

Wildflower in Focus

Text by Melanie Choukas-Bradley
Illustration by Tina Thieme Brown

Pinxter Flower (Pink Azalea)

Rhododendron periclymenoides (Michx.) Shinnery
(*Rhododendron nudiflorum*)
Heath Family (*Ericaceae*)



During April and May almost every home garden in our region is ornamented with boldly-hued cultivated azaleas. Yet few Maryland residents realize that beyond the garden gate a native woodland azalea of delicate beauty and subtle fragrance is blooming simultaneously. The pinxter flower opens just as the new leaves emerge in native woods, when the pink lady's slipper adorns the forest floor and the returning wood thrush sings its first flute-like song from the trees. Like many members of the heath family, the pinxter flower favors acidic woodland soils. It is one of several azaleas native to Maryland and the only one common in Washington-Baltimore area woodlands. According to Maryland Native Plant Society President Carole Bergmann, the pinxter is threatened by deer, who devour the young plants.

Flowers: Roundish clusters of several pale to deep pink flowers which are delightfully and subtly

fragrant (degree of fragrance varies). Dark pink more or less pubescent corolla tube flares into 5 paler pink lobes. Pink stamens and pistil are long, protruding and upswept. Flowers 1 - 1 3/4" across, emerging just before or with the new leaves. [Note: Some botanical guides describe this plant as lacking or nearly lacking in fragrance, and the fragrance is not nearly as strong as the swamp azalea (*R. viscosum*) of swamps, bogs and streambanks throughout Maryland or rose azalea (*R. prinophyllum*) of the mountains and piedmont.]

Leaves: Alternate (but may appear whorled in terminal clusters), simple, with finely hairy entire margins. Oblong, obovate or elliptic, with wedge-shaped base and short petiole (to nearly sessile). 1 3/4 - 4" long, a pale spring green as they emerge with blossoms.

Height and Growth Habit: 2 - 8' shrub; branching toward the top.

Habitat and Range: Woods, streambanks; New England to South Carolina and Tennessee.

Blooming Time: April - May.

Similar Species: Several native azaleas grow in Maryland from the mountains to the coastal plain (see Brown and Brown's **Woody Plants of Maryland** and Fleming, Lobstein and Tufty's **Finding Wildflowers in the Washington-Baltimore Area**.) Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) has evergreen leaves and smaller, later flowers. Great rhododendron (*R. maximum*) has evergreen leaves and later blooms.

Locations: Found throughout Maryland, especially in rocky woods. Rock Creek Park, Blockhouse Point Park, Fairland Recreation Park, Rachel Carson Conservation Park, Carderock, Great Falls, Sugarloaf Mountain.

"Wildflower in Focus" text adapted from **An Illustrated Guide to Eastern Woodland Wildflowers and Trees: 350 Plants Observed at Sugarloaf Mountain, Maryland** (Choukas-Bradley and Brown, University of Virginia Press).