



# Potomac Valley Chapter

American Rhododendron Society

www.arspvc.org

Late Spring Supplement: June 2026

## Potomac Valley Chapter ARS – 2026 Calendar

- **June 14 – 16: Native Azalea Trip to Whitetop Mountain**
- **October 11 – 13: MAC-PVC Joint meeting, Winchester, VA**
- **December 2: PVC Fall Banquet, Hidden View Farm, Annapolis, MD**

## Chapter Trip to Whitetop – Plans have Changed

Most of this supplement was supposed to have information about our chapter field trip to Whitetop Mountain to see the beautiful display of the native flame azaleas (*R. calendulaceum*) growing up there. Due to the unprecedented weather extremes this year, the bloom in the Southern Appalachians is way ahead of schedule. If we were to wait until the planned dates of June 20 – 21, there is a good chance that the bloom will be over. It doesn't make sense to drive so far only to find that the azaleas are finished.

We did have many unknowns. The first concern on any trip is whether we selected the right time for the best bloom. Mother Nature can be fickle so that is hard to predict. From past experience, dates around the second and third weeks of June have had the best bloom. Whitetop and several other prime spots like Roan Mountain and Gregory Bald usually peak on the summer solstice. The Roan Mountain Rhododendron Festival and the Graham County Flame Azalea Festival in Robbinsville, NC, are held at that time. This year, the rhododendrons and native azaleas in the mountains are blooming two to three weeks early. It is the earliest we have ever seen!

I had this newsletter about ready to go but delayed delivery as we monitored conditions in the mountains from afar using Facebook. We finally decided to scrap plans for our trip and provide some alternatives for those who want to see the azaleas.

Weather is always a concern even if we hit the right bloom time. We have been on hikes where we have been rained out. It is not wise to be walking on a mountaintop while trying to juggle an umbrella and camera during a thunderstorm. Lightning does kill people. Strong winds, heavy rain, and hail can ruin blossoms. The plants appreciate the moisture but photographers do not. If inclement weather is predicted, we may yet have to adjust our itinerary.

Judging from Facebook posts I have seen, Roan Mountain was reaching peak bloom the week of June. Whitetop will be about the same.

### Chapter Officers

#### President:

Carol Segree  
csegree17@outlook.com

#### Treasurer:

Phyllis Rittman  
rittwoman@gmail.com

#### Membership:

Norm Beaudry  
beauorm@gmail.com



*R. calendulaceum* on Whitetop



The parking area on Whitetop

I will try to provide some options for alternative trips on the next page. Neither Carol Segree nor I can leave for the mountains this first week in June so we were discussing options. We have settled on a quick trip to from June 14 to 16. There are more detailed plans later in this posting. If you want to join us, keep in touch. We can alert you to any last-minute changes.

#### Carol Segree:

csegree17@outlook.com

#### Don Hyatt:

donaldhyatt@verizon.net

## Whitetop Trip: *Original Schedule*

### Day 1 –*Travel Day for Distant Locations*

Possible leisurely travel day to Abingdon. We chose Abingdon since it has better hotels and restaurants

### Day 2 – *Travel & Grayson Highlands*

- People who live closer, leave home early in the morning and meet at Grayson Highlands State Park by 1:30 pm. Note, there is a \$10 parking fee.
- Check out flame azaleas along the roads and behind the Country Store (currently closed).
- Park at Massie Gap, hike across the field and up a hill to the Rhododendron Trail the Appalachian Trail to Wilburn Ridge. Look for the wild ponies.
- Stop at the Visitor’s Center. Buy stuff.
- Head to hotel of choice in Abingdon for the night

### Day 3 – *Whitetop Mountain*

- Check out of hotel early and drive to Whitetop. Consider carpooling. At the Abingdon Exit 19 on I-81, there is a Walmart Super Center and a Lowes where we could probably park a few cars.
- If on a weekend, it would be good to get to the top early to avoid parking problems. Admire azaleas and views. Eat snacks you have for lunch.
- When ready, drive back to Abingdon to pick up cars. Head for home or drive to Sevierville, TN, for the night if you want to buy some native azaleas.

