed and growing these into sizeable plants, they proceeded to select superior forms to use as stock plants in their display area. The seed from these specimens is used to grow transplant (plug/liner) and quart-size plants that are available to both the trade and to individuals. In this way, ANP has become a premiere source for 15 of our 17 native azaleas species, as well as for some very beautiful natural hybrid azaleas. They also grow wild-collected seed of many of the native rhododendron species. One can purchase items at the nursery by appointment.



We were most impressed with the environmentally conscious use of geothermal energy to heat and cool the greenhouse. We applaud J and Lindy's dedication to providing education about the propagation and production methods for native rhododendron species.

After our time at the nursery, we drove a half hour to J and Lindy's home and walked through their gardens. What a treat! Seeing mature plants gave me an appreciation of the beauty of the blooms and an up-close view of the foliage, as well as the structure and size of the plants. I know this information will be helpful when it comes to planting our new acquisitions.

## **Day 2**

Our first excursion into the wild started Thursday morning on Roan Mountain, a part of the Pisgah and Cherokee National Forests. This actually is not a single mountain, but a high ridge of peaks and gaps that extend over five miles and boasts the longest stretch



of grassy balds in the Appalachian Mountains. A bald is a mountain summit or crest that is covered primarily by native grasses or shrubs in areas where heavy forest growth would normally be expected. Throughout the Roan Highlands the elevation changes are fairly gradual, from 5,500 to 6,286 feet..

This area boasts one of the finest and most diverse stands of native azaleas anywhere in the world. Usually it is a sea of vibrant color during mid-June, but this

year peak flowering had passed. Our cooler-than-normal spring, followed by an abrupt, very warm spell had compressed the bloom time. Fortunately for us, the later-blooming forms were impressively showy, with brilliant yellows and oranges in many shades and combinations.

The morning air was very crisp and windy, necessitating multiple layers of clothing. From the parking lot at Carter's Gap, we followed a well-defined path leading to a part of the Appalachian Trail. To the west of this point are Roan High Bluff and Roan High Knob. But our plan was to head east where the *R. calendulaceum* are more abundant. We went through a short section of woods (Fraser's fir, red spruce), then entered a long stretch that is almost completely treeless. Soon after we entered the open area, Karel took out his bird-watching binoculars and spied a group of *R. calendulaceum* in a fairly remote area to the southwest, a cluster he had not noticed on previous trips. So he and George bushwhacked their way to the new find to record descriptions, take photos, and map the area using GPS.

Meanwhile, Don accompanied us to the east. We hiked across Round Bald, Engine Gap, and Jane Bald to Jane Gap, with panoramic views most of the way. Don pointed out some of the special forms of *R. calendulaceum* that have been given unofficial names



like 'Molten Lava', with its ruffled golden-orange flowers, 'Frilly Jane', in shades of apricot and golden-yellow, and 'Roan Buttercup', a compact, semi-dwarf yellow variety. After an hour we reached 'Big Bird' (one of my favorites), a clear yellow with the top petal frilled and overlaid with gold.

Ahead of us was Grassy Ridge, an area that is usually awash with the pinkish-purple flowers of *R. catawbiense* (Catawba rhododendron). The late freeze that season

had caused heavy bud damage, so the entire hillside was just green. We decided to head back. Hopefully, we will be able to return another time to see what is, typically, a magnificent display.

Along the way back to our car, we stopped to rest and have lunch on a rocky outcropping that had a spectacular view of the area to the south. By then it was toasty warm and we had had to shed a layer or two. As we relaxed, Don relayed some of the history of this mountain range, including the fact that the gneiss (pronounce 'nice') rocks we were sitting on were over a billion years old.

The small piece of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT) that we had hiked involves a moderate climb; the walking sticks that Don had lent us came in handy in a few spots. The AT extends over 2,200 miles, following the ridgeline of the Appalachian Mountains from Mount Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia. Thousands of species of plants and animals make their home there, including 2,000 that are considered rare, threatened, or endangered. We feel very grateful for all the resources that have gone into creating this fantastic hiking trail, and for the continued efforts to maintain it from groups that include a variety of citizen organizations, environmental advocacy groups, government agencies, and individuals, all coordinated by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

For dinner our group gathered at Suba's Restaurant in Mountain City, Tennessee, where we thoroughly enjoyed the Smoked Trout Cakes and the Salmon Oscar. Their handmade, mouthwatering desserts are a specialty. How can one resist Fried Apple Pie with Homemade Cinnamon Ice Cream, Bailey's Irish Cream Chocolate Torte, or Mile-High Coconut Pie? Suba's provides a truly fine dining experience!

