

Native Azaleas – Beautiful, Versatile, Dependable¹

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me. I feel most unqualified to be here talking to an international group of professional propagators when I probably should have followed my friend, Jim Cross', advice and spent more of my time writing verse than trying to be a propagator. But by way of introducing you to myself and to CARLSON'S GARDENS, where we grow over 2000 cultivars and species of azaleas and rhododendrons and ship them all over the country, I'll read to you from one of the mailing pieces we've been sending to our customers with a color photo of 'Carlson's Coral Flameboyant' azalea. The verse on it is called,

"Buy Big & Save"

Buy yourself some politicians

But don't neglect your yard.

Azalea costs are not recurring –

No future bills for each dance card.

Buying Bill may buy Bill time,

But big azaleas are no crime,

And unlike time for politicians,

The time you'll buy will not be hard.

For nearly 30 years I've been collecting, hybridizing, propagating, growing, and marketing native azaleas. So I'm hoping that some of my enthusiasm for them will rub off on some of you. We grow many other types of azaleas and rhododendrons, such as 'Gable Walk', but native azaleas were my first love — initially because of the intense fragrance of some of them — and secondly because of the ease with which a novice nurseryman could propagate the species from seed.

But to put our discussion in the proper geographical perspective, let me first explain that CARLSON'S GARDENS is located 50 miles north of New York City in Zone 6a. So the third reason for my enthusiasm for native azaleas concerns their hardiness. These deciduous plants don't object to the fact that CARLSON'S GARDENS is a container nursery that operates in this inhospitable climate without any wintering-over structures. The only winter protection our containers receive is a mulch of wood chips. If a plant doesn't like that treatment, it ends up on the compost pile. As a result we market our plants as being "northern grown and acclimated".

Fragrance was what started me growing azaleas many years ago, and the azalea 'Hot Ginger & Dynamite' is the one which motivated me and has also influenced many of my customers including:

Mrs. Jeremiah Aloysius Withington III

Always leaves for Maine each year about June 23rd

With several cats and dogs, the cook, and just a maid or two –

"It's still a trifle chilly, but one does what one must do!"

A single day of summer south of Maine is quite unheard

Of, when you have a pedigree like 'Withington III'.

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Meanwhile back in Upper Crust her garden scene is quiet,
 Since plants are only authorized to hold a Springtime riot.
 "What's the use of summer blooms that I'm not there to see?"
 But can you guess whose gardener left behind did not agree?
 Who after many bloomless summers went June 24th
 And bought azaleas that would bloom while Withington was North?

But it so happens that he chose some fragrant *arborescens*,
 Which proved to be the source of one of Nature's harsher lessons –
 That trips are less precise than blooms, he hadn't fully reckoned,
 For *arborescens* in full bloom on June the 22nd
 Not only got the trip to Maine historically deferred,
 But gets him three more weeks each year of Withington III.

***Rhododendron arborescens*, the sweet azalea.**

Rhododendron arborescens is commonly known as the sweet azalea. 'Hot Ginger & Dynamite' is our selected clone of *R. arborescens* that was introduced nationally a number of years ago in both *Horticulture* and *Flower & Garden* magazines. It is extremely fragrant and the original plant has been a long time favorite of visitors to our gardens.

Like most of the native azaleas, *R. arborescens* is native to the eastern United States. It makes a gorgeous large shrub, typically 6 to 8 ft in 20 years in our gardens. Give it lots of room because it will be fully as wide as it is tall. The stock plants from which we take our seed all tend to form a lovely umbrella shape as they mature. Whether this is true of all populations of the species, I can't say. But we're very pleased with that attribute in ours.

Rhododendron arborescens is intensely fragrant and capable of perfuming the air for a considerable distance – probably 20 ft or more. Just as important, they bloom in late June into July after most other azaleas have finished. The deciduous foliage is a shiny deep green that remains attractive and trouble free throughout the growing season. The flowers are typically a clear white with pink stamens that are apparent only as you get up close.

