

This Week in the Garden: “What Color is *R. austrinum*?” - March 28, 2020 by Don Hyatt

Rather than showing images of what is in bloom in ARS District 9 this week, I wanted to share some native azalea pictures Ron Miller, just sent me. Spring is in high gear where he lives on the Florida Panhandle. I hope you enjoy seeing the flowers he admired while on a solo boating trip along the Escambia River last weekend. This river meanders its way through a dense wilderness area north of Pensacola, and the azaleas along the banks were in full bloom.

In this photo essay, I have included a few images Ralf Bauer sent me from a prior trip to that area. Ron didn't send any selfies but Ralf took a few images of him. Ralf is a dentist from Germany, and a native azalea enthusiast who belongs to our Potomac Valley Chapter. He often flies to the US to go hiking with us to places like Roan Mountain and Gregory Bald. Ralf has traveled extensively with Ron but had to cancel plans this year due to the pandemic.

Still spry at age 81, Ron is an expert on the flora of the Southeastern US. He also holds a Ph.D. in English which could explain his awesome writing style. Ron is an inspiration!



Ron Miller

Photo: Ralf Bauer



R. austrinum

Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller

Many of us are sure that Ron has seen more plants of *R. austrinum*, the Florida Azalea, than anyone else in history. He has been studying this azalea and many other native plants for decades in an area where few have traveled. We gardeners admire *R. austrinum* for its color and fragrance, but also for the heat tolerance it has provided to other azalea hybrids. How much do we know about this species?

Ron posed a simple question, “What color is *R. austrinum*?” Most publications will parrot the textbook description that it comes in shades of yellow to orange. That is certainly true of the forms we usually grow, but the taxonomists who have pushed that narrative have had limited experience in the wild. Ron sent us many photos he took that day. Have our thoughts been too narrow?



R. austrinum and Ron's Boat Photo: Ralf Bauer

Ron is a very creative and independent thinker, quick to recognize that established norms may not necessarily be true. He warns that botanists should stop looking at dried herbarium specimens and get out in the wild to see how plants actually grow. My favorite quote from Ron in an email he wrote was, "Botanists who only look at herbarium specimens are like zoologists who only look at road kill."

Only a person with Ron's depth of knowledge would notice the tiny details he sees. He has written ground-breaking articles for our journals. He sensed the "May Pink" or Red Hills azaleas didn't match conventional forms. In 2008, that azalea was determined to be a new species, *R. colemanii*. Ron coined the name "smokianum" for a dwarf purple form of *R. minus* we see in the Smokies. He now wants us to look more carefully at *R. austrinum*.



Pink Tetraploid Azaleas Photo: Ron Miller



Escambia River Scene Photo: Ralf Bauer

The epicenter of *R. austrinum* in the wild is likely the Florida Panhandle. The plants can be found on the banks of dense wilderness areas as the rivers work their way to the Gulf. Some of those regions are only accessible by boat. The Escambia River is one of those tributaries, and the one Ron explored last weekend. It is interesting to note that the Florida Azalea is not native to the rest of the state of Florida.



Pink Tetraploid Photo: Ron Miller



White Tetraploid Photo: Ron Miller

The pink and white azaleas seen in that area were assumed to be *R. canescens* but Ron said the plants were not typical for the species. They looked more like *R. austrinum* except for the color. *R. canescens* is diploid, and those pinks and whites have now been shown to be tetraploids, just like *R. austrinum*. They are not *R. canescens*, but what are they?

Ron has collected seeds from these pink and white tetraploids, and has kindly shared them through various seed exchanges. Many people are growing them now, and we can look forward to seeing them bloom in our gardens.

Perhaps future DNA studies will tell us exactly what these azaleas are. Are they color variations of *R. austrinum*? Is it a new species? Of course, Ron will ask us, "What exactly *is* a species?"

These azaleas come in yellow, orange, pink, and white, but there are also multicolored blends that rival the famous azaleas on top of Gregory Bald. The rest of these images were taken by Ron to document the diversity of that swarm. Enjoy!



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller

Thank you, Ron,
for making us aware
of the diverse forms
of this native azalea.
“What color is *R.
austrinum*?” The best
we can say is, “What
color do you want?”



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller



Photo: Ron Miller

Garden Share - ARS District 9
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