### Day 4 – *East Fork Nursery*

- In the morning, purchase plants from Vivian Abney at East Fork Nursery. Head for home.

## Other Options after Cancellation

Since we decided to cancel the trip planned for June 20 to 21, here are some other options:

### 1. **Go next year.**

We try to do this trip every year so maybe next year’s weather will be more cooperative.

### 2. **Join Charlie Andrews’ trip.**

Charlie has continued the mountain hike tradition that George McLellan and I started years ago. Thanks, Charlie! His group will start in Boone, NC, on June 12 and will visit Whitetop on Sunday, June 14. He will continue south to places like Wayah Bald, Gregory Bald, and Hooper Bald. Write Don Hyatt or Charlie for the itinerary.

### 3. **Visit Whitetop on your own.**

There should be enough information in this newsletter to attempt this trip on your own.

### 4. **Join a modified trip from June 14 - 16.**

We have organized a trip earlier trip to Whitetop.

## Details for the Abbreviated Trip

- **June 14, Sunday** – Travel south on I-81. Stop at the **Hampton Inn Wytheville**, 950 Peppers Ferry Rd, Wytheville, VA 24382 (276) 228-6090
- **June 15, Monday** – Skip Grayson Highlands but go to Whitetop in the AM. Visit J. Jackson and Lindy Johnson afterwards. Spend the night at the **Hampton Inn Sevierville**, 681 Winfield Dunn Pkwy, Sevierville, TN 37876 (865) 429-2005
- **June 16, Tuesday** – Buy native azaleas from Vivian Abney in the AM and then head for home.



*Rhododendron calendulaceum* variations and vistas from Whitetop Mountain

## Grayson Highlands State Park

829 Grayson Highland Lane

Mouth of Wilson, VA 24363

We have often used this stop to check out the state of bloom in the region. It is a lower elevation than many places we visit so it peaks at least a week prior to our other prime spots. It has a full range of floral attractions including nice forms of *calendulaceum*, quite a bit of *catawbiense*, and some kalmia.

From recent posts on the Internet, it seems that the *catawbiense* in Grayson Highlands was starting to peak on Memorial Day this year. I have not seen any reports about azaleas yet, but if nothing is in bloom, it may not be worth a stop for those who are primarily interested in the flowers.

The park also has about 100 wild ponies that were introduced in 1974 as a way to keep the balds from getting overgrown. They don't eat rhododendrons but they cut the grass, eat the weeds, and seem to intimidate the deer. I think I need ponies!

For those of us who live to the south of DC, travel time to Grayson Highlands is usually just 4 to 6 hours so we usually make this an afternoon activity on our first day. We try to arrive by 1:30 PM, spend 3 or 4 hours here, and then drive another hour or so to our destination for the night. Keep in touch by phone or text in case there are changes in plans. I hope you can use the information here to visit on your own.

### Stop 1: Ranger Station

Pay \$10 parking fee, request a map of the park, access restrooms, and explore the park. Here is a link to a map. Don Hyatt can email you one, too.

[Graysons Highlands Map](#)

### Stop 2: Country Store

The Country Store is currently closed but there are some excellent forms of *calendulaceum* growing in a picnic area behind it. There are scattered azaleas around the park and some of them are quite nice, too.



*R. calendulaceum* behind the Country Store

### Stop 3: Massie Gap Parking Area

Park cars and prepare for a short hike. Good shoes, hiking poles, and some water is advisable. Walk across field, go through gate, and follow the gravel path or the Rhododendron Trail to the top of the hill. At the crest, it connects to the Appalachian Trail.



Path at Massie Gap leading to the Rhododendron Trail



*R. catawbiense* at Rhododendron Gap on the AT

The trail has some *calendulaceum* and kalmia. When it joins the Appalachian Trail, there will be *catawbiense* in both directions. In 2.1 miles, the AT South leads to the big display at Rhododendron Gap. Try that on a full day hike. The AT North toward Wilburn Ridge is a favorite spot for the wild ponies.



