



Tony Glover
Regional Extension Agent
News Release

NATIVE AZALEAS

Question: My neighbor has a type of azalea that has a light pink bloom. It is very fragrant and it does not have leaves on it yet. Do you know what kind of azalea this might be?

Answer: As a group, these are called deciduous azaleas and are most likely native species. Although there are many native species of Azaleas the one your neighbor has is likely *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. Some have unusual yellow to orange and orange-red flowers, such as the Florida Flame azalea. 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 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*). 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 ask for them and this will encourage nurseries to stock a wider selection.

Some plants that may be more readily available are native hybrids that were developed for superior quality. A friend of mine in Mobile, Tom Dodd, III, has developed several of these hybrids that he calls the Confederate series. These hybrids are well adapted to our climate, have larger blooms than the native azaleas and they're all fragrant. Some names to look for in this series include 'Admiral Semmes' that has big, fragrant yellow flowers and 'Col. Mosby' with large fragrant deep pink flowers that fade to light pink with a yellow blotch. At the front door of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, General N.B. Forrest is now in full bloom. It has large ruffled, red-orange blooms in clusters that show off in late April. If you want to look at pictures of these and other great native plants, go to the following web address: www.doddnatives.com.

For more about this topic please contact Tony Glover, Regional Extension Agent-Home Horticulture, Home Gardens and Home Pest Management at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@auburn.edu.

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