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NOTES ON OUR WESTERN AZALEA RHODODENDRON OCCIDENTALE

By E. P. Breakey

A Illustrated Lecture Delivered at the 16th Annual Meeting of the American
Rhododendron Society



Fig. 20. *Rhododendron occidentale*. From a
plant that was growing near Langlois, Oregon
May 27, 1954
Breakey photo

The Western Azalea, *Rhododendron occidentale*, (Fig. 20) is native to the far western United States. Its distribution is limited to southwestern Oregon and to certain sections of California. It was recognized as a plant new to botanical science by Drs. John Torrey and Asa Gray in 1855 who described it under the name *Azalea occidentalis*. According to McMinn⁽¹⁾, the specimens on which Torrey and Gray based their description of the species were collected by Henry Pratten among the "hills along Deer Creek in Nevada County, California." In 1876, Dr. Asa Gray, well known professor of botany (1842-1888) of Harvard College (now Harvard University), re-described the species and placed it in the genus *Rhododendron*⁽²⁾.

Rhododendron occidentale is the only azalea native to the Pacific Coast country. It is one of the most beautiful of all azaleas. The flowers are delightfully scented and produced abundantly in trusses of six to twelve, and often more. The flowers may open with or after the leaves. White is perhaps the dominant color, whereas that of its eastern counterpart, *Rhododendron calendulaceum*, is predominantly a flaming yellow or orange-scarlet. In autumn, the foliage of our western azalea is highly colored in tints of red and gold making it very attractive as a foliage plant. It has been much used in England and Belgium in hybridizing and is doubtless a prominent constituent of many of the Ghent and Knaphill azaleas. I believe it can be said truthfully, the Europeans have valued the species much more than the Americans. In fact, if one wishes to learn about the species he can well afford to devote considerable time to the writings and work of European collectors and hybridizers. This apparent neglect on the part of the Americans has had

much to do with the present attempt to study the species in its native habitat.

The following observations are based on the study of many plants from many locations. These include both plants observed in the field and herbarium specimens. A very interesting pattern of distribution has developed. Coos, Curry, Douglas, Josephine and Jackson Counties in Oregon have the most colonies and plants and a few are found in Klamath County. There are a considerable number of colonies in Del Norte, Siskiyou and Shasta Counties in northern California. Sonoma County and the Mt. Tamalpais area in Marin County also have some good stands. Some very good stands are to be found along U.S. Highway 101 from Eureka, California north to Coos Bay in Oregon.

Hugging the Pacific Coast from north of Bandon in Coos County, Oregon, and running south through California to the southern boundary of Santa Cruz County, is a relatively heavily populated belt that is perhaps 75 miles wide and approximately 700 miles long. A few centers are found scattered through central California to San Benito County. A broader inland belt seems to begin below Roseburg in Douglas County, Oregon, and runs south to Fresno County, California. This belt is less populous than the one that follows the coast, but it does cover some very high territory. Plants are found in the Sierra Nevada Mountains often at an altitude from 6000 to over 9000 feet. Perhaps one of the best known colonies in this area is that in Yosemite Park where the plants line the banks of the Yosemite River often to the near exclusion of all other shrubs.

From Fresno County there is a long jump with no records of plants until Riverside County where a considerable population occurs in the San Jacinto Mountains. Plants have also been found in the highlands of San Diego County which borders on Mexico. These are island populations that depend on altitude for coolness and springs for a dependable supply of moisture. Surrounding these island populations is some of the most arid of California's semi-desert lands, yet Douglas fir and other normal companion plants are found growing there also. These could well be remnants of a once continuous population of *R. occidentale* left in favorable situations while the connecting portions succumbed to changes in southern California climate.

Apparently the plant has persisted in certain favorable situations through the centuries as the climate has changed. These favorable situations are usually above four thousand feet in that part of California east and south of San Francisco. Along the coast north of San Francisco it is found, of course, at lower elevations. When the mountains of California are compared with those of Oregon and Washington, one cannot but be impressed with their age and the fact they are much eroded and not nearly so high as they doubtless once were. When these mountains were younger and much loftier than they are now they would condense more of the moisture carried by the prevailing winds from the ocean and provide a much greater rainfall. In other words, the climate would resemble that of southern Oregon and northern California, which as we know is favorable to the species. Through the centuries the mountains have eroded away and diminished in height and the natural result of this has been a gradually lessening rainfall with a change in climate to the dryer and more desert like situation we know today. Certain species like the western azalea and the redwoods have persisted in favorable situations though their numbers are doubtless reduced and their range greatly restricted.

