

Flame Azaleas

light up a woodland garden



Natural Gardener

by Michele Worden

This past May I was walking in Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids, Michigan when I spotted luminous color in the Gwen Frostic Wildflower Garden. The color could be described as orange by those with a poor imagination. I prefer to think of it as salmon or mango or sunset. Sunset is perhaps the most apt since it seems full of light, as if lit from within. As soon as I saw it, I knew I was looking at *Rhododendron calendulaceum*, otherwise known as Flame Azalea.

For years I had been contemplating adding one of our native azaleas to my woodland garden. After seeing the Flame Azalea in person, I knew I had to have it. It will complement my ferns and hostas in a blank spot where we lost a tree this past winter. We will plant it this autumn; the fall is a great time to add shrubs to your garden because plants establish better than in spring. In the fall, plants and shrubs have more time to establish roots in the cooler, more temperate weather before they go dormant for the winter. In spring planting, the shrubs are often hit with severe heat and drought which stresses the plants. Also, in summer plants are trying to kick out green leafy growth, which competes with root development so vital for establishment.

There are 26 species of *Rhododendron* native to the United States. Many are found along the Blue Ridge

parkway from Pennsylvania to Georgia, causing legendary traffic jams during their peak bloom times of May and June. *Rhododendron calendulaceum* has a native range from New York south to Georgia and westward to Ohio and Tennessee. It is a zone 5-8 shrub and grows from 4-8 feet wide and high (though can grow 12-15 ft). According to renowned plants-

her years ago in heavy clay soil. It was doomed from the start. If you have clay soil, you can improve drainage by planting your azalea in a raised bed, or with the root ball half exposed but with a thick covering of pine bark mulch to keep it moist.

Rhododendrons have another attractive feature: their waxy leaves are toxic when ingested, and are thus relatively deer resistant. Of course, a hungry deer will eat anything, but I will take whatever help I can get. Our golden retriever passed away three years ago and his scent must be finally and truly gone, because for the first time we have had significant

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man Michael Dirr, *Rhododendron calendulaceum* is "one of our finest deciduous native azaleas." In addition to the stunning spring blooms, the medium green summer foliage becomes a bronzy red color in the fall. This species thrives in well-drained but moist, organic-rich and acidic soils. Dirr says the major cause of failure is root rot from poor drainage. That explains what happened to my mother's rhodie, which I planted for

deer damage this spring. I will plant a Flame Azalea in his memory. 🐾

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