But there can be some variation in flower color, and as a hybridizer and collector, it is those variations that I have been looking for and selecting for future propagation.

- **'Fringe on Top'**. This is another fragrant selection with a decided fringe to the upper petal. Our original plant is at least 7 ft tall by 7 ft across in about 20 or so years. In its maturity it is mounding over to form the handsome umbrella shape.
- **'Summer Parasol'**. 'Summer Parasol' is the exception that proves the rule. It started forming its parasol shape at a height of about 3 ft — all without any pruning to help it.

Next, I'll discuss some our newer *R. arborescens* selections. Most of these are in shades other than white.

- **'Deed I Do'**. This is a large light salmon pink with a light gold flare framed in lighter pink. It is very fragrant and blooms in early July.
- **'Intermission Riff'**. A selection that usually blooms in late June during the intermission between *R. atlanticum* and *R. arborescens* with a delicate pale pink with a faint yellow blotch or flare. It, too, has a delightful fragrance.

- **‘Sweet & Lovely’**. A white flower with a faint pink blush, red stamens, and distinctive golden yellow flare characterizes this cultivar. It is very fragrant and appears to be more compact than most. It blooms from late June into July.
- **‘Bronze Age Beauty’**. This cultivar is another blush pink. Each year’s new leaves open with a bronze color that concentrates towards the tip and outer edges of the leaves as they mature, while the inner portion becomes a nice bright green. The striped effect of green down the center of the bronze leaves is very striking.

***Rhododendron atlanticum*, the coast azalea.**

This species is native to the eastern United States coastal plain. It is typically a smaller and twiggy plant than *R. arborescens* staying in the neighborhood of 3 to 4 ft in our gardens. Another characteristic is its lovely soft gray-green foliage. Normally it is white. If you want fragrance, but don’t have room for *R. arborescens*, then some form of *R. atlanticum* is probably your best choice.

- **‘White Heat’**. This cultivar is as generous with its fragrance as *R. arborescens*. However, it blooms in late May and early June with white blooms while we are still anxiously awaiting *R. arborescens*.
- **‘High Society’**. This has a touch of pink at the base of the corolla.
- **‘S Nice Like This’**. A large fragrant white flower with a flush of pink on the upper petals is the feature of this selection.
- **‘Milenberg Joys’**. This is a delicate pink with a hint of gold in the throat; add a touch of yellow and you have ‘Oh, Baby’, add ruffles to a soft pink and you have ‘Anything for You’.
- **‘Easy To Love’**. Peachy yellow buds opening to a creamy yellow with peach edging.
- **‘Somebody Loves Me’**. Similar to ‘Easy To Love’ but 5 days later with a touch more yellow and slightly more fragrance.

Choptank River Azaleas.

The original Choptanks were natural hybrids of *R. atlanticum* mixed with a bit of *R. periclymenoides* that were found growing wild in the vicinity of the Choptank River by Polly Hill of North Tisbury Azalea fame. She originally described them as follows:

“The flowers have a wider flare than the pure white species and the clusters are showier. The glandular hairs, stamens, and pistils are a sparkling deep pink against white petals. The fragrance is intense and delightful, especially on a damp day or in the evening. They bloom directly after the lilacs (either side of Decoration Day into June for 2 or 3 weeks) and cover our ‘farm’, just as the lilacs do, with a wind born spring fragrance.”

She continues: “The color comes from hybridizing with *R. periclymenoides*, I am told; and the plant is a stabilized wild hybrid, but basically *R. atlanticum*, coming true from seed. The plants grow 2 or 3 ft only, or to 4 ft or better in partial shade. They will take much exposure and are drought tolerant to an astonishing degree. Being very stoloniferous, beds quickly fill in, and mulched by oak leaves from above, they need no better food. I strongly recommend them for natural-looking mass planting.”