Wild Ponies frequent Wilburn Ridge

### Stop 4: Visitor Center

I try to stop here before heading home to buy nature-related items including books, apparel and crafts. I take pictures of animals in their taxidermy display.

## Directions to Grayson Highlands

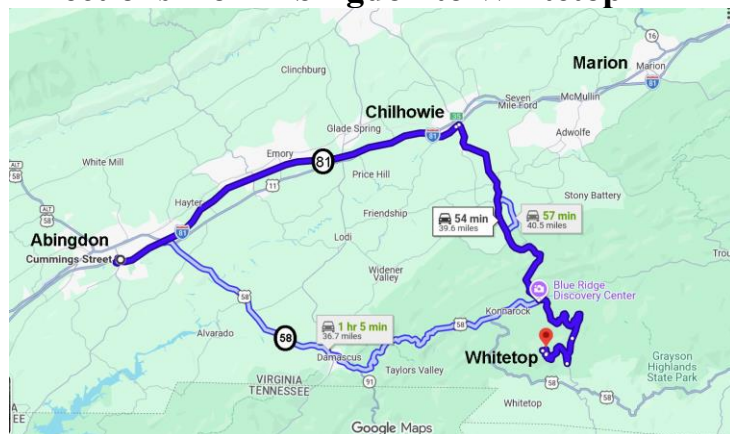


Traveling south on I-81, take exit 45 at Marion and turn south onto Rt. 16 toward Troutdale, then right onto Rt. 58, and finally right into the park. It is possible to leave I-81 at Atkins exit 50 and head south onto Rt 622 which connects to Rt. 16 near Sugar Grove.

Traveling north on I-81, take exit 35 at Chilhowie onto Whitetop Road, then left on Rt. 58, and eventually left into the park.

To get to Abingdon from Grayson Highlands, the trip via Whitetop Road is faster but Rt. 58 goes directly into Abingdon at exit 19 on I-81. It is a very winding road but it is scenic.

## Directions from Abingdon to Whitetop



Travel north on I-81 to Chilhowie (exit 35) and turn south onto Whitetop Rd. (Rt. 600). The road is paved until it climbs up the mountain. From there to the top, the road is gravel and may have a few rough spots although significant resurfacing was done last summer. There will be a sharp right turn at Mud Creek Lane that leads to the top of the mountain. There is a parking area near the top.

Pull into the parking lot on the right which is where the azaleas start. The Appalachian Trail crosses the road at the corner of the lot and from there to the tree line on the far side is a fantastic display of *R. calendulaceum*.

## East Fork Nursery – Vivian Abney

2769 Bethel Church Road  
Sevierville TN 37876,  
(865) 453-6108

We always like to purchase native azaleas from Vivian Abney at East Fork Nursery when we are in the area. Her place is like a “candy store” since she has a fantastic selection, probably the best anywhere in the US. She propagates many rare varieties from hybridizers and collectors by tissue culture and also raises plants from seed collected in the wild. She does not ship so you have to visit in person.

Her nursery is adjacent to her home which is east of town in the shadow of the Smokies. She is open from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM Monday through Friday but it is wise to call her in advance to make sure she will be there. She is the sole operator and does go to town from time to time and makes local deliveries.



George McLellan speaking with Vivian Abney



## Problems with Planning

It is always difficult to predict when flowers will be at their peak, especially when planning garden tours or trips to the wild. Spring can be early or late, and then the weather can be unpredictable. How often do the cherry blossoms bloom on time for their festival in DC?

When I joined the Middle Atlantic Chapter Species Study Group in 1995, our goal was to document the native azaleas in the Southern Appalachians. We usually set aside a range of dates of at least a week for our trip but often had to adjust itineraries at the last minute to see peak bloom of various plant populations.

