

Out in the Garden

Rockport Garden Club, February 2021



Garden Diary

Native Azaleas, Who Knew?

When I thought about writing an article for February, I dug deep into my personal experience and realized I don't do anything in the garden that month. It's always been month of planning and research...and wishful thinking.

I took a look around to see if there's anything that can be planted in the garden then. The list for planting bloomers is short...pretty much just Roses and Azaleas. Given all our recent presentations about the benefits provided by the ornamental qualities and wildlife support offered by native alternatives for popular plants, I decided to check out native Azaleas.

Are there native Azaleas? You bet. I found one nursery in our zone (6b) that offers 16 natives with flowers encompassing almost all the colors of the rainbow. Interestingly, only our native azaleas come in yellow.

I don't have any experience with azaleas. I don't plant many spring-blooming plants or shrubs, but I've discovered that the bloom times for native varieties span most of the growing season, March to September. Who knew?

Azaleas are part of the Rhododendron family and have been cultivated for centuries, primarily in Japan. There are over 10,000 different cultivars. Most of the US azaleas are indigenous to the southeast regions and there are many Azalea festivals to attend down there. The range of native azaleas is from Massachusetts down. It's not a mystery that native azaleas are relatively unknown. The tremendous popularity of the Asian species has created a standard for what we think azaleas should be: spring blooming, evergreen and perfect for foundation plantings.



Native azaleas are deciduous and will lose their leaves during the winter. Their colors are usually not as vivid as their Asian cousins, but there's something to be said about the beauty of softer, subtler hues. When they bloom, they burst forth before the leaves arrive. The flowers are typically clustered and funnel-shaped. That shape is perfect for hummingbirds. Azaleas are a hummingbird's juice bar. That reason alone put azaleas on my wish list. The flowers run from very fragrant to none. And the flowers bloom on old wood so be judicious when you prune.

As for the stats, native azaleas are dense, bushy, sometimes suckering shrubs that typically grow from 2-6+ feet. Some natives grow quite tall and airy...up to 15 feet! Basically woodland plants, they do best with half day sun. High dappled shade is the norm, but some natives can thrive in full sun where Asiatics fail. When grown in light shade, they grow faster, leaf out better and flower more evenly and profusely. They can thrive where some Asiatics can't...like wet spots. They like moist roots, but don't much like "wet feet" or standing water. Once established, most can handle a moderate amount of drought, but best to water when it's just too dry...like you would a hydrangea. Many of the natives tolerate dryish, sandy or rocky soils, even clay! They are moderately slow growers. Oh, and parts of the plant are poisonous if ingested. Don't feed it to your pets or partners.

Like most rhododendrons, they prefer acidic soil...perfect for us. Azalea fertilizers are available, but a general 10-10-10 will do well. Fertilizing at the wrong time can create problems...don't fertilize after August because you might stimulate new growth that will be damaged in cold conditions. Fertilize in the spring and fertilize widely because the roots extend far beyond the canopy/diameter of the bush...three times as far!

Native Azaleas are as low maintenance as their overseas counterparts. Pretty much plant 'em and walk away. I'm printing a page of photos and descriptions to show you how lovely and versatile these shrubs are. They're considered to be some of our most beautiful native shrubs. Cultivating native plants gives a regional feeling to a landscape and blends the natural history of our area into your garden.

Gorgeous photos and descriptions follow courtesy of

[Natural Landscapes Nursery](#) (Zone 6b)

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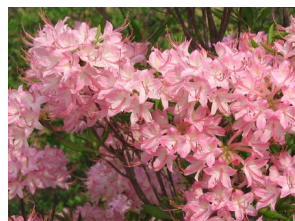
Native Azeleas, Who Knew?, cont'd



Florida Flame Azalea,
Rhododendron austrinum
Late April-Early May
Ht. 6-7'. (Sun - partial shade)



Flame Azalea,
Rhododendron calendulaceum
Mid May-June
Ht. 5-6'+. (Sun - partial shade)



Piedmont Azalea,
Rhododendron canescens
Early-Mid May
Ht. 4-6'+. (Sun - partial shade)



Roseshell Azalea,
Rhododendron prinophyllum
Mid May
Ht. 2-6'+. (Sun - partial shade)



Pinkshell Azalea,
Rhododendron vaseyi
Late April - Early May
Ht. 5-6'+. (Sun - partial shade)



