

Chasing the Bloom

Springtime in the Southern Appalachians

by Donald W. Hyatt

Introduction

I have always been enamored by the Southern Appalachians. These mountains were as high as the Himalayas, a mere 200 million years ago. Because they missed the mass extinctions of the Ice Ages, they remain one of the most botanically rich areas in the world and the home to many choice native azaleas, rhododendrons, and wildflowers.



Every spring becomes a series of pilgrimages for me, hoping to catch our native azaleas and rhododendrons in flower. Of course, when peak bloom will occur is not easy to forecast. Mother Nature is rarely predictable... or cooperative.

Spring can be early or late, and the bloom date for any species is controlled by many factors including latitude, weather conditions, elevation, and natural variation. However, if one is flexible and knows where to look, it is usually possible to find something in bloom, somewhere.

The motivation behind this article is to suggest some locations where people who come to the joint ARS/ASA Convention in Asheville in May of 2012 can find native plants in bloom if they want to do some exploration on their own in conjunction with the meeting. The convention garden tours will be wonderful, of course, but if attendees can add some extra time to their travel schedules there are many beautiful wild places nearby that deserve a closer look.

Many of us in the east will drive to Asheville, so we will likely be exploring along the way. An option for distant travelers is to fly into one airport and depart from another, and rent a car to get between the two locations while seeing attractions along the way. At the 2011 ARS Convention in Vancouver, WA, several of us flew to Portland, and afterwards explored the Oregon and California coasts by car before flying home from San Francisco. Fantastic trip!

Western North Carolina and the Blue Ridge Parkway

We are so fortunate to have access to the Blue Ridge Parkway, a scenic highway started in 1935 that traverses some of the highest mountains in Virginia and North Carolina for a distance of 469 miles (755 km). It allows easy access to a variety of habitats and rare plant populations that early plant explorers took months or even years to survey on foot. What is in bloom at any specific location does change throughout the year, but fortunately for rhododendron enthusiasts, one of the peak seasons coincides with the 2012 Convention. Typically, this will be prime time for early spring bloom at the upper elevations of the Parkway, one of my favorite seasons.



In the Asheville area, the Parkway has several access points. We typically use the one at the northeast edge of town where it intersects with Rt. 70 and access to Interstate I-40, or the other one southeast of the city where it intersects with Rt. 191 and I-26. The Parkway actually passes east of the city through part of the property of the Biltmore Estate but the elevation is low and vistas are rather limited.



Rhododendron vaseyi, one of our most charming native azaleas, is usually in full flower in the wild during the first and second week of May. The natural range for this species is very limited, though, and it only grows in a few mountainous regions of North Carolina at elevations from about 4000 to 6000 ft (1220 to 1830 m). Knowing where and when to look is helpful in order to catch this lovely azalea in bloom. Even though the species is considered rather rare, it is abundant in its realm and puts on an impressive show.

There are two main regions along the Parkway where *R. vaseyi* is easily accessible. One is north of Asheville near Grandfather Mountain and the other area is to the south near Mt. Pisgah. My preference is that southern population since *R. vaseyi* is very abundant there, the variation in flower color is excellent, and there are so many other rare plants and wildflowers along that very scenic stretch of the Parkway.

At the southeast entry point to the Parkway, about milepost 395 near the North Carolina Arboretum, the road heading south quickly ascends from about 2000 ft (610 m) to heights of about 5000 ft (1520 m) near the Pisgah Inn, a popular restaurant and hotel on the Parkway at milepost 408. In a little over 10 miles (16 km), it is interesting to watch the gradual change of the seasons. At the low elevations, nature is in high gear with the trees fully leafed out and yet at the upper elevations, it is very early spring and the leaves are just beginning to emerge.

Don't rush to the top, though. Look carefully into those rich wooded hillsides since they are filled with lovely wildflowers including masses of the great white trillium, *T. grandiflorum*. At the higher elevations after mp 400, look for the white and pale pink flowers of *R. minus* var. *carolinianum* that often colonize the rocky cliffs. Some forms have flowers with large yellow blotches and on one ledge we have spied a plant with apricot colored flowers.