There is considerable evidence to indicate that our western azalea prefers a non alkaline situation with adequate drainage where the soil remains moist most of the year. Along the coastal belt, it is found rimming the edges of swamps and bogs, and along natural drains and gullies that carry away water from springs. In southwestern Oregon the species often follows low riverbanks. In the far southern sections of California, Riverside and San Diego Counties, springs and altitude

provide situations that are favorable. In a number of instances overflow or seepage from lakes provides a continuously moist situation. Plants were also found on steep hillsides in Oregon where springs or seepage apparently provided the necessary moisture during the hot and dry summers.

The species thrives best in relatively cool and moist situations, where there is an absence of extremes of heat or cold. It is here we found the most brilliant and varied colors, the lush growth and the larger flowers. Such situations are most frequently found in the northern portions of its distribution, particularly the coastal sections where the Pacific Ocean is never far away, and the relative humidity is almost always high. Toward the south and inland, the flowers are smaller and paler, the dominant color being white with a yellow blotch that is often pale and lacking in character.

Rhododendron occidentale is a variable and dynamic species. Field studies have revealed no evidence of maturity or rigidity. In certain places where the azalea was found growing in undisturbed areas, seedlings were present in considerable numbers. While the variation between individuals is considerable, it does not justify a separation into additional species, although some effort has been made to identify varieties. It is questionable also if this distinction is valid. Fortunately, no other rhododendrons are found in western North America except *albiflorum* and *macrophyllum*, the evergreen species. The latter species is often found near *R. occidentale*, yet the two species have always been found in different immediate situations so they are not nearly so contiguous as one might infer. Natural hybrids between the two are known to occur, though they are extremely rare, and are readily identifiable because of their intermediate character. No crosses with *R. albiflorum* are known.

Variation in the flowering season is a marked and valuable characteristic of the western azalea. Some individuals blossom in very early spring, others in late summer. The first report of a plant in flower came on April 20 and individual plants are known to have been in flower until mid-July or later.

Flower sizes vary from 1½" to 3" across. The lobes of the smaller flowers are narrow and are infolded lengthwise. In the larger sizes the flowers tend to be wide open and flat. Often there is a slight ruffling of the edges, and a single example of definite crinkling has been found. With slight variations, the tube is ½" long, the stamens are greatly extruded, and the pistil slightly exceeds the length of the stamens. The greatly extruded stamens and pistil are characteristic of American azaleas and, in the opinion of this writer, are one of the most charming features of these plants.

Variation in flower color is extreme. Invariably there is a blotch of some shade of Indian yellow⁽³⁾. One group is practically white with the exception of a very pale blotch. This can be considered as the white group, and some individuals are very attractive. Another group has strong Indian yellow as the dominant color. Rarely a pale yellow corolla is found, but usually the color comes from a large and prominent blotch of Indian yellow, along with yellow buds. A third group has carmen rose as the dominant color. In this group the blotch may be pale or deep in color. Often from 60 to 75 per cent of the corolla area is pink. A few individuals were found with buds that were a deep and dusky red, cardinal red 822/1. The back of the corolla was cherry red 722, while the face of the corolla was Carmen rose 621. The new foliage and stems of such plants were dark reddish also. These were colorful and striking shrubs.

When considering the ornamental value of our western azalea the buds are important. Unlike many rhododendrons, all of the flowers in the truss are never fully open at the same time. The lower buds in the truss are the first to open, and flowers from these will be faded and gone

before the more backward buds in the center open, so the color of these unopened buds often adds materially to the beauty of the flowering.

The foliage of *R. occidentale* is usually oblanceolate, although extremes are occasionally found, such as linear, elliptic, obovate or lanceolate. Pubescence in dry situations tends to be sparse and strigose. Where humidity is high it is pilose and plentiful. Margins of the leaves are ciliate. Rarely is the foliage glabrous when mature.



