Plant of the Month: April

Scientific Name: *Rhododendron canescens*

Common Name: Piedmont or Mountain Azalea

Selected by: Horticulturist Bennett O. Dowling

Nothing is more emblematic of spring in the South than azaleas in full bloom under a loose canopy of pines and oaks. However, did you know the commonly used evergreen azaleas found in our gardens are actually Asian natives brought to the Carolinas in the 19th century? Before their popularity stole our attention, it was the many species of native, deciduous azaleas that captivated the South. One that dazzles here at Moore Farms Botanical Garden is piedmont or mountain azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*).

In early to mid-spring, clusters of delicate, trumpet-shaped flowers in a rich, deep pink cap each branch. As this azalea matures, the trunks and branches develop a very sculptural, aged look. These contorted branches are accentuated by patches of lichen and moss, a true treat in the dead of winter when all the leaves drop. Fall color, generally a yellow or burgundy, is nothing impressive, and the foliage is a matte-green in summer, though its loose texture contributes to the airy feel of this plant. I adore this plant because of this airy quality that is a soft cloud of pink blossoms in spring and a lace of green throughout summer. The open structure shelters ferns and other shade-lovers that choose to live in their dappled shade.

Found throughout the southeast, mountain azalea surprisingly thrives in the low, swampy, complete lack of mountains in this region as long as some basic requirements are provided. These are as follows: part to full sun in acidic, moisture retentive soils. Though this plant likes moist soils, it needs to be well-draining, which seems like a paradox; essentially, what this means is that wet, heavy clay soils can lead to root rot, but wet soils that are crumbly and loamy are perfect. If you have heavy, wet soil, generously amend it with compost and fine pine bark to increase drainage. Ours are thriving on slopes near our ditches where the persistent water wicks through the soil, though they also do reasonably well in some of our heavier soils. If growing in full sun, moister soil is required, though all mountain azaleas are surprisingly drought tolerant.

Fun fact: All azaleas are rhododendrons, but not all rhododendrons are azaleas. All plants called azaleas fall within the *Rhododendron* genus.

*Photos taken by Roberta Burns.*