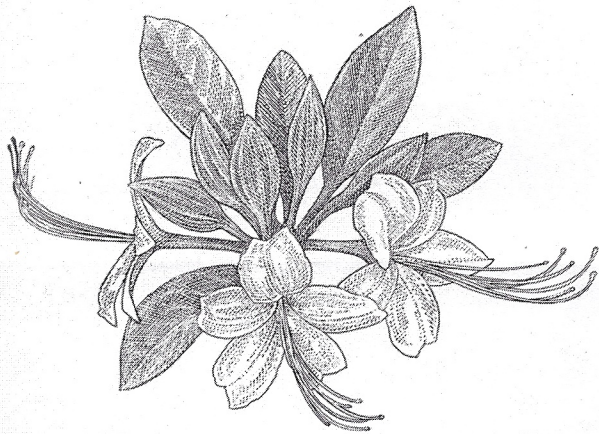


SAVED BY A ROSE TREE

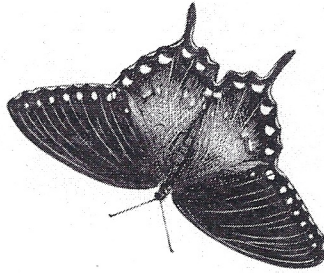
BY ERIC DINERSTEIN
Contributing Writer

ILLUSTRATION BY TRUDY NICHOLSON
Contributing Artist

In spring, after the redbud, cherries, magnolias, and dogwoods have had their day, rhododendrons and, we have come to expect, azaleas will trumpet the end of the season's blossom parade. Here in Cabin John, front yards are awash in the gaudy candy colors of azaleas and the more serene white



Pinxter flower (*Rhododendron periclymenoides*)



Spicebush Swallowtail butterfly

of the southern Appalachian Mountains. Its thick leaves resemble an evergreen southern magnolia or a holly tree. Perhaps the most elegant Rhododendron blossom on the planet, however, belongs to another native, an uncommon species known as the Pinxter flower or Pinxter azalea, found from Alabama to New Hampshire (and with the mouthful of a Latin name *Rhododendron periclymenoides*). Reaching a height of 9 feet, Pinxter azaleas put out long tubular flowers that can range from its namesake hue to a version with more reddish blush in the petals.

Many of the rhododendrons are pollinated by bees and butterflies, and the Pinxter bush is no exception. It engages with another lovely creature, the spicebush swallowtail, a butterfly that lays its eggs only on spicebush and sassafras in our local woods, but takes nectar from the Pinxter blossoms. When the swallowtail lands on the flower, the pollen grains, rather than transferring to the insect's head, dust the inner edges of the wings of the butterfly to be spread to the next plant. I have only seen this interaction in pictures, as depicted in the accompanying illustration, never in real life. It is something I long to see. It must be one of the most exquisite of all mutualisms shaped by evolution by natural selection: one of the most beautiful flowering plants in the world visited by one

of the loveliest butterflies imaginable.

I mention this exquisite partnership because it is one that gardeners can recreate in their own yards as part of a broader movement to plant native species instead of exotics. Planting natives makes a lot of sense, not only for their natural beauty, but because they are part of what evolved here. In a time when celandine, garlic mustard, creeping Euonymus, various invasive honeysuckles, multiflora rose, Japanese barberry, Japanese spurge, and the like invade our wild Cabin John woods, planting a Pinxter bush in your front yard would make a personal statement to preserve wild nature. Why not go for it?

Preserving rhododendrons and native azaleas is something we should aspire to everywhere, as they are important parts of the ecosystems in which they occur. Most grow in the northern hemisphere and reach maximum diversity in the Himalayan region. The largest specimens reach almost 100 feet tall and 3 feet in diameter. But it is their diversity that is astounding—in some mid-elevation national reserves in Sikkim, India and in Bhutan, as many as 22 species of rhododendron coexist.

My favorite among them is *Rhododendron hodgsonii*. This tree is covered in a luminous purple bark that flakes off in long, jagged parchment-like pieces. When I stood in a grove of these colorful trunks listening to a serenade—the song of five species of wild cuckoos—I felt more at peace with the world than in almost any other place I have ever been.

Researching Pinxter flower, I learned something new from a Federal website page: a warning that all parts of Pinxter bush contain poisonous compounds, even the seductive flowers. That must be the explanation of how a Rhododendron once saved me from prolonged agony. When I was working in the 1970s as a survey biologist in the Peace Corps and stationed in the lowlands of Nepal, I was treated as an honored guest to a meal of fresh river fish and boiled rice, washed down with as much

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE →

of the local rice liquor, called raksi, as I could swallow. The fish on the menu, like all big fish of Nepal's rivers, are members of the



Planting natives makes a lot of sense, not only for their natural beauty, but because they are part of what evolved here. In a time when celandine, garlic mustard, creeping Euonymus, various invasive honeysuckles, multiflora rose, Japanese barberry, Japanese spurge, and the like invaded our wild Cabin John woods . . .



carp family and exceedingly bony. I made the mistake of swallowing a large hunk of fish

without chewing properly and before I knew it I felt a sharp pain in my throat. I tried the Nepali technique of swallowing a large ball of rice to force the bone down the hatch, but no luck. I stayed for a day in that village by the Karnali River, wondering what to do. I had only arrived a few weeks ago at my post and it was the monsoon. The monsoon had turned the dirt tracks to mud and the nearest hospital was a 50-mile walk. Despondent, I sat in a makeshift straw-roofed platform, elevated above the ground, watching the mighty Karnali roll by.

An old fisherman heard of my plight and approached carrying a small leather satchel. He told me in Nepali not to worry, that this happened to fishermen and their families all the time. Just take a few of these dried flower petals and suck on them and after a while, the fish bone would pass. Sure enough, within an hour, I could swallow again without pain.

Those magic petals, it turned out, were the dried petals of Lali Gurans, the national

flower of Nepal, that comes from the tree, *Rhododendron arboreum*. Most rhododendrons have poisonous compounds in their leaves—it is why cattle and sheep cannot eat them. But for some species like the Pinxter azalea and the Lali Gurans, the petals contain the toxin, too. I ate enough petals to cause my mucus membranes to work overtime and my throat tissues to expel the foreign object. For me, this is yet another reason – beyond its beauty and its service as a nectar source for the spicebush swallowtail – to plant Pinxter azalea in the yard. The next time a loved one finds a fish bone stuck in their throat, I know what to do. **VN**



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