It took me nine years before I saw the awesome display of *Rhododendron catawbiense* at its peak on Roan Mountain (below). The flowers only last a week to ten days and they are very susceptible to weather conditions. Since 1995, peak bloom ranged from June 8<sup>th</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Heavy rain can shorten the bloom window to a few days. Hail storms are disastrous. Late spring freezes can easily destroy the entire season.



*R. catawbiense* creates an awesome display on Roan Mt.

*R. calendulaceum* has a much wider bloom window of two to three weeks. The buds do not open all at once so if some get damaged, there are usually others that will open later. It is usually in bloom with *catawbiense*.

This year has been hard to predict. We had a brutal winter with a deep freeze through all of February. Will spring be late? Then we had a record warm spell so spring arrived early. Freezing weather returned in late March but that was followed by more record heat and late freezes again in April. Most orchards in Virginia were frozen out and farmers are facing a complete loss for their apple and peach crops this year. Vineyards suffered a similar fate. What about the azalea bloom?

It was also extremely dry this year until recently when we receive cool rains over a period of ten days. That should delay the blooms. The long-range forecast is for average to slightly below normal for a while but then warm in June. The plants are confused. So am I.



*R. calendulaceum* usually blooms with *catawbiense* on Roan

It certainly would be helpful to have camcorders at all of the prime locations so we could monitor spring as it unfurls. Lacking that I rely on the Internet. For weeks I have been monitoring Facebook looking for images of posted by local hikers. Apparently, there was minimal freeze damage at the upper elevations since the tops of the mountains were still dormant during those frosty nights in March and April.

Images shared by others taken along the Blue Ridge Parkway near Mount Pisgah during the first and second weeks of May showed that spring was just waking up. Early spring natives like *R. vaseyi* and *R. carolinianum* at 5000 ft. were unfazed by the cold nights. They were blooming about on schedule. Then came the heat wave.

Many of us have noted that plants in our own gardens were confused this year and bloomed out of sequence. That happens in nature, too. *R. catawbiense* is way ahead of schedule now, earliest I've seen. Plants at 3000 ft. near Peaks of Otter, at 4000 ft. near Grandfather Mountain, and at 5500 ft. near Craggy Gardens were in bloom on the Memorial Day weekend, May 24 - 25. Roan Mountain and Grayson Highlands were reaching peak on June 1. That is two to three weeks ahead of schedule. A record? The Roan Rhododendron Festival is scheduled for June 19 - 21. The flowers won't last.

I had only seen a few posts about *R. calendulaceum* until recently. They were in bloom on Roan's Round Bald by June 2 which is problematic. We had been hoping that they were still in bud, waiting for us.

Despite erratic spring weather conditions, many native azalea populations in the Southern Appalachians seem to get back on schedule by the summer solstice. That was always the case for Gregory Bald during the 20 years we hiked up there. We have only been visiting Whitetop since 2023, but that date has been the best, too.

At this point, it seems clear that *calendulaceum* is not going to cooperate. There might be a few azaleas still blooming on Whitetop on the weekend of June 21<sup>st</sup> but the big show will likely be over then. Bummer!

## Fall Meeting with MAC: Winchester! October 11 – 13, 2026

Mark your calendars! Carol Segree, Doug Jolley, and Theresa Brents are working on an exciting joint fall meeting between our Potomac Valley Chapter and their Middle Atlantic Chapter ARS. The meeting will be based in Winchester, VA, over the Columbus Day weekend.

We have an invitation to visit the exquisite private garden of Beverly and Chuck Veatch in the Shenandoah Valley. They call their place Veatch's Gleann Arboretum and it is a showplace for native plants, wildflowers, and conifers. Beverly admits that rhododendrons and azaleas are scarce in the garden since their soil has a high pH due to the prevalence of limestone in that region. Ericaceous plants do not like sweet soil and they must be grown in raised beds with imported acid soil to survive.

Below are a couple of photos that Carol took as they made an initial visit to the Veatch garden. We'll provide more details later but be sure to save the date. This is a meeting you won't want to miss.



