The Royal Azalea: *Rhododendron schlippenbachii*

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*Rhododendron schlippenbachii* is perhaps most noted for its lovely spring bloom, but this deciduous azalea is also a standout in the autumn garden when its leaves turn striking shades of yellow, orange, and red. In addition, royal azalea displays attractive summer foliage and a handsome winter silhouette, making it that object most desired by gardeners—a plant with all-season ornamental interest.

Royal azalea has long been a favorite of mine, so I was tickled to find out that several illustrious Arboretum horticulturists have also written glowingly about this species. As Peter Del Tredici mentioned in the first article in this issue, many timeless bits of information and opinion can be gleaned by reading through old issues of the *Bulletin of Popular Information* and *Arnoldia*—here, Charles Sprague Sargent, first director of the Arboretum, describes royal azalea’s native range and growth habit:

*R. Schlippenbachii* is one of the commonest shrubs of Korea and often forms the dominant undergrowth in open woods. From Korea it crosses into northeastern Manchuria where it grows on the shores of Possiet Bay; it occurs, too, in two localities in northern Japan. Wilson found it extraordinarily abundant in Korea on the lower slopes of Chiri-san and on the Diamond Mountains, which were where he visited this region in June “a wonderful sight with literally miles and miles of the purest pink from the millions of flowers of this Azalea.” In Korea this Azalea on the wind-swept grass-covered cliffs of the coast grow[s] less than a foot high but flowers abundantly. In the forests of the interior it often grows to a height of fifteen feet and forms a tall and slender or a broad and shapely shrub. *(Bulletin of Popular Information, May 5, 1921)*

Typically blooming in mid-May at the Arboretum, royal azalea is covered with large flowers in clear shades of pink, somewhat resembling a mass of pink butterflies resting on the branch tips. In the same *Bulletin* article quoted above, Sargent wrote, “The pale pink fragrant flowers, which are about three inches in diameter and marked on one of the lobes of the corolla with red-brown spots, are perhaps more beautiful than those of any other Azalea, certainly of any Azalea which has proved hardy in the Arboretum.” And Ernest H. Wilson wrote in the May 16, 1927, issue of the *Bulletin*, “The blossoms on this lovely Korean Azalea are now open on the Bussey Hill. A sturdy bush of upright habit, bearing on naked twigs terminal clusters of large pale to pure pink blossoms. This is a very hardy and satisfactory Azalea.” *(Cold hardy through USDA Zone 5 [average annual minimum temperature -10 to -20°F/-23.4 to -28.8°C], and possibly into Zone 4.)*

Royal azalea also has distinctive foliage. The large, broad-obovate leaves are arranged alternately, but they are crowded together at branch tips, giving a whorled appearance. Foliage color is medium green during the summer and, as Donald Wyman reported in the May 14, 1937, *Bulletin*, “One of its valued characteristics is the fact that in the fall the leaves turn from yellow to orange [and] crimson, thus enabling landscape gardeners to utilize it for autumn as well as spring color.”

There are several accessions of *Rhododendron schlippenbachii* growing at the Arboretum, including several mass plantings in the Explorers Garden on Bussey Hill. One of the easiest and most impressive to view is a large group of plants of accession 465-70 nestled under towering oaks just off of Bussey Hill Road (seen in photos at right). If visiting at any time of the year [though especially spring and fall] be sure to see this lovely azalea species that has a long history of appreciation at the Arboretum.

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