

Native Azaleas

I was out on the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge recently with our youth leadership class for the nature-based tourism session. I spotted several shrubs with beautiful, light pink blooms.

Since we had several nature presenters leading experiential learning exercises, it was the perfect time to ask “what is this?” “Wild azalea” was the answer.

I don’t know if they are still in bloom now, but I highly recommend visiting the Refuge to see the azaleas and/or anything else that might be in bloom. About the same time as my Refuge visit, I got a column from Horticulture REA Tony Glover on...you guessed it, native azaleas! Here’s an excerpt from his column:

“Wild azaleas” are called deciduous azaleas and are most likely native species. Although there are many native species of azaleas, the one most prevalent in Bibb County is *Rhododendron canescens*, the Piedmont Azalea.

Native azaleas such as the Piedmont Azalea, often called wild honeysuckle bush, are at least as beautiful as their non-native evergreen cousins and are much more fragrant.

As a group, native azaleas are greatly underused in the southern landscape. Most of them are either native to Alabama or will grow well in most areas of the state. The individual florets are trumpet shaped, and they are usually borne in large terminal clusters.

The sweet smelling blooms have led to the common name, wild honeysuckle bush. Identification of native azaleas can be difficult because of the similarities between species. Natural hybridization has complicated the matter by producing many intermediate forms with unusual flower colors.

Many southerners first encountered native deciduous azaleas while walking in the woods. There, they may have spotted the pink, fragrant, delicate flowers of the Piedmont azalea mentioned above or the orange-yellow blooms of the Florida Flame azalea (*Rhododendron austrinum*).

Or, maybe it was the white, yellow-blotched and lemon scented flowers of our namesake Alabama Azalea (*Rhododendron alabamense*). Alabama Azalea, while not the showiest flower, may be the most fragrant of all the native azaleas.

Deciduous azaleas prefer moist, sandy, well-drained soil. Morning sun with afternoon shade will enhance blooming and reduce excessive drying. Pine straw or pine bark mulch should be added to protect the shallow root system.

A light application of slow release azalea fertilizer just after blooming should be sufficient to keep deciduous azaleas growing and blooming. If your soil is not well drained, consider planting on a raised bed or individual mounds.

As landscape specimens in woody areas, deciduous azaleas are a wonderful addition to any landscape. They do best when left un-pruned and allowed to maintain an open natural habit.

Deciduous azaleas are not always available in nurseries, but asking for them will encourage nurseries to stock a wider selection.