

A fling with Spring bling

You know that cringey feeling when someone attends a wedding wearing something so flashy it takes away from the bride's glory? Same thing happens when azaleas erupt into eye-popping bloom.

Don't get me wrong, I love azaleas. Really. It's just that they, like a handful of other equally blinding floral exhibitionists including snowball Viburnums, wisteria, dogwoods, Hydrangeas, Southern magnolias, and crape myrtles, are so stop-in-your-tracks gorgeous they cause less-showy natives and other more demur plants to fade into the background like wallflowers.

Those few garden critics who say I don't like them simply misjudge my point, which is that when these blousy beauties show up to banish dreary winter weather and jump-start our Spring gardens. Myriad other not-

so-floriferous beauties simply fade into the background.

Reminds me of Skippy and Daphne, the "fun girls" from Mt. Pilot in the old Andy Griffith TV program. They were well-meaning, but every time they showed up in Mayberry, three things happened: they jazzed things up, then quickly left town, but in the meantime they left the perfectly attractive, hard-working local Thelma Lou and Helen feeling... well, a little dowdy.

Isn't this what azaleas do to otherwise outstanding Spirea, Kerria, Japanese maple, blueberries, English dogwood (Philadelphus, also known as mock orange), black- and blueberries, and other more subdued flowering shrubs? When azaleas and snowballs show up they poke us in the eye and then disappear into the background as big green meatballs, leaving us both ener-



PARTY GIRLS BOUQUET

gized and dazed.

Me, I can just say no to them, like that third beer or extra helping of mac n' cheese. If I want to be blinded by azaleas all I

have to do is look across the street for a fling with Spring bling.

Instead, I savor the more subdued true beauties that inspire and comfort. In-

stead of blinding but finicky dogwoods, I treasure my much easier to grow native redbuds, "grancy graybeard" also known as American fringe tree, cherry laurel, hummingbird-laden red buckeye, and my arbor's stunning crossvine.

And perhaps the most delicious spring shrubs of all, our native deciduous azaleas which flower before they leaf out. Last week I saw these leggy natives, often called wild honeysuckle, flowering all up and down the Natchez Trace, covered with huge tiger and other swallowtail butterflies. Most are pink but there are other species that flower in white, yellow, orange, and even red. And they make me all but swoon with their heady sweet bouquet.

Speaking of fragrance, this is the season when the warm wafting fragrance of banana shrub beckons us to take off our shoes and run barefoot. Before long there will be a citrusy conspiracy going on between Magnolia, star or confederate jasmine, Ligustrum, privet, and honeysuckle; though each has its own signature attar, I can barely tell them apart when they

battling up for nose-space. Meanwhile, my unexpected tendency to over-accessorize my garden with glass bottles, Mardi Gras beads and other bling is being overshadowed by the party girls across the street vying for attention.

So last week I hosted a garden soiree with them, gathering them from around my little neighborhood. Made a big floral bouquet with them that was actually almost embarrassingly opulent. They were seated side by side in one of my great-grandmother's favorite vases, which is embossed with either dogwood or Cherokee rose flowers; even stuck in a couple of stems of dogwood, our local fun gal. Couldn't have been more lush had they been arranged in a vodka bottle.

We whooped it up during our sumptuous 'do, but they quickly faded, leaving me to savor my beloved main garden squeezes.

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