She convinced us that we’d better try them. So we planted the seed she sent us, and have been growing Choptank River azaleas ever since. Over the years we have

continued to propagate Choptanks from the seed of one of her original named selection which she calls 'Marydel'. We also have made some selections of our own.

- **'Choptank River Belle'**. This was our first Choptank selection. It is similar in its coloring to 'Marydel' but seems to be a bit more vigorous, having grown a foot or more taller over the years.
- **'Choptank River Doll'**. A cultivar having a fragrant light yellow with a deeper yellow flare and a reddish tube.
- **'Choptank River Queen'**. This selection with pink striped buds opens to a fragrant white with rose tips at the ends of the petals.
- **'Choptank River Sweet'**. 'Choptank River Sweet' is a very fragrant buff yellow flushed with peach accented by red stamens, an orange-red tube, and a light golden flare.

Before I continue my discussion of what the flowers of some of the native azaleas look like, let me call your attention to the fact that some of these native azaleas have been designated as either threatened or endangered somewhere in their native habitat. So if you, too, are concerned with preserving our native flora, you'll want to remember that while:

We mourn the long gone dinosaur –
 Except for bones, he is no more.
 Woolly mammoth – same sad plight:
 Only tusks still come to light.
 When whooping cranes have flown the coop;
 Their missing whoop won't be from croup.
 So let's make sure we've given room
 To wild azaleas and their bloom.
 We can't do much for tusk and bone,
 But natives can be grown at home!

***Rhododendron cumberlandense* (syn. *R. bakeri*), the Cumberland azalea.**

Rhododendron cumberlandense is native to the Southeastern United States. It blooms in combination with our Kousa dogwoods in late June into July. We particularly like it in the garden for its horizontal branching habit, much like our native dogwoods. In addition it seems to be even more shade tolerant than most other native azaleas. We initially considered them to be relatively low growing, but now have some in our own gardens that are at least 6 ft or more in 20 years. The strains we are growing are predominantly in the orange-red shades like 'Baker's Dozen'.

- **'Baker's Dozen'**. This is a particularly floriferous orange with exceptionally large trusses.
- **Bakeri 88-1**. Bakeri 88-1 has not yet been named. It has a deeper pink ribbing down the center of each petal, and a frosted look to the edges of the petals.
- **'When You're Smiling'**. This is a soft golden yellow with peach-pink edging to the petals.
- **'So Ready'**. This is our deepest red to date.

A number of years ago we swapped seed with a gentleman who had collected seed from a native stand of *R. cumberlandense* on Gregory Bald. The plants from that seed have proved to be quite similar to the strains we had previously been growing, but we have continued to propagate them separately.

- **‘Yellow Gregory Bald’**. A selection that we saved for ourselves back in 1988. It proved to be a lovely soft yellow with a large deep golden flare.
- **‘Wait A Minute’**. This cultivar is called ‘Wait A Minute’ for its ability to change colors as it matures and to display multiple colors all at the same time, a characteristic of *R. cumberlandense* that occurs more frequently than we once thought.

***Rhododendron calendulaceum*, the flame azalea.**

This species is also native to the Eastern United States. It can flower in a remarkable range of bright yellows, oranges, and reds, and in-between combinations, from late May well into June. It can become very tall in time, at least 6 to 8 ft and often higher. The strains we are growing tend towards the oranges, although some are gorgeous soft yellows with deeper golden flares.

- **‘Jazz’**. This is one of our favorite clones of the flame azalea.

“The shrub’s aflame!” the gardener said –
 “Fiery blooms of orange-red;
 Blazing yellow; smokey rose –
 So get your Kodak, not the hose.”

- **‘Ruffles & Flourishes’**. ‘Ruffles & Flourishes’ is a rather spectacular pink.
- **‘Carlson’s Coral Flameboyant’**. Our nurseries earlier blooming form of *R. calendulaceum* with large flowers in bright shades of coral that blooms for us in mid-May. We find that it carries spectacularly in the garden. I have color postcards of it here for any of you who would like one.