Rhododendron vaseyi begins to make its appearance about mp 410 and continues well past mp 425, a mere 15 to 17 miles (24 to 27 km). When in flower, though, the display is stunning. The Parkway near Mt. Pisgah generally varies between 4500 and 5500 ft in elevation (1370 to 1675 m), which means bloom times for any specific population can vary by a week or more. If spring is late and the *R. vaseyi* still hasn't opened at the upper elevations yet, then be sure to head south on Rt. 215 at Beech Gap near mp 423 toward Balsam Grove. *R. vaseyi* is very heavy on both sides of



that road for several miles until the elevation falls below 3000 ft (900 m). Interestingly, in the northern direction on Rt. 215 toward Waynesville, there is little or no *R. vaseyi*. Many of us consider that area around Route 215 and mileposts 419 to 425 as the “epicenter” for *R. vaseyi* in the US. The mountains even take on a pink haze when the azaleas are in bloom. Flower color varies from white through many shades of clear rose pink to almost red.

Blooming at the same time with the *R. vaseyi* are many other treasures including serviceberry trees (*Amelanchier laevis*) with their bronzy-red new foliage and white flowers. In places, they seem to frost the hillsides with their delicate blossoms. There is also the mountain fetterbush, *Pieris floribunda*, with its white flower clusters contrasting against the dark evergreen foliage.

Be sure to park the car at some of the overlooks and walk among the flowers. At the Graveyard Fields Overlook (mp 419), there are several hiking options, some less than a mile but others much longer. I highly recommend the relatively short trail to the waterfalls. The trail descends the steps at the parking lot to a paved trail and then to recently

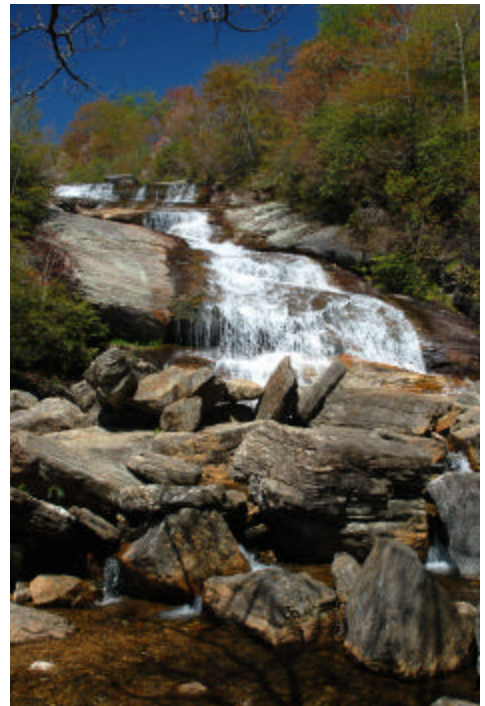


refurbished decking with more stairs leading to the upper falls. After crossing the stream, a longer trail continues to the left but the right fork descends through a series of decks with more stairs affording many lovely vistas of the lower

falls. Be sure to look for wildflowers along the trail including the painted trillium, *T. undulatum*. Come back in mid June and again in early July when the other rhododendrons, *R. catawbiense* and *R. maximum*, are in flower. There is even a natural hybrid between those two species right along the trail.



I also recommend another short trail at the nearby John Rock Overlook. That will be the next parking area on the left after Graveyard Fields, just beyond mp 419. Get out of the car and follow the trail to the left into the woods. It is less than 500 ft (150 m) and fairly level, passing by some large plants of *R. vaseyi* and tall evergreen trees. There are excellent views of Looking Glass Rock and John Rock, but the treat is the woodland area carpeted with yellow trout lilies, *Erythronium americanum*, and scattered plants of painted trillium.



Another “must” when *R. vaseyi* is in bloom at this elevation is to walk back from the John Rock parking area along the grassy edge of Parkway toward Graveyard Fields. On the bank is a very deep pink form of *R. vaseyi*. In past years, that plant was called the “red” *vaseyi* until we found deeper colored forms elsewhere. It is often referenced now as ‘419.2’ because of its milepost position. The elevation is nearly 5400 ft (1645 m) here, so that plant is one of the last to bloom along the Parkway.



