

Mohonk Preserve

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Azalea "May Apple"

The one-time abundance of this gall in the Shawangunks was brought to mind by a question from Joe Karsner, a Minnewaska State Park ranger. I knew them well at Mohonk in the 1930s, but have not seen one for some 40 years. Present-day naturalists and botanists, that I have asked, have never heard of them. Mention of this oddity on my nature walks this summer has brought nods of recollection from older Hudson Valley residents. Generally it had not been a first-hand experience, but a family custom to collect them for eating.

My remembrance of May Apples at Mohonk was of a fleshy light green growth at the end of twigs of pink azaleas. At that time I did not distinguish between the two species of pinksters\* found in the Shawangunks. The galls varied in size and shape from a ping-pong ball to that of a small oblong potato. As a boy I considered them edible. The texture was that of a fine grained melon. They could be found in May and early June. Joe Karsner told me that in his youth May Apples were collected by the pail-full, in the vicinity of Cragmoor, for eating raw, and to pickle for later consumption. He has not seen one in that area for at least 15 years.

Thanks to Vince Schaefer, a literature search in the Research Center library produced only one reference. Our Northern Shrubs by Harriet L. Keeler, 1903 (Dover reprint 1969) quotes Martha Bockee Flint's "A Garden of Simples" concerning Azalea nudiflora:

"In secluded forest dells where the wood soil is rich and damp, on the verge of black, peaty swamps, and even on rocky hillsides, there blooms the most beautiful of the Azaleas, the *Rhododendron nudiflora*.



Leaves of *Azalea nudiflora*.

No 'tree' in its sub-arborescent growth, it is truly a rose flower, for the exquisite tints of the wild-rose and the peach-blossom color its clusters of airy bloom. . . . This peerless azalea is familiarly known in New England as the honeysuckle, the swamp pink and the May apple. The latter name comes from the irregular excrescence, pale green and glaucous, growing on the leaves when stung by an insect, which there deposits its eggs. Cool, crisp, and juicy, they are the delight of children, and put for a day in spiced vinegar, make the first pickles of the year.

\*(*Rhododendron* (sp.))

The Arnold Arboretum has kindly supplied the following quotation from "Diseases and Pests of Ornamental Plants" by P. O. Pirone:

**Azalea Gall** (*Exobasidium vaccinii*). The leaves become thickened or fleshy either wholly or in part, and turn pale green or whitish. Sometimes a fleshy rosette of leaves appears at the tip end of the branch, or a gall which later becomes bladder-like as it decays and dries out (Fig. 60). The flower parts, especially the petals of evergreen species such as *R. maximum*, become greatly thickened so that the whole bloom is turned into a hard, fleshy, waxy, irregular gall (Fig. 61), the parts of which become covered with a whitish bloom. Even the seed pods become fleshy and gall-like. When found in nature, these fleshy galls are called "pinkster apples," and are eaten by those familiar with their qualities. Similar galls of a beautiful rose color develop sometimes on cranberries; they are called "rose apples." The fungus that causes these abnormalities is one of the simple basidiomycetes, which forms basidia superficially instead of in fleshy fruitbodies. Azalea gall is largely composed of abnormal leaf tissue.

The reason for the apparent disappearance of the Azalea May Apple fungus gall from the northern Shawangunks is unclear. Information on its occurrence in other areas, or its reappearance in this area, would be welcomed.

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