

Callaway Gardens<sup>®</sup>  
Home Horticulture

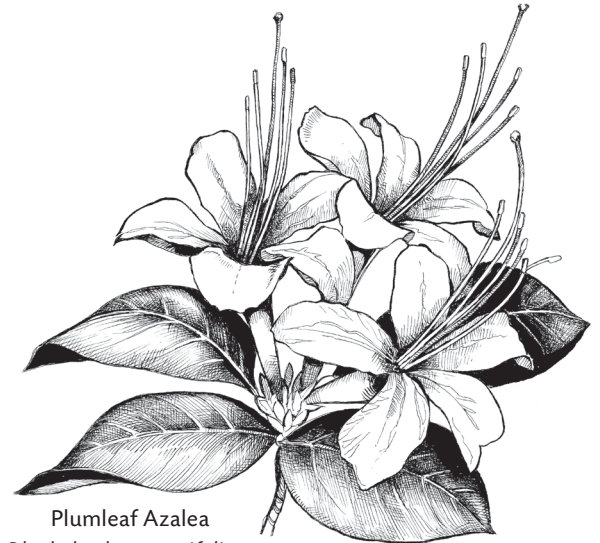
# NATIVE AZALEAS

Deciduous azaleas are often referred to as “honeysuckles,” perhaps because of the sweet fragrance of many species. They are, in fact, true azaleas of the genus *Rhododendron* and are **not** related to the honeysuckle vine. Many species are native to the Southeast and should be used more extensively in landscaping.

The following is a partial list describing some of the species growing at Callaway Gardens. Careful selection of species will provide flower color from March through August. The species are listed in sequence of flowering.

## Florida Azalea *Rhododendron austrinum*

The attractive golden-yellow flowers of the Florida azalea are often the first of the native azaleas to bloom in our area. It flowers in March and early April along with the Piedmont azalea and can reach heights of 15 feet. Its sweet, lemony fragrance makes this species even more desirable. The blossoms precede the leaves by a few days. Some forms have pink or reddish tubes, perhaps being natural hybrids with the Piedmont. The hardiness range is zone 7-10.



Plumleaf Azalea  
*Rhododendron prunifolium*

## Piedmont Azalea *Rhododendron canescens*

This is our most abundant native azalea, occurring naturally from east Texas to Virginia. Its color ranges from solid white to deep pink. Its sweet fragrance makes it delightful in the landscape. Hardy from zone 9 to 6, the shrub will grow 10 to 15 feet tall. Since it is one of the first native azaleas to bloom, flowering in March and early April, the leaves develop as the flowers open.

## Oconee Azalea *Rhododendron flammeum*

This brilliant orange to orange-red species usually blooms in mid-April. Because of its flower color, it is one of the most striking of the native azaleas. The color range varies a great deal since there are naturally occurring hybrids with the Piedmont azalea. Oconee azaleas may reach 8 to 10 feet in height, growing in zone 8 to 6.

## Flame Azalea *Rhododendron calendulaceum*

This is the native azalea prized by most people. Indigenous to the Appalachian Mountains, it will grow from zone 8 to 5. Blooming late, in June, its flowers are approximately two inches across. The flower size is thought to be a result of having twice the number of chromosomes as other species. The color range is relatively diverse, yellow-orange to deep red. The plants attain a height of 10 to 12 feet.

## Cumberland Azalea *Rhododendron cumberlandense*

This brilliant red azalea is spectacular in the landscape. Occurring naturally at high elevations of the Cumberland Plateau, it flowers in late June to early July. Its hardiness zone is 8 to 5 with a wide variation in height from 1 to 2 feet to 5 to 6 feet and sometimes even taller. The flowers are similar to those of the Flame azalea.

## Sweet Azalea *Rhododendron arborescens*

Considered by many to be the best white native azalea for the southeastern region, the beautiful white flowers have prominent red stamens. It may attain a height of 8 to 12 feet and its sweet fragrance is reminiscent of cloves or heliotrope. There is an early blooming form (May and June) and a late blooming form (July and August). The late flowering form is seen more often in our area, flowering with the Plumleaf azalea. It grows in zone 8 to 5.

## Plumleaf Azalea *Rhododendron prunifolium*

Found naturally only within 100 miles of Callaway Gardens, the Plumleaf azalea is the Gardens' floral emblem. Flowering in July and August, and sporadically into September, it is a welcome addition to the summer landscape. The flower color ranges from orange to deep red. Since it blooms in the hottest part of the year, it is essential for this plant to be grown in somewhat shaded conditions, out of full afternoon sun. It is a tall grower, up to 15 or 20 feet, and can grow from zone 9 to 6.

## CULTIVATION

Native azaleas should be treated much like the cultivated azaleas with which you are familiar. They prefer some shade, especially the late blooming species. Dense shade, however, causes fewer bloom buds to form.

Good drainage is essential for native azaleas. Plant spacing may range from 4 to 6 feet apart. Azaleas prefer acid soil (pH 4.5 to 5.5) with plenty of organic matter. As with cultivated azaleas, it is important not to plant too deeply. In fact, they should be planted slightly higher than the surrounding soil and mulched well. Watering is very important. Plants should be watered one inch per week during the first growing season unless there is adequate rainfall.

Native azaleas generally require little pruning. Dead or old wood may be removed after flowering or established plants can be cut back to control height. When pruning, remember that the flower buds form in summer for the following year. Fertilization is similar to cultivated azaleas, using formulations such as 12-6-6 or 10-5-7, in mid-March or early April, and again in June or July.

Collecting native azaleas in the wild is generally not recommended for the beginning gardener. They have shallow roots and many are destroyed when transplanting from the wild. Special handling and severe pruning are necessary for their insured survival.

The Plumleaf azalea is protected under the provision of the Georgia Wildlife Protection Act of 1973. Other native azaleas, including the Florida and Oconee species are plants of special concern for preservation in the wild.

## WINTER SHRUB DAMAGE

Horticulturists base their planting recommendations on hardiness zones. Occasionally, the minimum temperature is much lower than normal and ornamental plants suffer damage from this extreme. If you are concerned about winter injury on azaleas and other ornamentals, the staff at Callaway Gardens offers some suggestions.

Begin your selective pruning for winter damage after spring growth starts. It is best to wait until you are absolutely sure of what is dead and what is not before pruning back to live wood. Scratch the outer bark to the thin cambium layer. Green color indicates that the stem is alive. Any stems which have severely split bark should be removed, as these lesions allow entrance of insects and disease. Even though you may have lost this year's flower buds, many of your azaleas will survive to give you spectacular color in succeeding years.

### USDA Cold Hardiness Zones

(Average minimum temperatures)

5	-20 to -10 F
6	-10 to 0 F
7	0 to 10 F
8	10 to 20 F
9	20 to 30 F
10	30 to 40 F

  
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