

This Week in the Garden #09: “The Merry Month of May” - May 16, 2020

by Don Hyatt - Potomac Valley Chapter ARS

May is high season in our local rhododendron and azalea gardens. Normally we would be having garden tours and flower shows, or visiting friends to see special plants that just opened. It is the time to finish potting up cuttings and seedlings, and to move plants to larger containers so they have room to grow for the rest of the season. I must do that!

This is also the time when the upper elevations of the Southern Appalachians awaken. Spring begins in the valleys and gradually works its way up the mountains due to a factor called the “lapse rate.” For every 1000 ft increase in altitude, the temperature is generally 3 degrees cooler which is why spring is delayed at the higher elevations.

Peak bloom for the rhododendrons and flame azaleas won't happen until the middle of June but the first two weeks of May is when the early spring wildflowers and native azaleas like *R. vaseyi* will be opening near Mount Pisgah. (5,722 ft.) It is the perfect time to drop everything and head south.

Rhododendron vaseyi

R. vaseyi is considered rare since it has a very limited range in the mountains of North Carolina. There are essentially two regions where it grows, one near Mt. Pisgah and another near Grandfather Mountain. In the wild, it only grows between 4000 and 6000 feet in elevation but it does well for us.

The plant is easily accessed from the Parkway but there are many pretty trails, too. In its realm, *R. vaseyi* is a primary understory shrub and there are places where the mountaintops will take on a pink haze when it is in bloom. The delicate flowers come in various shades of rose pink to white, and they dance in the breeze like butterflies. It is surely one of our most charming native azalea species.



Blush Pink *R. vaseyi*

Hyatt



R. vaseyi at the Devil's Courthouse Overlook

Hyatt



R. vaseyi on the Parkway at MP 425

Hyatt



“Near Red” *R. vaseyi* at MP 419.2

Hyatt



R. vaseyi on the trail to Pilot Mountain Hyatt

R. vaseyi near Pisgah is only found on 17 miles on the Parkway. It starts about milepost 410, gets quite dense at MP 425, but quits soon after that. George McLellan and I have studied this area and on Rt. 215 as it descends from the Parkway at Beach Gap to the valley below. The late Ed Collins thought this was the epicenter for *R. vaseyi* in the US. There are places for a few cars to pull off the road and admire them up close.

We have hiked to the top of nearby Pilot Mountain where *R. vaseyi* is so thick it is like walking through a pink cloud. The vistas are fantastic. This year, we wanted to explore more around Grandfather Mountain but that must wait.

We have never seen a pure white in the wild but *R. vaseyi* 'White Find' is such a plant and already in the trade. Our goal has been to find a deep red form. We have seen some very deep rose-colored shades but have yet to find that good red. It must be out there somewhere.



Some Color variations of *R. vaseyi* Hyatt



Vista from Rt. 215 Hyatt

R. minus* var. *carolinianum

This year, we also wanted to study variations of the dwarf rhododendron *R. minus* var. *carolinianum* pictured to the right. It blooms at the same time as *R. vaseyi* and grows in the same general places, Mt. Pisgah and Grandfather Mountain. It is also found in the Linville Gorge but it is lower elevation so there is no *R. vaseyi* and we have never seen it in bloom.

We have noticed variations in flower color depending upon location. The plants near Mt. Pisgah have flowers of white to light pink and most have a prominent yellow to bronze blotch. Images we have seen of the plants in those northern areas look more typical of *R. carolinianum* sold in the trade and used in hybridizing. They tend to be deeper pink with minor spotting. Many plants seem quite compact with smaller, rounded leaves. That area will also be on our "to do" list for future years.



R. minus var *carolinianum* and Color Variations



James Garden Panorama

P. James

The Garden of Paul James - Paul's Paradise

Paul James has created a magnificent 15-acre garden on his property south of Roanoke, VA. It is a floral treasure. The panoramic photo he shared above gives an impression of the breathtaking view from his deck looking out on his garden to the distant mountains. What people may not realize is that everything from where we are to as far as you can see, Cahas Mountain (pictured right), is part of 1000 acres of land that has been in Paul's family for over 200 years. Cahas is the highest peak in Franklin County and has an elevation of 3,571 ft.