***Rhododendron periclymenoides*, pinxterbloom azalea.**

This azalea which someone with a marvelous sense of humor has renamed from *R. nudiflorum* to *R. periclymenoides*; perhaps just to make it more difficult for those of us who like to write verse. In any case it called for some mild form of retaliation. So with a tip of my hat to Mr. W.S. Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan I offer you a verse entitled:

“Azalea buttercup”
 I’m called *schlippenbachi*,
 Named for Mr. Schlippenbach,
 Although he was not my first choice –
 Far too rarely taxonomists,
 Historical botanists,
 Give namesakes that much of a voice.
 Do you think *nudiflorum*
 Was furnished a forum
 When renamers revised the last time?
 Was my naming an omen
 That they’d find a cognomen
 That folks can’t pronounce, spell or rhyme?
 Some day some revisionist,

Ambitious taxonomist
 May learn who first gave me the eye –
 'Twas poor Mrs. Buttercup,
 Sweet Mrs. Buttercup,
 Who showed Mr. Schlippenbach I!

We call the pinxterbloom azalea pincushion because of its long showy stamens. The sweetly fragrant white to pale pink flowers appear in tight clusters in mid-May. In 20 years or so ours reached 5 to 6 ft, and is now even taller. This is the native azalea that you are most likely to find growing wild in the Northeast.

***Rhododendron austrinum* (syns. *R. prinophyllum*, *R. roseum*), the roseshell azalea.**

Rhododendron periclymenoides is sometimes confused with the roseshell azalea (*R. austrinum*). Usually, but not always, *R. austrinum*, is a deeper pink with a spicy clove fragrance rather than the sweeter perfume of *R. periclymenoides*.

Roseshell azalea always delights us with its very pronounced fragrance. But it has also surprised and delighted us with some of its variations. We started with a bright rose-colored clone that we obtained years ago from Weston Nurseries. It was selected for both its color and its fragrance. Some of its offspring include:

- **'Opus One'**. 'Opus One' has bright pink buds that open into fragrant large blush pink flowers with deeper pink on the upper petals. It produces a very large truss.
- **'Stop, Look & Listen'**. This cultivar has soft pale pink flowers with sharply contrasting rose-red stamens and tube.
- **'Yes, Indeed'**. A selection with flowers having a blush pink color with deeper pink edges to the petals and a hint of a yellow flare.
- **'Marie Hoffman'**. This is a lovely, fragrant, deep pink from Mike Johnson at Summer Hill Nursery. Its flowers are much larger than the species, but are considerably smaller than our own 'Opus One'.

***Rhododendron prunifolium*, the plumleaf azalea.**

The plumleaf azalea is one of the last native azaleas to bloom. It is native to southwestern Georgia and eastern Alabama, yet it has proved hardy in our gardens for years. Our plants that Henry Skinner sent us, nearly 30 years ago from the National Arboretum, are the selection 'Hohman' which are more than 6 to 8 ft tall and wide.

They normally start to bloom in our gardens about the middle of July. In our light woodland shade that gives them some afternoon protection, they continue blooming for a month or more, at least into mid-August, and this past cool summer into September. In full sun they open all at once and last for a 7 to 10 days. Our seedling-grown plants of *R. prunifolium* are predominantly in shades of red and orange-red. But we do get some variation in both flower color and time of bloom.

- **'Plumb Lovely'**. A selection that is considerably lighter in color than 'Hohman', but seems to vary in color from one year to the next. I have notes indicating that it was a lovely soft coral-pink one year. In the year I took this picture it was obviously more of a buff yellow with shadings of peach or apricot. It is 'Plumb Lovely' in any case.
- **'Plumb Later'**. This cultivar blooms even later, opening as it does in late August, or the beginning of September, and continuing to bloom through much of that month. It is a soft orange.

