In Nature’s Garden

By ELIZABETH MURRAY
Charlottesville

if I were really thirsty and had no other possibility for drinking.

Flame-azaleas have almost no fragrance, relying on color for their powers of attraction. A later azalea which has a very strong, sweet fragrance is R. viscosum, the Swamp-Honeysuckle or Clammy Azalea. It is a rather densely branching shrub with shiny, sticky leaves which are already well developed at flowering time. The flowers are white, the lobes of the corolla short and slightly pointed, the corolla tube long and straight. The shrub grows in wet situations from Maine to scattered locations in South Carolina.

The first wild azalea to bloom for us in Virginia is the Pinxtier-flower, *Rhododendron nudiflorum*. This may come out at the end of March in lower sheltered areas and will bloom through April and May. It is a shrub 2′ to 6′ high with narrow, ovate leaves which are deciduous (all the wild azaleas here shed their leaves in winter). The tubular flowers are flesh-colored to pale pink, sometimes a deep ruddy pink at the base. The flowers come out before the leaves, hence the specific name *nudiflorum*. Pinxtier-flowers are found in rocky woods and swamps from Maine west to Illinois and south to Florida and Texas.

The name Pinxtier comes from the Dutch word for Pentecost. In the days when New York was known as New Amsterdam, the Dutch settlers of that area made a great occasion of Pentecost, with what started as a religious festival developing over the years into a feast of merry-making lasting several days. During this time the houses were gaily decorated with live flowers. The celebration became known as the Pinxtier Frolics and since *R. nudiflorum* was one of the flowers most commonly used, it acquired the name Pinxtier-flower.

I always think of the Flame-Azalea, *Rhododendron calendulaceum*, as a June flower, but that is because I encounter it mostly in the woods around Mountain Lake, at an elevation of around 4000′. Lower down, it is well out in May. Flame-azaleas have a magnificent color range from almost red, through all shades of orange and copper, to a pure, brilliant yellow. The shrubs may be quite tall, up to 15′, loosely branching, with fine hairs on the young branchlets. The flowers come out at the tips of last year’s branches at the same time that the leaves are opening. Flame-azaleas are native to the Appalachians, growing in open deciduous woods and along the margins of the forests from Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio down to Georgia and Alabama.

The spongy greenish-white growth which is often found on this azalea is always cited as being an excellent source of fluid for the dry traveler. The liquid which is produced when you bite into one of these growths is a bit sour for my taste, but I suppose I should welcome it to VIRGINIA WILDLIFE 

14
some confusion, but it does seem reasonable at least to keep all the members in the same genus.

There is a long Indian legend concerning wild white azaleas. An old herb woman was brewing a magic potion into which she dropped a handful of pink flowers. These were gathered a long way from her home since the shrub which she had transplanted outside her own front door never bloomed (soil too basic, probably!). Suddenly a dog burst into the clearing and seized a gourd of cornmeal which she had laid ready for cooking. Furious, she picked up a red hot rock and flung it at the dog. Burned and furious in his turn, he leapt up into the sky, spilling the cornmeal as he went. Where the meal fell on the flowerless shrub, it became transformed into brilliant white azalea flowers. Where it fell in a wide track across the sky as the dog limped over, it became the Milky Way, known to the Indians as “where-the-dog-ran.”

The Cherokees have a legend about flame-azaleas. The Sky Painter from above cut off the rabbit’s tail (which in those days was supposed to be long and bushy) to use as a paintbrush. This made all the animals angry and they started to fire arrows, in volleys of six, up into the sky. The Sky Painter was just getting ready to paint the sky brilliant shades of orange and yellow, and some of the arrows landed in the paint. He flung them back as fast as they arrived and everywhere that a bunch of six arrows landed, a flame-azalea appeared—with five stamens and a pistil. These flowers are still sometimes called Sky Paint Flowers.

Our three main wild azaleas were introduced into the gardens of Europe a long time ago. At the end of the seventeenth century, John Banister, an English missionary to Virginia and a keen naturalist, sent seeds of *R. viscosum* to his friend Henry Compton. Compton was then Bishop of London and an enthusiastic gardener, and he successfully grew the clammy azalea in the gardens of Fulham Palace. Unfortunately his successor was not so interested in flowers, and the azaleas became neglected. In the eighteenth century, the Bartrams were responsible for sending many seeds and plant specimens to England. They were encouraged and sponsored by Peter Collinson, a Quaker woolen merchant who was really more interested in gardening than he was in textiles. John Bartram, himself a Quaker from near Philadelphia and an accomplished botanist, undertook several journeys through the South, collecting plants for Collinson, and John’s son William followed in his father’s footsteps. It is known that they supplied Collinson with three kinds of azaleas, two of which were *nudiflorum* and *viscosum*, and the chances are high that the third species was *calendulaeum*. They certainly saw the flame-azaleas, and William Bartram’s glowing account of it in his *Travels* (where he calls it the Fiery Azalea) may be the first description of the species.

At the end of the eighteenth century, André Michaux, the French botanist, brought flame-azaleas to Europe with his other plant collections. They suffered a fairly adventurous passage since the boat was shipwrecked in the English Channel and Michaux had to salvage his specimens from the wreck and from the sea water. He seems to have divided his haul of azaleas between gardens near Paris, and some at Ghent, in Belgium. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, many fine gardens were neglected and his French collections perished, but at Ghent the flame-azaleas survived. They were distributed amongst several gardeners in the area, including a baker called Mortier. Mr. Mortier crossed the flame-azalea with the Pinxter-flower and from this original hybrid the well-known Ghent series of cultivated azaleas was developed.

But in Virginia we are lucky enough to have the original parents growing wild. We are spared the necessity for all this extensive horticulture, and need go to no trouble to get a glimpse of a fine azalea. All we have to do is to go out into the woods in the spring and summer, and simply look around.