### Day 3

On Friday we left Mountain City to travel along the Blue Ridge Parkway on our way to Franklin, North Carolina. We accessed the parkway near Blowing Rock, North Carolina, heading south. Shortly after entering the parkway, about Milepost 294, we stopped at the Moses H. Cone Memorial Park and spent some time in their gift shop. They have a tempting array of finely



Frilly Jane



Frilly Jane

handcrafted items of ceramic, wood, glass, fabric, and more, all attractively displayed. We were looking for a thank-you gift for a special couple, and this was a perfect place to make a selection. Then, back to the parkway.

The Blue Ridge Parkway is a scenic highway, linking two Eastern national parks: The Shenandoah and The Great Smoky Mountains. It has some of the highest mountains in Virginia and North Carolina, with elevation changes from 649 to 6,047 feet.. It has so much to offer vacationers: overlooks with wonderful views, waterfalls, hiking, art, music, camping, and, of course, a treasure trove of plants. But we were on

a mission, other temptations had to wait.

At Milepost 316 we made a little detour to Linville Falls. An easy hiking trail took us downhill to where we could see the waterfall from a good vantage point. Along the way, we passed a patch of *Galax urceolata* (wandflower), a delightful wildflower with spike-like racemes of white flowers and shiny, dark green basal foliage. There were scores of *R. maximum* (rosebay rhododendron), but none in bloom.

At Milepost 355 we turned into Mount Mitchell State Park, the highest point in the Eastern US at 6,684 feet. The cloud cover prevented a good view, but we did have enough light to take photos of some *Platanthera grandiflora* (purple fringed orchids), with their spikes of pinkish-purple and white flowers.

Along the edge of the road, from mMilepost 410 to 425, Don pointed out places where *R. vaseyi* can be found in many shades of pink, from pale to very dark. Since flowering time had passed, Paul and I



talked about returning to this area in early to mid-May of another year to see them blooming in all their glory. I especially would like to find one of the darkest pink varieties to photograph. Although *R. vaseyi* has a very limited natural range, restricted to a few mountainous regions in North Carolina, it grows well at lower elevations such as in our garden in Northern Virginia. We exited the Blue Ridge Parkway at Balsam Gap (Milepost 443) and headed to Franklin, North Carolina, for the evening to rest up for our next day's excursion.



Wayah View and Old Stone Tower

A short drive downhill took us to Wine Springs Bald where we were greeted with myriad forms of *Kalmia latifolia* (mountain laurel), along with several more types of *R. arborescens*. One of the latter had larger-than-normal flowers and curly lower petals. The plants in this area were so close together that it

was difficult to wedge our way through to see specific specimens, but we persisted.

The afternoon schedule called for a trip to Hooper Bald, but predictions of heavy storms discouraged Paul and me from attempting it. The rest of the group decided to chance it and were able to keep ahead of the rain as they made their way to just past the Tennessee border. On their way back, they drove through the storm, but by the time they reached Hooper, the sky had cleared and they were able to make a preliminary trek in preparation for the work they had planned for the next day.

#### **Day 4**

Saturday we drove to Wayah Bald, which is located in the Nantahala National Forest near Franklin and is on the AT. On our drive to the top we stopped to walk a side path to check out a most unusual form of *R. calendulaceum* – a two-inch, hose-in-hose, colored apricot with a broad, gold blotch. We drove to the summit (elevation 5,342 ft.) and parked, then wandered around the periphery through a patch of *R. arborescens* (sweet or smooth azalea).

Walking down the road a little distance, we took a paved path to the Old Stone Fire Tower. Since it was a clear day, we had a gorgeous view from the tower of the Great Smokey Mountains in Tennessee and the rolling hills of Georgia. In the area surrounding the tower there was an impressive display of *R. arborescens*, their pink-tinged white with pink stamens and an intoxicating fragrance.