***Rhododendron vaseyi*, the pinkshell azalea.**

Jekyll cautioned Mr. Hyde:
 “Vatch out vat you do –
 Ve don’t vant dem vondering
 Vich is me and vich is you.
 “Vitneses of homicide
 Makes tough de alibi
 Ven dat jury’s vondering
 Vas ’e you or vaseyi?”

This species is native to the mountains of North Carolina. Its soft pink and rose flowers are an absolute delight, blooming as they do in early to mid-May before their leaves appear. Most become very tall plants of 6 to 8 ft and more. A delicate soft coloring of the blossom is typical and the fall color can be exceptional.

- **‘Pinkerbell’**. This cultivar is a gorgeous strain with considerably deeper pink flowers.
- **‘White Find’**. This is an example of one of several white forms that we grow.

***Rhododendron viscosum*, the swamp azalea.**

Mike Johnson selected a clone of *R. viscosum* that is called ‘Pink Mist’. This species is native to the Eastern United States but in my opinion it is not as desirable a garden plant as *R. arborescens*. It seems to bloom a little later than *R. arborescens*; but I don’t find the flowers as showy, nor the plant and its foliage as attractive. It is reputed to be able to tolerate wetter growing conditions than most other azaleas, and perhaps it can when growing in the wild, but we grow it in containers under the same conditions as we grow our other azaleas. Whether the fact that it has not been acclimated to wetter conditions in the nursery makes it any less tolerant of them I can’t say. But it is a consideration I take pains to point out to customers contemplating them for wetter areas.

- **‘Bob’s Bayou Beauty’**. Here is a pretty good argument for continuing to grow some of these natives from seed. This selection is an open pollinated seedling of ‘Pink Mist’. Blooming for the first time this summer, it opens as a deeper brighter pink and matures to a soft light pink. It blooms about 5 days later than ‘Pink Mist’ and is intensely fragrant.

Before I continue let me remind you of a couple of selling points for persuading gardeners to include native azaleas in their home landscapes. They should take advantage of their fragrances. By using the species *periclymenoides*, *austrinum*, *atlanticum*, *arborescens*, and *viscosum*, in that sequence, they can have a nearly continuous succession of fragrances from mid-May well into July.

Secondly they can enjoy an extended blooming season. *Rhododendron vaseyi* starts off our native azalea blooming season in early May. But by using the later-blooming species as well, they can have azaleas in bloom in June, July and August — even into September with Jim Cross’s ‘Sweet September’. They can plan a nearly continuous sequence of bloom with the species *cumberlandense*, *arborescens*, *viscosum*, and *prunifolium*. Then expand their color palette with some of our summer blooming natives. That way they’ll be enjoying “next” spring along about the first day of “this” summer.

So Let's Look at Some More Late-Blooming Natives.

As many of you are no doubt aware, from having either seen or read about them, native azaleas frequently grow in the wild in extensive colonies. And one of the nicest aspects of these swarms, as they are called, is that they don't believe in ethnic cleansing. They are absolutely delighted to interbreed and hybridize with other azalea species. This of course gives straight-laced purists and taxonomists fits, but gives gardeners and collectors in search of diversity a wealth of material to landscape with.

Having gotten myself tied down to my nursery, much the same way that a dairy farmer does to his cows, I've had to create my own swarms, albeit on a considerably more modest scale. To some, including my ever-patient wife, it seemed that I've tried to grow every azalea in existence that would be hardy. But I really have attempted to specialize.

Now it just so happens that my specializing has addressed a concern of one of our favorite customers. And possibly it's a concern that your customers may share too. We usually receive a number of orders from him each year, each being sent as the inspiration strikes him. Writing to add to his first fall order on the third day of July, he wrote: "Nostalgia (already?): Monet's apple trees (which were pictured on his note paper) prompt this question from Old Dribbler: Why can't we have another spring each year, say, about July 1?"