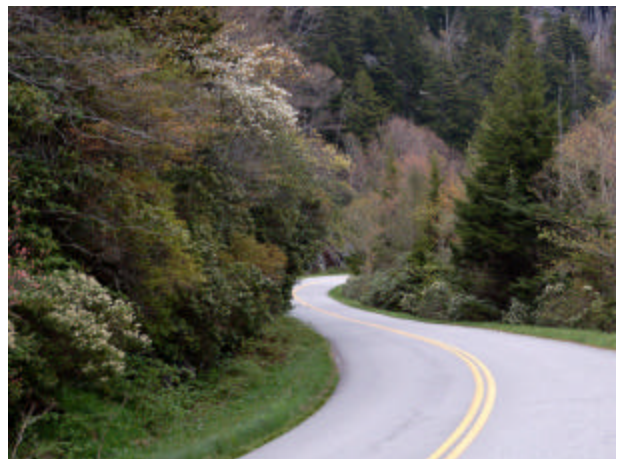
For able climbers, there is a much longer hike on the Art Loeb Trail that goes over the top of Pilot Mountain, a 5000-ft (1524 m) peak south of Mt. Pisgah. The trail can be reached from various Forest Service roads, some providing closer access to the mountain than others. The path up Pilot Mountain, steep at first, winds through masses of *R. vaseyi* and carpets of ferns and wildflowers. It is a lovely hike.

By milepost 425, the population of *R. vaseyi* gets quite dense but there isn’t an overlook. However, it is OK to pull off to the side of the road where shoulders are wide and the car is off the pavement, except in watershed areas. Be careful of ditches or damp areas where a car might get stuck.



It is easy to be distracted by the huge masses of soft pink *R. vaseyi* and bold mountain vistas, but look carefully for delicate wildflowers like the red *Trillium erectum* and tiny Bluets (*Houstonia caerulea*). There are other flowering trees in bloom, too, like the white blossoms of the Carolina silverbell, *Halesia carolinia*, and cream to pale yellow blossoms of *Magnolia fraseri*.

The road continues to gain altitude, eventually reaching 6047 ft (1843 m) at Richland Balsam, the highest point on the Parkway (mp 431). By that time the *R. vaseyi* has completely disappeared from the scene, but it reappears again near Waterrock Knob at milepost 451. If spring was very early, you can probably find it still in flower here along the trail to the Knob where the elevation is 6292 ft (1918 m).



From there, the Parkway gradually descends, terminating at milepost 469 in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park near the town of Cherokee. Come back in mid June to drive this same stretch since it is ablaze with orange and yellow flame azaleas, *R. calendulaceum*, white and pink *Kalmia latifolia*, fragrant white blossoms of *R. arborescens*, purple *R. catawbiense*, and a whole array of other wildflowers. In late September to early October, the fall foliage is glorious, too, with brilliant red vaccinium, maples, and sourwood.

The speed limit along the Blue Ridge Parkway ranges from 35 to 45 mph (52 to 72 kmh) but don't expect to traverse the 75 miles (120 km) from Asheville to Cherokee in just a few hours. I have been known to take a full 8 hours to drive that segment, stopping at almost every overlook or pulling off to the side, in total awe of the beauty before me.

The Great Smoky Mountain National Park has many attractions, and I will touch on just a few. There are trails and streams and waterfalls, of course, and there are mountain vistas and carpets of wildflowers, too. The one way, 10-mile loop through scenic Cade's Cove is a favorite drive for many.

South of the Smokies are attractions like the huge trees at Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, mountain reflections in Fontana Lake, and whitewater rafting on the Nantahala River. Of course, the big attraction for rhododendron enthusiasts is the rare hybrid swarm of native azaleas on Gregory Bald in the National Park, but they won't bloom until mid to late June.

The stretch of the Blue Ridge Parkway north of Asheville is lovely, too, but I must admit that I usually explore this region later in the season when *R. catawbiense* and *R. maximum* are in flower. The northeast access point at Asheville enters the Parkway about milepost 382 and similarly begins a steep climb to an elevation of about 5000 ft (1520 m) near Craggy Gardens, mp 364. This area is well known for its impressive display of purple *R. catawbiense* in mid June.

At milepost 355, there is an access road to Mount Mitchell State Park, the highest point in the eastern United States, elevation 6684 ft (2037 m). The park recently completed reconstruction of a new observation deck on top of the mountain, and the vistas in all directions on a clear day are amazing. At that elevation, spring will be at its very earliest stages but return to the Mount Mitchell area in mid July since that region seems to be a center for *R. maximum* and its many variations. The rare red *R. maximum* discovered about 1930 still grows nearby at the headwaters of Curtis Creek, but its location is quite remote and very hard to find even if given detailed directions.



There are several scenic waterfalls along this northern stretch of the Parkway including Crabtree Falls at mp 340 and Linville Falls at mp 316. Both will require a hike to see the falls but neither trail is very difficult. There are many vista points along the trail to Linville Falls depending upon how far one wishes to hike.