Fig. 21. *R. occidentale*. A plant in Azalea Reserve State Park near Arcata, California. The trusses on this plant were especially noteworthy.
May 15, 1958.
Breakey photo

Growth habit tends to a mounded form, with flowers and foliage from the ground up (Fig. 21). Upright growth is sometimes found, and rarely is a very lax habit observed. Maximum height observed ran from 12 to 15 ft. (Fig. 22). A devastating forest fire ravaged the Pacific Coast country within the past 50 years, and man has ruthlessly cut and burned over most of the area so this may not be a reliable indication of maximum height.



Fig. 22 *Rhododendron occidentale*. A tall plant in Azalea Reserve State Park near Arcata, California. Dr. Clement G. Bowers is standing on the right. May 16, 1958.

Breakey photo

Along the Pacific Coast in southern Oregon and to a greater extent in northern California, some of the best stands were found on open hillsides facing the Pacific Ocean in full sun. The azaleas were growing among blue blossoms (*Ceanothus*), salal (*Gaultheria*), evergreen blueberries (*Vaccinium*), a coarse bunch grass and certain unidentified shrubs. Trilliums, Solomon's Seal (*Smilicina*), ferns, terrestrial orchids, and foxgloves (*Digitalis*) were also noted among the woody shrubs. The whole composite was about waist high. These areas resemble the downs of England and also have many of the characteristics of a moorland. They have not been despoiled to any extent by human activity and the aggressive Douglas fir has not invaded these areas as it has others. When we looked back toward the mainland (to the east) however, the vanguard of the Douglas fir forest could be seen ruthlessly invading the downs (Fig. 23).



Fig. 23. *Rhododendron occidentale* in Dry Lagoon State Park just south of Orick, California. The view is east toward the vanguard of the encroaching fir forest. May 14, 1958.

Breakey photo

The smothering effect of the Douglas firs on the azaleas and their companion plants was observed in several localities. As long as the azaleas received a minimum of light, they were able to survive, though they grew tall and spindly in their quest for light and air. As the firs grew larger and the growth became denser, the azaleas had weakened and eventually died. Such a progression could be observed by going among the trees in the vanguard and continuing back into the forest. Limited as they are by the encroaching forest, the ocean, and the dry and semi-desert lands inland, it was a privilege indeed to find and see these remnants of what must surely have been a much more extensive and continuous population of a truly magnificent species.

As might be expected, man in his ignorance and lack of appreciation of the value of such things has ruthlessly destroyed countless thousands of these beautiful shrubs. The clearing of land for agriculture and more recently the building of highways, have taken the heaviest toll. Fortunately, there are a few people who appreciate such things and because of their desire to preserve certain stands of these azaleas, and their willingness to work to bring that about, we have an Azalea State Park near Brookings, Oregon and an Azalea Reserve near Arcata, California. Some of the principals in this movement have been consulted and a brief account of the activities that led to the creation of these preserves follows.

Azalea State Park, Brookings, Oregon A movement to create an Azalea State Park in Oregon was started in 1936 or 1937. Mr. W. L. Crissy⁽⁴⁾ of Brookings, Oregon was president of the local Chamber of Commerce and initiated correspondence in an effort to interest the state officials in Salem.

The reception of the idea has been termed very lukewarm. The Portland Garden Club was approached and the assistance of this organization was secured. The president of the Portland Garden Club came down to Brookings several times with parties of friends and they became most enthusiastic about the idea. Among the visitors was Mrs. Henry Cabell, whose husband was then chairman of the State Highway Commission. Mr. and Mrs. Cabell spent over two hours viewing the flowers and the proposed site and when the next meeting of the Commission occurred, the proposal to make a State Park of the area was given consideration. However, it developed there was considerable opposition and when it began to appear that the idea of making

it a State Park was on the point of being vetoed, Mrs. Cabell gave such an impressive talk that the motion carried.

The area under consideration was a 25-acre tract in private ownership and at the time was leased as a pasture for mules used by the Forest Service. When visitors came to see the azaleas and the area, they had to climb a high rickety gate because it was locked and occasionally the ladies' stockings became casualties.



Fig. 24. *Rhododendron occidentale* in Azalea State Park, Brookings, Oregon. Note the tiered development in the position of the flowers. This was a most attractive plant. May 30, 1954

Not a single azalea in the park has been planted by man. Every plant is just as it occurred in nature. All that has been done to improve the area has been to grub out and destroy competing trees and shrubs thereby giving the azaleas a chance to develop to their utmost (Fig. 24). The spaces between the shrubs have been planted to grass that is cut and kept under control. When attempting to learn something of the possible age of the plants an old time resident of the area was approached in 1954 and asked if he knew how old the azaleas might be. He replied, "Yes, I know exactly how old they are. They are just fifty years old." He was then asked how it happened that he knew the exact age of these plants and he replied, "Oh, it was then that this area experienced a devastating forest fire and everything was burned off to the ground." We replied, "You mean the top growth is fifty years old?" And he quickly replied, "That's right." We then commented, "You don't know how old the roots and crowns might be?" "Oh no," he said, "they could easily be several hundred years old."



Fig. 25. Azalea State Park, Brookings, Oregon. The view is from the shelter on the knoll toward the Chetco River. A shower of rain is passing. May 30, 1954.
Breaky photo

The park area has been fenced and provided with shelter houses, tables, benches, fireplaces and other facilities. A rustic shelter house was built atop a knoll where one can obtain beautiful views of the azaleas in all their glory. The view toward the Chetco River is particularly impressive (Fig. 25)

The first Azalea Festival was held in May, 1939, and has been an annual affair since, except when interrupted by World War II. The Festival is held on Memorial Day weekend. A queen is chosen from the young ladies in the Brookings-Harbor area. Coronation ceremonies are held in Azalea Park on Saturday morning followed by the Queen's Smorgasbord in the afternoon and the Queen's Ball in the evening. Memorial Services are held in the Park on Memorial Day, May 30 and a community church service is held in the Park on Sunday.

Azalea Reserve, Arcata, California Among the people responsible for initiating the establishment of the Azalea Reserve State Park in California, Mr. and Mrs. George Parrish were very prominent.⁽⁵⁾ In 1928, the Parrishes acquired a tract of land of several acres of neglected and badly wrecked azaleas which they named Bishop Pine Lodge. It was in November and at the time they were unable to fully appreciate what they had bought, even though they had always known the azaleas and had admired them. As clearing, and the work of development proceeded, the plants became more and more beautiful with care. Mrs. Parrish has stated that in May she was able to do nothing but play hostess to the many people who stopped to admire and to take Kodachrome transparencies and movies in color. This was something quite new at the time, about 1938. On one day in May she counted twenty people taking Kodachrome transparencies. This was just before the war.

It was this experience that convinced Mrs. Parrish of the great love of wild flowers in the

general public and that an area should be set aside for the preservation of these plants. Dr. Henry MacGintie of Humboldt State College was also interested in such a project and took her to the present site of the Azalea Reserve one day when they were getting together a wild flower display of color transparencies for the Redwood Empire Building on Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay during the International Exposition. When she saw the azaleas she exclaimed, "Oh Mac, this is it!" and he agreed there was none finer.

The Redwood League sponsored the collection of funds for the purchase of the tract but much was raised in California by individuals and by garden clubs all over the State. It was necessary to raise six thousand dollars and the State matched it. Even though it was war time, 1942, it was all done in less than three months. President Sproule of the University of California was treasurer of the Azalea Reserve fund. There was a surplus of about eight hundred dollars left over after the tract had been purchased and this was used as far as it would go for park improvement.

The total area of the park is a 30-acre tract. One portion, ten acres across the road from the main tract, was cut to the ground for pasture about twenty-five years ago. This area is presently the most accessible and contains many of the best plants. It has been neglected however, and would benefit from the improvement of the trails and the removal of competing shrubs. The main tract of 20 acres has also been neglected and competing trees and shrubs have caused many of the azaleas to grow tall and spindly. Judicious clearing and cutting would greatly improve this larger portion of the tract. Perhaps some of this work has been done; it was in June, 1958, when we last visited the Reserve.