Sweet or Smooth Azalea,
Rhododendron arborescens
May-June, July-Aug
Ht. 2-6' (Sun - partial shade)



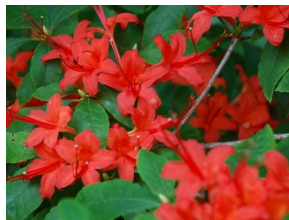
Oconee Azalea hybrids,
Rhododendron flammeum X
Early to Mid May
Ht. 5'+. (Sun - partial shade)



Cumberland Azalea,
Rhododendron cumberlandense
Mid June-Early July
Ht. 4-6 ft. (Sun - partial shade)



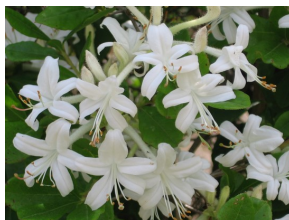
Pinxterbloom Azalea,
Rhododendron periclymenoides
Early to Mid May
Ht. 3-6'+. (Sun - partial shade)



Plumleaf Azalea,
Rhododendron prunifolium
Late July - August
Ht. 4-6'+. (Sun - partial shade)



Alabama Azalea,
Rhododendron alabamense
Mid May
Ht. 5-6 ft. (Sun - partial shade)



Swamp Azalea,
Rhododendron viscosum
Mid June-July
Ht. 4-6'+. (Sun - partial shade)



Coast Azalea Hybrid,
Rhododendron atlanticum
Mid May
Ht. 3-6'. (Sun - partial shade)



Hummocksweet Azalea,
Rhododendron visc. v. Serrulatum
July - September
Ht. 6-8'+. (Sun - partial shade)

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The Garden Cart: Hellebore

The first hellebore I encountered was the pure white *Helleborus niger*, commonly known as the Christmas rose which true to its name bloomed every Christmas morning during the eleven years I tended a garden in Charlotte, NC.

I was impressed that a plant would bloom at such an unreasonable time of the year with freezing temperatures and snow. So my obsession started. Upon retirement, I cajoled my husband to drive a U-Haul truck with hundreds of plants north including my beloved hellebore collection. To my delight the hellebores are thriving and the first blooms I recorded this year were on January eighth. Blooms will continue until early May.



This tough plant belongs to the Ranunculaceae family and most are native to the mountainous regions of Europe. Today after decades of extensive hybridization between the different species, breeders have developed single, double, and anemone forms in almost every color except true blue and red. Unfortunately, new introductions are made every year so it is nearly impossible to control my obsession.

Hellebores grow best in part shade and hate soggy soils or wet sites. They look good in a woodland setting. The crown should be planted at ground level. In the right conditions, they are long lived plants (many of mine are 15 years old) and do not need dividing. Deer and rabbits are not interested in them.

Hellebores tend to nod downward on cold, cloudy days and upward when the sun is shining. This helps to protect the flowers from inclement weather. I try to look for plants that have outward facing flowers and plant them on a hillside where the bloom is at eye-level.

The foliage is evergreen so hellebores make a good ground cover. The previous year's foliage tends to be ratty looking and should be removed. It is hard to know when to cut back the old leaves because they do provide some protection against snow and ice. Old leaves take away from the blooms and if you wait until the buds are too large you may cut off a bud which is

heartbreaking. Usually, I wait until it is warm enough for my old bones to get down on the ground.

Hellebores may be cut for a centerpiece but I prefer floating the blooms in a bowl of water where I can enjoy the different variations. Team hellebores with heuchera, carex and blood twig dogwood to make an attractive spring container.

If you leave the pale green seed heads on though the summer, they add interest to arrangements and occasionally the seeds drop and produce new plants. Hellebores are a trouble-free plant that brings joy during the winter months but beware you can not purchase just one plant.

Attributes:

Height: 1–1.5 feet

Spread: 1–1.5 feet

Hardiness: 4-9

Bloom Color: White, Pink, Purple

Exposure: Part shade to Full shade

Soil Moisture: Rich, Moist Soil

Maintenance: Low

Ecoregion: Caucasus, Turkey

Ornamental Interest: Spring bloom

Tolerance: Drought and Salt

Submitted by Patty Hock

Garden Events

ZOOM Meeting
Monday, February 1st

‘Native Plants for Cape Ann’

Speaker: Nick Anderson
Mingle 12:30 PM
Presentation: 1:00 PM

[ZOOM Meeting Link 2021](#)