Farther north about mp 305 is Grandfather Mountain, the other region where *R. vaseyi* and *R. minus* var. *carolinianum* are plentiful. On top of the mountain is a private park that does have an entry fee. Be sure to note the engineering feat of the Linn Cove Viaduct, an elevated portion of the Parkway constructed through particularly difficult terrain that preserved delicate habitats on the slopes of Grandfather Mountain. This was the last 7 miles (11 km) of the Parkway to be completed, opening for the first time in 1983.



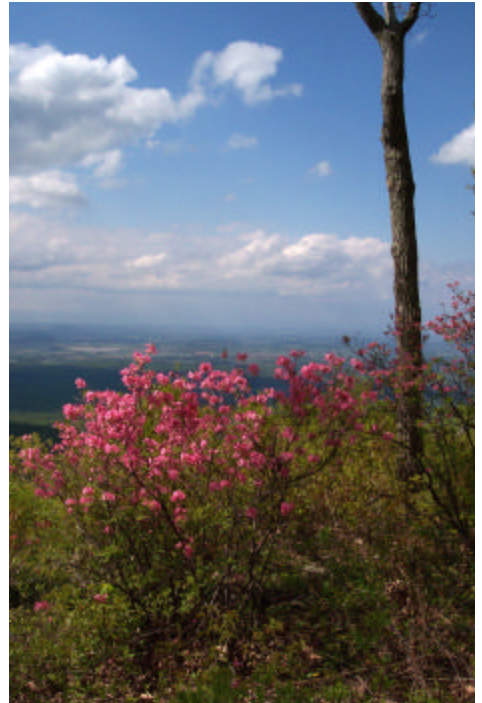
About an hour west of the Parkway along the northern border of North Carolina and Tennessee is another treasure, the magnificent Roan Highlands. Roan Mountain, elevation 6285 ft (1916 m), is the highest point in a series of peaks and open balds. Through this region is one of the most scenic stretches of the Appalachian Trail, a focus in mid June when the *R. catawbiense* and *R. calendulaceum* are in bloom. The beauty here is incredible!



The Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia and Skyline Drive

If time and travel plans allow, during the first and second week in May is usually peak for the several native azalea species and wildflowers along the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia. The northern terminus for the Parkway is about 1.5 hours west of Richmond at the intersection of Interstate I-64 near the town of Charlottesville. This is about 3 hours south of Washington DC.

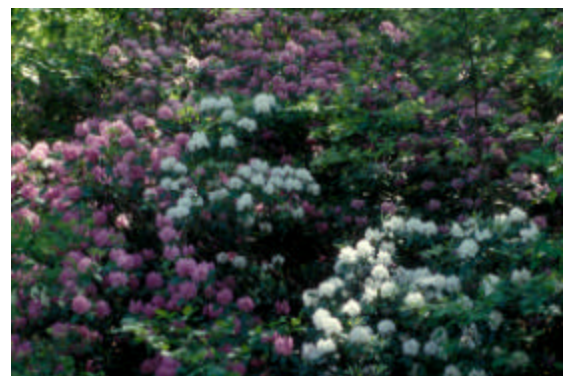
After the 2006 ARS/ASA Convention, we offered a post conference tour to Monticello at Charlottesville, and the 120-mile stretch (193 km) of the Parkway from there south to Roanoke. There were limited spots where we could park a bus to let people explore along the Parkway, but when traveling by car there is much greater flexibility. The deeper pink native azalea *R. prinophyllum* and paler pink *R. periclymenoides* are scattered all along the first 80 miles of the road. The native white dogwood trees (*Cornus florida*) and purple redbuds (*Cercis canadensis*) are lovely, too.



Look for an azalea population about milepost 4 in an area that has been cleared under some trees. There is no overlook, but the shoulders are wide with room to pull off to get a few photos of the azaleas with vistas of the Shenandoah Valley in the distance. There is more *R. prinophyllum* at Apple Orchard Mt., the highest point on the Parkway in Virginia, elevation 3950 ft (1200 m). Due to the elevation, it will bloom later here, usually opening in mid May in a normal year.

Trillium grandiflorum is plentiful in that area, too, especially between mileposts 10-13. The white form is more frequent in the north but there is a large population of the pink *T. grandiflorum* forma *roseum* at the Thunder Ridge Overlook, milepost 74. At the big rock near the overlook, head down the Appalachian to the right for a few hundred feet to the trillium. There is also a plant of *R. prinophyllum* near that rock, and don't forget to smell its cinnamon-spice fragrance wherever it is in bloom.