Paul has an incredible plant collection and seems to grow everything. He has huge collections of Delp and Haag rhododendrons. I adored his rock garden. It had a chest-high wall so all his treasures were at eye level. I understand the deer liked that too. I hope he can replant.



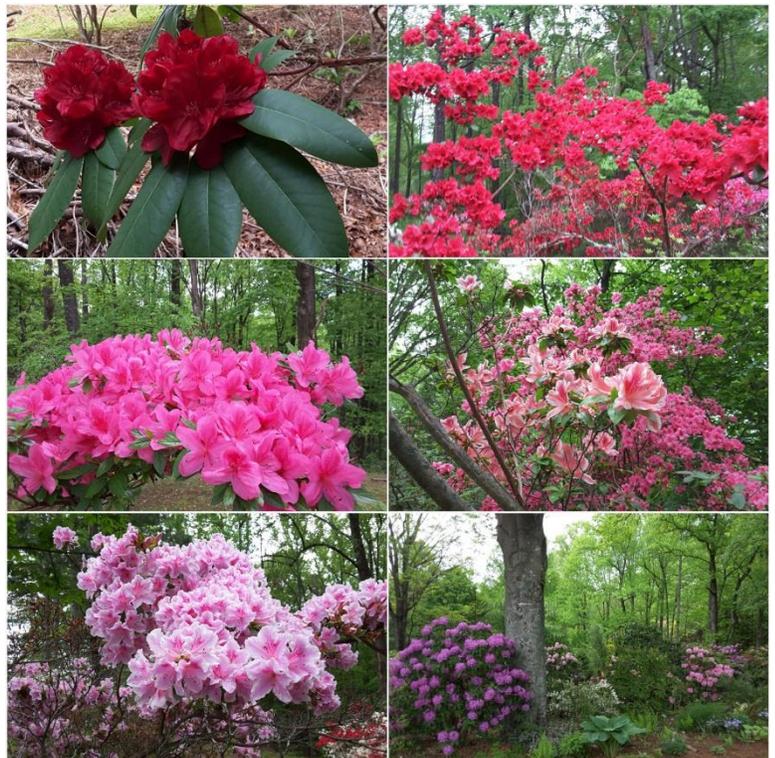
Cahas Mountain from Paul's Deck

Hyatt

One day I would love to see the rich flora on Cahas Mountain. Paul has brought wildflowers from there to his garden including double forms of *Trillium grandiflorum* that he found among the native stands. He moved lovely *R. calendulaceum* selections from Cahas to brighten his landscape. If Paul ever tires of his mountain, the Blue Ridge Parkway is just minutes away. Yes, this is Paradise!



Former Rock Garden, Paul's Home, and Driveway Hyatt



Rhododendrons and Azaleas in Paul's Garden

James



Haag Hybrids: 'Nip and Tuck' and 'Jim Dandy'

Bob and Rosa McWhorter

Rosa sent me a few pictures of their lovely garden in Gambrills, MD. We have toured it many times and it is always a treat. I have added a few pictures of special rhododendrons I admired including a hybrid from George Ring, 'Ring's Lily' and their seedling from (Scintillation x Apritan).



Fragrant Hybrid 'Ring's Lily'



The McWhorter Home & Rosa Gardens McWhorter



Backyard & 'Carrie Amanda'



(Scintillation x Apritan)



Azaleas in the Ravine McWhorter



'Scintillation' and White Azaleas Mohr

Richard and Ginny Mohr

The Mohrs shared some pictures of plantings adjacent to their glassed-in family room. Their pink 'Scintillation' and white azaleas are lovely and the huge clematis is perfection. I admired their Japanese maple, *Acer shirasawanum* 'Autumn Moon' backed up by their pink dogwood. In Supplement #07, I said I liked the color of 'Autumn Moon' with 'My Mary' but now I may need to add a pink dogwood, too. I just need dirt!



Clematis 'Nellie Moser'



Maple 'Autumn Moon' Mohr

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