Garden Art and Conifers in the Veatch's Arboretum

## Coming Next Issue – *Garden Travels*

Did you go on any of the garden activities promoted by our chapter this year? Our summer issue will have lots of pictures of gardens and nurseries that we visited. Here are some of the places you can expect to see:

- **NC Plant Trip** – Plant Delights Nursery
- **MAC Spring Meeting** – Richmond, VA
- **ASA Convention** – Athens, GA
- **ARS Convention** – Vancouver Island, BC
- **U. S. National Arboretum** – Washington, DC
- **PA Plant Trip** – East Earl, Pennsylvania
- **Native Azalea Field Trip** – Whitetop Mountain, VA



Rosa and Bob McWhorter

## Remembering Bob McWhorter

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of Bob McWhorter. He was a chapter president and a hybridizer, too. Bob and his wife Rosa opened their lovely garden for many tours over the years. We send our sincerest sympathy to Rosa and the extended McWhorter family. Below is a link to Bob's obituary. There are also some images of their garden.

[Robert "Bob" L. Whorter - Obituary](#)



Touring the McWhorter Garden



'Jennifer Marie' - Named for their late daughter

Potomac Valley Chapter ARS - Newsletter  
Donald W. Hyatt, Editor  
donaldhyatt@verizon.net



**Potomac Valley Chapter  
of the  
American Rhododendron Society**

The Potomac Valley Chapter ARS is one of three American Rhododendron Society chapters located in District 9 which represents the Middle Atlantic region of the United States. Some of our chapter activities include:

- Regular Meetings with Speakers
- Annual Chapter Banquet
- Garden Tours
- Field Trips to Nurseries or to Wild Stands of Native Azaleas and Rhododendrons
- Seed Exchanges
- Plants for Members Program
- Flower Show
- Informative Chapter Newsletters
- Photography Contest

Our regular chapter meetings are usually held four times a year on Sunday afternoons. However, we do hold occasional meetings at other locations in nearby Maryland, Virginia, or Washington, DC.

We encourage you to check out our chapter website which includes at least 20 years of previous newsletters that contain interesting articles, more color pictures, and examples of past activities:

[www.arspvc.org](http://www.arspvc.org)

As a member of our local chapter you will also become a member at the national level of the American Rhododendron Society. This entitles you to a year's subscription (3 issues) of their outstanding **Journal** in printed or digital form. It is filled with information and many color pictures. You will also be invited to attend national conventions or regional conferences.

The cost of ARS membership is \$50 per year for both printed and digital form, or \$40 for just digital. It includes membership in a chapter of your choice, such as our Potomac Valley Chapter. If you are already a member of another ARS Chapter, you may join the Potomac Valley Chapter as an Associate Member for only \$10 per year. Please identify your home chapter.

For more information about the American Rhododendron Society, check out their website:

[www.rhododendron.org](http://www.rhododendron.org)

**Membership Application**  
*American Rhododendron Society*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State \_\_\_\_\_

Zip/Country \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Memberships are on a calendar year basis and include the local chapter membership:

Individual (Print & Digital).....	\$50.00
Individual (Digital Only) .....	40.00
Student (proof of age required).....	10.00
Commercial/Corporate.....	90.00
Sustaining .....	75.00
Sponsoring.....	150.00
Life, single .....	1,000.00
Associate Membership*.....	10.00

*\*Associate Members must identify home chapter*

I would like my "home" chapter to be the Potomac Valley Chapter

To join our chapter, send this form with payment to:

**POTOMAC VALLEY CHAPTER ARS**  
**PVC-ARS Membership Chair**  
**Beaunorm@gmail.com**

You may also send this form with US Funds payable to the national organization:

**AMERICAN RHODODENDRON SOCIETY**  
**P.O. Box 43**  
**Craryville, NY 12521**

To pay online by credit card, follow the link to "Membership" on the ARS website:

[www.rhododendron.org](http://www.rhododendron.org)

**More ARS National Contact Points:**

Phone (631) 533-0375

Email: [member@arsoffice.org](mailto:member@arsoffice.org)