

Rare azaleas in bloom on Grandfather Mountain

Written by Kellen Short
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The stunning and rare pink-shell azalea is now in bloom on Grandfather Mountain, offering visitors unparalleled access to the shrub native to only a few western North Carolina counties. The delicate pink blossoms typically appear in late April or early May, arriving even before leaves appear on the hardy branches. The pink-shell grows in spruce forests up to about 5,500 feet in elevation, and Grandfather Mountain is believed to be home to the world's largest population of the exquisite plant.

Because of its limited range and small population, the pink-shell azalea (*Rhododendron vaseyi*) is considered globally "vulnerable." Grandfather Mountain serves as a home for this plant and helps to protect the species.

The High Country's best viewing spot is Grandfather Mountain's Half Moon Overlook, where thickets of pink-shell grow among the rhododendron bushes set to bloom in a matter of weeks. The pink-shell azalea also can be seen in wooded areas along the Grandfather Mountain entrance road and along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

While much of the higher-elevation forest remains bare, the pink-shell azalea provides a dazzling burst of color unmatched in the early spring season. Blooms began to appear this week around 4,400 feet, but the buds should continue to be visible at higher elevations in the coming weeks.

"The pink-shell azalea just screams 'spring,'" said Grandfather Mountain Chief Naturalist Jill Goodwin. "It's what we've been waiting for all winter."

The Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation is a not-for-profit corporation established to preserve Grandfather Mountain, operate the nature park in the public interest and participate in educational research activities. For more information, call 800-468-7325 or plan a trip at www.grandfather.com.

Photos: Grandfather Mountain--Pinkshell1: The peaks of Grandfather Mountain are visible behind the vivid blooms of the pink-shell azalea, a rare plant species now flowering on the Mountain. Kellen Short | Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation.

Pinkshell2: The pink-shell azalea is unusual due to the emergence of the flowers before the leaves. Kellen Short | Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation.