

The Deer-Native Shrub Dilemma

By Susan Camp

One of the best things about being an Extension Master Gardener is helping community members find the right perennials, shrubs, and trees to plant in their yards and gardens. One of the worst things is telling them that if they live on the Middle Peninsula, they will likely have a deer problem.

Our white-tailed deer are always hungry. They graze continuously when no one is around. They aren't very picky about what they eat, as long as the plant has tasty buds, tender leaves, or pretty flowers. Deer don't eat strongly scented members of the mint family, especially those with gray, hairy, or fuzzy stems and leaves like Russian sage (*Salvia yangii*, formerly *Perovskia atriplicifolia*) and catmint (*Nepeta x faassenii*), but they will munch on many popular perennials and shrubs that grow well in our environment.

Daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp.) and azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.) are prime examples of deer salad bar favorites. Every spring, Gloucester gardeners complain about nipped daylily buds and azaleas stripped of both flower buds and new leaves.

The situation is discouraging, and a friend recently asked about planting native azaleas instead of an introduced species. I didn't have good news for her, but her question gave me the opening to write about two of the lovely native azalea species that will grow well in Gloucester.

Pinxterbloom azalea (*Rhododendron periclymenoides*, formerly *R. nudiflorum*) is a showy, fragrant deciduous shrub that ranges from Massachusetts to the Carolinas and west to Tennessee. Pinxterbloom, or pinxter azalea, grows best in full sun to part shade and requires acidic, organically rich, well-drained humus with medium moisture. Root rot will occur with poor drainage. Pinxterbloom will tolerate dry soil. It is found naturally in open areas, moist woods, or swamp margins. Pinxterbloom will add interest to a border or woodland or shade garden.

This azalea reaches a mature height of 3 to 6 feet with a spread of 4 to 7 feet. It is a suckering shrub with shallow, fibrous roots that should not be disturbed. The pink, white, or lavender flowers are funnel-shaped with 5-inch-long curved yellow stamens. The blossoms attract hummingbirds and several species of butterflies. Pinxter azalea blooms in April and May. It will tolerate rabbits, but not deer. A writer, in response to a question on the Virginia Native Plant Society website, described Pinxterbloom azalea as "deer candy."

Pinxterbloom, like other members of the *Rhododendron* family, is susceptible to a number of insect pests, including aphids, mites, mealybugs, borers, thrips, and whiteflies. Besides root rot if planted in poorly drained soil, pinxterbloom diseases include powdery mildew, rust, leaf spot, and crown rot.

Swamp azalea (*Rhododendron viscosum*) ranges throughout the eastern and southern United States. Slightly smaller than pinxterbloom, with a height at maturity of 3 to 5 feet and a similar spread, swamp azalea also has somewhat different culture requirements. Swamp azalea grows best

in part shade in acidic, humusy, well-drained loam. This azalea tolerates moist to wet soils in its native swampy lowlands. It is less susceptible to root rot than pinxterbloom, but is plagued by the same diseases and insect pests as its cousin.

Swamp azalea has a loose, upright, spreading habit with oblong, dark green leaves that have light green undersides. The tubular, white to pale pink flowers bloom from May to July and have a musky, clove-like scent. Fall leaf colors include purple, orange, and yellow. All parts of swamp azalea are highly toxic.

See the Virginia Native Plant Society for information on these attractive native azaleas and for helpful techniques to discourage predation by deer.

If you decide to plant either species, you will find plenty of suggestions online for deterring Bambi and friends from munching your native azaleas to the ground; some methods may work for a while. Deer may not be the Einsteins of the mammal world, but in time, they will catch on to your ploys to ban them from your garden. You have been forewarned.