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Propagation of Deciduous Azaleas[®]

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INTRODUCTION

There are 15 deciduous azalea species native to the Eastern United States, but they are relatively rare in our gardens. In 1791, plant explorer William Bartram said of *Rhododendron calendulaceum*, the Flame Azalea (Fig. 1), "This is certainly the most gay and brilliant flowering shrub yet known." (Slaughter, 1996). Our native azaleas have been greatly admired for hundreds of years, but partially due to propagation difficulties, these species are still not widely available in the trade.

Native deciduous azaleas come in a wide range of colors, and many are delightfully fragrant. Species bloom at various times of year, from early spring to late summer. Most native azaleas are not bothered by mildew, a major problem with the deciduous Knap Hill and Exbury azalea hybrids. Adapted to local environments, native azaleas require less care than many garden shrubs. Their delicate flowers, which usually bloom over a long time period, are also less susceptible to weather. Many plants have very attractive foliage. Unfortunately, due to loss of habitat, theft, deer browsing, and competition from invasive alien species, many wild azaleas are threatened.

EAST COAST NATIVE AZALEA SPECIES

Native azaleas are quite variable, and rare forms still exist in the wild that should be preserved and propagated. Some species are better suited to southeastern gardens, but the author briefly comments about all 15 native species, grouping them by color and order of bloom (Kron, 1993).



Figure 1. Picture of flame azalea in flower.

White Group.

Rhododendron alabamense – White with a yellow blotch; fragrant; sometimes difficult in containers.

Rhododendron atlanticum – White to pale pink; very fragrant with attractive blue-green foliage.

Rhododendron eastmanii – First identified as a species in 1995; flowers white with a yellow blotch.

Rhododendron arborescens – Very fragrant; white with red stamens; excellent heat tolerance, and roots fairly easily.

Rhododendron viscosum [Includes the *R. serrulatum* (see *viscosum*), *R. oblongifolium* (see *viscosum*), and *R. coryanum* (syn. *coryi*)] – Fragrant white flowers.

Pink Group.

Rhododendron vaseyi – Delicate pink to white flowers; adaptable plant but often difficult to root.

Rhododendron canadense (formerly *R. rhodora*) – Small purple flowers; does not like heat or drought.

Rhododendron canescens – Pink to white; mildly fragrant; good heat tolerance.

Rhododendron perclymenoides (formerly *R. nudiflorum*) – Similar to *R. canescens* but more difficult to root.

Rhododendron prinophyllum (formerly *R. roseum*) – Deep pink; fragrant; not very heat tolerant.

Orange Group.

Rhododendron austrinum – Yellow to gold; fragrant; heat tolerant and excellent in the southeast.

Rhododendron flammeum (formerly *R. speciosum*) – Yellow, orange, or red; heat tolerant; hard to root.

Rhododendron calendulaceum – Yellow, orange, or red; not as heat tolerant and often difficult to root.

Rhododendron cumberlandense – Similar to *R. calendulaceum*, but blooms slightly later; difficult to root.

Rhododendron prunifolium – Red to coral; blooms in mid- to late summer; heat tolerant; easy to root.

Natural Hybrids.

Gregory Bald Azaleas – Blends of white, yellow, pink, orange, and red; blooms in June.

CUTTING PROPAGATION

Stem cuttings are often preferred for vegetative propagation, but rooting deciduous azaleas can often be problematic. One major difficulty is that after cuttings root, they often refuse to break dormancy the following year. Since the plants drop their

CONCLUSIONS

Our native deciduous azaleas of the Southeastern U.S. make excellent landscape plants and deserve wider distribution. Selected clones can be propagated by methods such as softwood cuttings, dormant cuttings, and basal shoot cuttings. Most of the difficulty related to vegetative propagation centers around dormancy problems where cuttings root but fail to grow. In vitro tissue culture propagation is proving to be a valuable method for rapid increase of cloned forms. Quality plants can also be raised from seed to blooming size in a few years with relative ease.

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