Kalmia on Wine Springs

#### **Day 5**

On Sunday morning, except for a little fog, the weather was inviting. So we traveled west along the Cherohala Skyway, with its ever-changing altitudes, abundant curves, and panoramic vistas. This area was somewhat familiar to us since we had taken part in 'The Great Azalea Planting' in the fall of 2011 (see *Journal American Rhododendron Society*, Vol. 66, No. 4, Fall 2012). On arrival, near Milepost 8, we walked up part of the quarter-mile, well-maintained path to Hooper Bald, and then followed our leaders through the woods



to the lower section of *R. calendulaceum* territory. This shortcut took us directly to ‘Hooper’s Copper’, whose huge blooms open yellow, but quickly turn a coppery-orange. This plant had been the first of the species there to be rescued from encroaching vegetation by a dedicated team of individuals and groups, led by Jim Brant and George McLellan of the ARS Middle Atlantic Chapter, and overseen by the U S Forest Service.

We visited other late blooming “old friends” while roaming the bald, gems like ‘Gold-10’, and ‘Hooper’s Pumpkin’. Lastly we came to a most striking specimen called, ‘Hooper’s Best Red’. What a surprise! We were thrilled with the opportunity to see the vibrant, dark red flowers that are atypical for the species. Knowing that the fall foliage is almost as spectacular as their summer blooms made me doubly glad that we had obtained some small plants of this form at Appalachian



Native Plants.

Although the rigorous hike up Gregory Bald would normally be the next stop on the schedule, the decision was made to forgo this three to four hour climb because it was thought unlikely that we would find plants in bloom. So we said our goodbyes and headed back east.

Our next destination was East Fork Nursery in

Sevierville, Tennessee. After taking a quick look at the road atlas to find the most direct route, we chose US 129. BIG MISTAKE—unless you are looking for a serious adrenalin rush. The longer we drove, the more closely the twists and turns occurred, and the more exaggerated they became. The biggest challenge was the first eleven miles within Tennessee, which is appropriately called “The Tail of the Dragon.” There are 318 curves, many of them S curves, within that short span; definitely not for the faint of heart.

We certainly did not realize on first setting out that this is considered THE premier thriller course for driving enthusiasts. This was a Sunday and weather conditions were ideal, so the motorcyclists were out in force. Unbelievably, many years ago this section had been posted at 55 mph. Today the limit is 30 mph, but we rarely made it to 20. Fortunately there were pull-offs at frequent intervals, so whenever we found ourselves holding back traffic we took the next opportunity to let others pass. A blink of the lights, a beep of the horn, or a wave of a hand expressed their appreciation.

Whew! Well, we survived Route 129 and arrived in Sevierville at the appointed time. Vivian Abney was there to greet us and show us through her East Fork Nursery. Although not usually open on Sundays, she had graciously agreed to let in several plant enthusiasts that day. Among her impressive offerings is a very large collection of deciduous azaleas, all grown from seed and tissue culture. She grows over 300 varieties. With Vivian’s help, I picked out 15 wonderful selections (that was all our already space-

**Sources for deciduous azaleas:**

Appalachian Native Plants  
676 Waddell Road  
Mountain City, TN 37683  
423-727-4264

East Fork Nursery  
2769 Bethel Church Road  
Sevierville, TN 37876  
865-453-6108

challenged vehicle could hold). One of my favorites is 'Memory of James Thompson'. This is an *R. austrinum* hybrid by Earl Somerville of Atlanta, Georgia. It is very fragrant, with large ball trusses of creamy-yellow flowers with a soft golden blotch, blooming early to midseason. The plant grows into quite a large specimen (14 ft. x 8 ft. in 20 years), and is hardy in Zones 6-9.

We were weary and ready to head home, but very glad we had taken the time to enjoy some of the sites where native azaleas can be seen in the wild.

### **Conclusion**

I have heard some objection to using deciduous azaleas in the landscape because of their leafless winter condition. But I think their irregular branching habit really enhances the winter garden by providing architectural interest. They also offer a different color palette from our evergreen azaleas, and can be used in sunnier spots where the evergreens tend to languish. Many of the deciduous varieties have spectacular fall foliage that almost equals the impact of most flowers. Fragrance in some species and summer bloom times are other reasons to consider using them in your garden design.

Although we missed peak bloom time this year, what we did see made this trip most worthwhile. I can only imagine the magnificence of finding these plants in full flower.

We are most grateful for the company of our three guides as they led the way to sites and pointed out plants that we would most likely have missed if we had undertaken this expedition on our own. We recommend this journey to anyone who enjoys botanical excursions. If you would like information on this year's trip, please contact Don Hyatt at don@donaldhyatt.com.

*Carolyn Beck is a retired Registered Nurse and an active member of the Northern Virginia Chapter. She and her husband, Paul, are concentrating their garden efforts on the chapter's Legacy Hybrids (see NV-ASA.org for more information on our Legacy Project).*

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