

Azaleas: Good News, and Bad

To anticipate your question, yes, azaleas are rhododendrons, members of the Ericaceae family. This genus of 500-900 species of deciduous and evergreen shrubs circles the globe, growing from sea level to mountain regions. To make the subject more understandable, rhododendrons are divided into five main groups: large-leaf (elepidote) evergreen, small-leaf (lepidote) evergreen, *Vireya* (Malesian R. from S.E.Asia), deciduous azaleas, and evergreen azaleas.

In speaking to the Gloucester Master Gardeners last week, rhododendron expert Donald W. Hyatt spoke of the strides being made by the American Rhododendron Society to secure the future of the magnificent azaleas in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina. He showed pictures of Gregory Bald that has a “magnificent hybrid swarm of native azaleas in a wide range of colors”.

Don Hyatt with fellow members of the ARS Middle Atlantic Chapter’s Species Study Group, Jim Brant and George McLellan of Gloucester have done yeoman service on Gregory Bald, the grassy area on a 4,900 foot ridge in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park N.C. and Tenn.

They began their work after seeing the status of the Bald in 1995 being overrun by blackberries and galloping tree seedlings. Through their efforts, the Bald, having shrunk to fewer than 14 acres, was rescued by the ARS donation of a big efficient mower that has enabled the National Park Service crew to begin reclaiming the Bald to its original 33 acres. Additional support from the MAC of the ARS has funded an intern to work on Gregory Bald. [This information came from an article by Brant and McLellan in a recent journal of ARS.]

The peak bloom is usually the third week in June. The Great Smokey Mountain National Park is best approached from Townsend or Gatlinburg, Tenn. In Virginia the Blue Ridge Parkway from Afton (west of Charlottesville) to Roanoke has peak color in early to mid-May for many species. Entering the Parkway at The Peaks of Otter, near Bedford, and driving south will be a delight.

In an era of mountaintop removal it is encouraging to see this stalwart preservation of America’s horticultural heritage, but further remarks by Mr. Hyatt outlined a potentially disastrous plan at the USDA’s National Arboretum in N.E. Washington, D.C. The plan is to cut down the fabled Glenn Dale azaleas as well as the world famous Boxwood Gardens with its host of daffodils, daylilies, and peonies.

It is no secret that the Department of Agriculture, known for its generous subsidies to corn production, has for years been unable to fund the National Arboretum to the extent needed. Although only six acres in extent this azalea collection includes the Glenn Dale Hillside, the Morrison Garden and the Lee Garden. It is one of Washington's premier attractions and the shrubs in the collection are the result of the breeding efforts of the first director of the National Arboretum, Benjamin Y. Morrison. The name, Glenn Dale, refers to the place in Maryland where the original research was carried out.

Morrison's vision resulted in the blending of the large flowers and exciting colors of tender species with the hardiness of the more northern species. From 1946 through 1949 the hillside was planted with 1200 select hybrids. Although only 454 cultivars were introduced into the trade, equally gorgeous ones remain at the Arboretum garden.

Perhaps the garden has become a victim of its own success since thousands attend during the bloom season, taxing both parking and restroom facilities. The Arboretum is open every day in the year except Christmas Day and there is no charge. That is correct, it is free! Surely a small user fee during peak season could provide port-a-potties? Organizations that have held flower shows in April and May just because there IS a crowd, have stated that there is not a real problem and that there is parking at the New York Avenue entrance where the Arboretum offers shuttle service to the various exhibits.

Ultimately, this is something to take up with your congressional representatives. Meantime check out www.savetheazaleas.org.