

# Exploring the Cumberland Azalea

Among “plant people” there is talk of mythical places. Stories are told of unrivaled beauty, of extraordinary finds. For lovers of deciduous azaleas, Gregory Bald, deep in the Smoky Mountains straddling the North Carolina–Tennessee border, is such a place—a botanical hotspot, a veritable paradise of azaleas. Several species of deciduous azaleas known for their brilliantly colored, often fragrant, flowers converge on the meadowlike summit of this nearly 5,000-foot peak creating a genetic playground for azaleas and giving rise to a legendary group of azalea hybrids as well as an unforgettable display.

Whether in the garden or in the wild, azaleas attract attention; they are undeni-

ably one of nature’s showiest offerings. Polly Hill’s passion for azaleas, evidenced by her renowned North Tisbury azaleas, encompassed eastern U.S. native species and included the flamboyant Cumberland azalea. In the wild the Cumberland azalea, *Rhododendron cumberlandense*, inhabits higher elevation forests and forest margins in a range extending from western Virginia and eastern Kentucky in the north to northern Georgia and Alabama in the south, restricted in part to its namesake plateau and mountains. Over this range it produces startlingly vibrant orange, red, or yellow flowers from mid-spring to early summer against a background of dark green foliage.

The Cumberland azalea throws its DNA into the mix atop Gregory Bald. And, in the fall of 1967, Olin Holsomback of Georgia made the arduous journey to the fabled bald to collect seed. As is the custom with plantspeople, he reserved seed to share, some of which made it to Polly in exchange for a handful of cuttings.

By 1972 Polly’s azalea seed had grown into young plants; she trained her keen eye on the three most promising seedlings, transplanting them that same year to just outside the Play Pen where visitors can still find them today. Conditions there were ideal: well-drained, acidic soil, filtered sunlight, and an ample mulch of leaf litter.

Over the years Polly admired her



*Rhododendron cumberlandense* ‘Chalif’, a PHA introduction, creates a splash of color in early summer.

plants and she decided to formally name and register them with the American Rhododendron Society. The one she named ‘Chalif’ (above) is the earliest to bloom. Its shocking orange flowers open in mid-June. Few shrubs furnish the landscape with as much visual drama as deciduous azaleas. Polly tactfully suggests in her notes, “This handsome shrub needs a green setting to absorb the brilliance of its flowers.” She named ‘Sizzler’ for its fiery orange blooms. The third she called ‘Sunlight’; its flowers are an incomparable blend of red, orange, and gold. (See picture on the front cover.) The glow of this plant can be counted on well into July. Of the three seeds whose auspicious beginnings were atop Gregory Bald, ‘Sizzler’ is just shy of 11 feet; ‘Sunlight’ reaches 16 feet; and ‘Chalif’ commands 20 feet. With proper pruning, these shrubs can be easily managed in a home landscape at a 6- to 10-foot range.

The Cumberland azalea is only one example of the botanical beauty of East Coast native azaleas. In the future we plan to visit the same natural areas for wild-collected seed to further explore their genetic potential. The PHA is home to at least a dozen species of native azaleas and a range of hybrids and cultivars. Many make excellent shrubs for the home landscape. To learn more, join Collections and Grounds Manager Tom Clark on Tuesday, June 17, from 10 to 11am for a special tour of the collection.



Native azaleas bloom at Gregory Bald on the western fringe of the Great Smokey Mountains. Photo: Rick Darke