Other Parks and Areas

There are a number of other excellent stands of azaleas that are accessible to those who admire and appreciate this flower. A list of those accessible to U.S. Highway 101 follows:

California

Arcata-Azalea Reserve - A 30-acre tract near Arcata was set aside as a State Park for the preservation of the Western Azalea. It is still much in the raw, but has many fine plants with great potentialities. It has an access trail and parking area. McKinleyville-Azaleas were growing along both sides of the road where they have escaped destruction by land clearing operations. Trinidad-Azaleas were found along the road as far north as Orick. They were especially good in Dry Lagoon State Park. Here they are growing on the open hillside facing the Pacific Ocean in full sun. The area has not been despoiled to any extent by human activity and the aggressive Douglas fir has not invaded this area as it has others. The State Park should be enlarged to include considerably more of this area. Another good stand was found in Patricks' State Park. Here the situation is very much the same as that observed in Dry Lagoon State Park.

Orick- Above Orick, one soon enters the redwood forests. Very few azaleas were seen along the highway below the Oregon-California State line. Some of the best stands of *Rhododendron macrophyllum* are to be seen as an undercover plant in the redwood groves. Few were in bloom in June, 1958; we were too early for that.

Oregon

Brookings Azalea State Park - This beautiful park is devoted almost exclusively to the care and preservation of *Rhododendron occidentale* the Western Azalea. Brush and competing plants have been removed giving the azaleas a chance to develop at their best. All plants are naturally

planted. Here one can study the great diversity of the species in a beautiful setting untrammelled by interfering competitors.

Harris Beach State Park - This park is just north of Brookings. It is down-like, similar to the area around Dry Lagoon State Park in California. Many azaleas are to be found in this area. Unfortunately, the highway is being widened and straightened and many azaleas have been ruthlessly torn out and destroyed.

About 8 miles north of Brookings there is a stand of azaleas on private land. These plants are to be found on both sides of the road, the best and most accessible are on the east side where they surround an abandoned cabin. These plants are late bloomers, possibly because of their situation with respect to topography and the shade of nearby stands of fir. They were in full bloom by the end of June in 1956 (Fig. 26). None were in bloom on May 17, 1958.

Wedderburn - There is a good stand of azaleas above Wedderburn. Many must have been destroyed when putting the highway through. This stand extends almost to Geisel Monument Wayside. Here the forest has encroached to such an extent that it is difficult to approach many on foot.

Denmark - There are some azaleas around the little place called Denmark, a short distance below Langlois. It was in this area we found the first young plants in 1953, indicating the azaleas were able to reproduce in spite of competition. We also found azaleas on Edson Butte, taking the road along the Sixes River, then turning left on a logging road as far as we could go in an automobile, then following a trail leading up the mountain side on foot.

Coos Bay - The only azaleas found north of Langlois are in Coos Bay, where they were apparently planted. There are a number of them near the approaches to the bridge.

Florence - Around Florence and for some distance above Florence, there are many specimens of the evergreen Rhododendron, *macrophyllum*. In this area the rhododendrons are growing on nearly pure sand and among pine trees (one of the short needle pines). The pines seem to be an ideal "nurse" for the rhododendrons, providing them with shelter and protection against the hot sun of summer and the gales from the Pacific Ocean in winter. With none of the smothering effects of the firs.

Each year, a Rhododendron Festival is held in Florence. It was scheduled for May 24 and 25 in 1958.

(1) McMinn, Howard E., An illustrated Manual of California Shrubs, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp. 427-429.

(2) Gray, A., *Rhododendron occidentale*, Bot. Calif., Vol. 1: 458, 1876.

(3) Colors are as defined in the British Horticultural Colour Chart Volumes I (1939) and II (1942) published by the Royal Horticultural Society under the copyright of Robert F. Wilson.

(4) Mr. W. L. Crissey of Brookings, Oregon was most helpful when collecting the facts relating to the creation of the Azalea State Park

(5) We are greatly indebted to Mr. Frederick A. Meyer, State Park Forester, California Park Commission, who kindly obtained most of this information from his files. Included was a letter from Mrs. George Parrish, dated September 7, 1957, that was rich in facts and reminiscences of the efforts put forward by the group that sponsored the creation of the Azalea Reserve.

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