The *R. catawbiense* at the upper elevations near the Peaks of Otter won't bloom until late May to early June, but at lower elevations near Otter Creek, mileposts 56 to 61, the species should be in bloom in early to mid May. There is much variation of the species in Virginia, so look for rare color forms including whites.



There are scattered populations of native orchids like the large flowered yellow lady's slipper (*Cypripedium pubescens*) south of the Peaks of Otter Lodge (mp 86) as well as the pink lady's slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*) in some of the drier pine woods closer to Roanoke. Look on sunny banks for Birdsfoot Violets (*Viola pedata*) about mp 19 – 21 and masses of Wild Pinks (*Silene caroliniana*), especially near mp 42.



The natural range for *R. calendulaceum* seems to begin south of Roanoke, but as the Parkway continues south, it gradually loses altitude for a while but then rises again before entering North Carolina. The very scenic Mabry Mill at milepost 176 is wonderful photo opportunity. A fully operational gristmill, the exhibit is a great chance to see how the early settlers used to live. The masses of *R. maximum* in that area can be stunning in early July, too.



Not on the Parkway but to the west near the North Carolina border is Mount Rogers, the highest point in Virginia, elevation 5729 ft (1746 km). The Appalachian Trail goes through here at the spectacular Rhododendron Gap with its glorious display of *R. catawbiense*. The trail can be reached from Grayson Highlands State Park and the rhododendrons will bloom in early to mid June along with *Kalmia latifolia*, and *R. calendulaceum*. Also look for the wild horses in the area that can be seen grazing in the high meadows.

The 105-mile scenic Skyline Drive in the Shenandoah National Park of Virginia was started in 1931 and completed in 1939. It connects to the Blue Ridge Parkway near Charlottesville, and its northern terminus is at Front Royal, just a little over an hour west of Washington DC via Interstate I-66. It has similar floral attractions and vistas, and at 35 mph (52 kmh) it will take at least 3 hours to travel the full length, assuming you don't spend too much time at any of its 75 overlooks.



I think it is important to mention a few nearby attractions that are not part of Skyline Drive but are located near the Shenandoah National Park. East of the mountains off of I-66 near the town of Linden is the Thompson Wildlife Management Area. This tract has one of the largest, continuous stands of *Trillium grandiflorum*, in the world, an estimated 10 million plants. There are many other choice wildflowers in this area, too. There is a 9-mile loop trail from a parking area near the lake that connects to the Appalachian Trail and the trillium display along the ridge, but shorter treks are possible. Be sure to download maps from the Internet.



There are also some impressive caverns near Skyline Drive including Skyline Caverns at Front Royal and Luray Caverns near the town of Luray on Rt. 211 near Thornton Gap at mp 33.

Beyond the Blue Ridge

Of course, if your travel plans bring you near our Nation's Capital, be sure to stop at the National Arboretum to see the Glenn Dale azaleas. The focus of the Save the Azaleas campaign, these magnificent plants are over 60 years old and the hybrids of the Arboretum's first Director, Ben Morrison. They should be in bloom from late April through early May.

Even farther north near Philadelphia are the great estate gardens including Winterthur, Longwood, and Mt. Cuba Center, many of which were featured on the 2004 ARS Convention tours. Most of those gardens are quite close to one another, but plan on at least two full 2 days to do them justice. Late April to early May should be peak to see the extensive trillium collection at Mt. Cuba and azaleas at Winterthur, but the gardens are spectacular at all seasons of the year.



If travel plans take you south near Atlanta, Callaway Gardens is always a treat. Its grand evergreen azalea display in the Azalea Bowl should be through by May, but there are usually many other flowers in bloom. Don't expect to see Callaway's signature plant, the rare plum leaf azalea, *R. prunifolium*, unless spring is *very* early since it usually flowers until mid July to August. Return in mid summer to see those brilliant orange-red blossoms. On the same trip, spend some time exploring Providence Canyon located south of Columbus, GA, where native *R. prunifolium* and *R. minus* var. *minus* grow wild at the base of the strikingly colored canyon walls.

My own garden is quite small and its peak season is rather short. Now that I have retired, I truly enjoy expanding my horizons, exploring wild areas and visiting public gardens, wherever and whenever there are flowers in bloom. There is so much to see! The few suggestions offered here are among my favorites but they cannot begin to cover all the floral treasures in the region. I assure you, next spring many of us will be at these very locations chasing the bloom before and after the Asheville Convention. Won't you to join us?