And lo and behold, we do. Not just with the species I've been showing you this morning, but with my hybrid swarms. Fortunately they're made up of the crosses I've been growing for years of the late blooming natives, *R. cumberlandense* and *R. arborescens*. We call them Carlson's Postscripts.

So I was able to advise Old Dribbler that:

Azaleas in June and July!
Need no longer seem pie in the sky –
Carlson's Postscripts will bring
You an encore to Spring
When the usual kinds have gone by.

We've been selecting and naming representative colors and forms of them for a number of years now. Many are described in the revised and enlarged edition of Fred Galle's marvelous book *Azaleas*. A few of these include:

- **'Salmon Chanted Evening'**. This is a nicely veined light salmon-pink with a large golden yellow flare that was still opening on July 4th.
- **'Dream Lover'**. 'Dream Lover' is a slightly deeper shade of salmon pink with a less conspicuous golden orange flare.
- **'Let's Dance'**. This one was named shortly after we lost Benny Goodman. 'Let's Dance' is a very showy fragrant pale pink with a light yellow upper petal.
- **'Summer Bouquet'**. In 'Summer Bouquet' the flower is striped pink with a hint of a yellow flare that blooms in early July.
- **'Moonlight Serenade'**. A selection that is a fragrant, soft salmon-pink with creamy yellow undertones and a soft yellow flare in late June.
- **'Lady Marmalade'**. 'Lady Marmalade' is a lovely light yellow with a brighter yellow flare in July.
- **'Thou Swell'**. This is a bright pink with deeper rose striping down the center of each petal and a hint of gold in the throat. It was still in full bloom on the 10th of July.

Before I continue I'm going to offer you a few words of caution to pass along to anyone who might be thinking of acquiring some late-blooming beauties. They should think long and hard whether they should keep them and plant them for themselves, or whether they should give them to a friend or neighbor, because:

Who would have thought
Nosy Myrtle McWhirtle,
Who grew pachysandra
And nothing much more
Till her neighbors chipped in and
Bought her some POSTSCRIPTS,
Would summer at home
Instead of next-door?

- **'Exactly Like You'**. 'Exactly Like You' is a bright rose-red with an orange flare over much of the upper petal.
- **'That Certain Feeling'**. 'That Certain Feeling' has very large light pink flowers with a very soft yellow flare. Its blooms last an exceptionally long time, well into mid-July.
- **'I Remember Apri'**. This selection blooms with the Old Dribbler's request in mind – in early July in varying shades of pink with a light yellow flare and showy red stamens. Not only that, but it's also fragrant!
- **'Fine & Dandy'**. 'Fine & Dandy' is a well veined medium pink with a contrasting very pale pink upper petal in early July.
- **'Glad Rag Doll'**. This is a large bright salmon-pink with a golden orange flare in late June.
- **'Later Than You Pink'**. A few of them got sillier names than others. Despite the name it is a nicely veined bright pink with a golden yellow flare framed in a lighter pink.
- **'Sing, Sing, Sing'**. We are back honoring the memory of Benny Goodman with this one. 'Sing, Sing, Sing' is a festive salmon-pink with a golden yellow upper petal in late June.
- **'Such A Night'**. Dr. John's 'Such A Night' has many large light pink flowers with a yellow flare and contrasting red stamens in late June.
- **'Lovey Mine'**. This is a beautifully veined fragrant pink with a golden throat.

I'm going to close with a short salute to my favorite nurseryman, Jim Cross. Jim and my wife, Jan, shared their cancer fight and hoped for cures for nearly a year. They both lost the fight, and were both always so supportive. And Jim repeatedly said that the following verse was one of his favorites.

So for Jim, and for Jan, I give you:

Protocol for royal balls
Calls for first unmasking
Common folk from royalty
Courteously asking:
"Vot's yore nomber, name and rank?
Iss you a king or lackey?
Lackey's has to schtand in line
Vile kings can schlippenbachi"