

GROWING AZALEAS IN FLORIDA

Mike Rogers – Central Florida

The most serious problems with growing azaleas start with the roots. Azaleas must have a well-drained soil mix. Most azaleas grown in this area are grown in a sandy pine bark mixture. This is a good mix for a couple of years while the tree is still in the nursery can. Nursery cans have much greater drainage than bonsai pots because of the height of the pot. The deeper the pot, the greater is the action of gravity in pushing the water out of the soil. For this reason, when planting in a bonsai pot, a soil mix with much greater drainage capabilities must be used. The mix must also be able to hold a great deal of water because azaleas must not dry out completely. I believe this seeming contradiction is why most people have trouble with azaleas when they are transferred to bonsai pots.

There are two soil mixes that I know of which meet these two requirements. The first is a soil mix that Helen Souder pioneered in south Florida and which I have been using for nearly 20 years. It consists of equal parts of crushed Chattahoochee, crushed volcanic rock, and fir bark, ground fine. I have substituted soil conditioned pine bark for the fir bark because the humidity is so much lower for half the year, yet it hold more water in the mix, but still drains very well.

The other mix is currently being produced by Tom Brantly in Ocala. It consists of crushed Chattahoochee, crushed turface*, and soil conditioned pine bark. I think this mix is satisfactory and readily available. Although turface does break down, it will last the two to three years between repotting.

Very good drainage is the reason that you see azaleas planted in deeper bonsai pots. For the same reason stated above, a deep bonsai container will drain better than a shallow one, the shallow trays being the least well-drained contrary to popular belief. Even though the shallow trays have more holes, the water is spread out thin and therefore is not forced out the holes as efficiently. It's the same principle as being on thin ice. If you stamp on thin ice, all of your weight is concentrated on a small area and you fall through, whereas, if you lie down and spread out, your weight is more evenly distributed and you won't fall through.

The second point is one of growth and vitality. Azaleas must be kept healthy and growing very strong. In order to accomplish this, two things must be done. The first is a fertilizer schedule. Since the soil mix is so well drained, a constant supply of nutrients must be provided. I use several things to accomplish this. A granular fertilizer in very small amounts such as 6-6-6 or 'azalea special' can be purchased at a local store very reasonably. Use very sparingly as this fertilizer can burn. In a bonsai container that is equivalent in volume to a one-gallon nursery can, use less than a teaspoon once a month in the summer. I also use Green King a couple of times during the summer and a liquid Peter's 20-20-20,

MiracleGro, or Miracid every one to two weeks during the summer. In the winter, cut down to half this schedule because azaleas do not go dormant in central Florida.

The third point is trimming. Do not keep azaleas tightly pinched like most other bonsai. Azaleas should really only be trimmed 3-4 times a year. The exception to this rule is if you get a very strong sprout that you don't need, cut it off or back. Also, evergreen azaleas are bottom dominant growers. Most other bonsai are top dominant, so instead of trying to control the top in order to keep the bottom branches healthy, you must control the bottom branches in order to keep the top healthy and growing.

One more method is to let the bottom flower strong and thin or completely remove the flower buds on the top every couple or three years. This will let the top regain strength. If careful attention is not paid to balancing the vigor of the top and bottom, the top will not develop, and could even die back.

Once indication of proper maintenance is the size of the leaves. If the leaves are the same size on the top as they are on the bottom, the tree is properly balanced. But if the leaves on the bottom half are larger than the top, then too much is being allowed in the bottom, and the top is regressing. Adjustments must be made at this point to return vigor to the top by trimming harder on the bottom.

The next requirement is that the plant must not be allowed to stay wet for long periods of time. If it rains for days at a time, place the plants under a canopy or spray with liquid copper or other fungicide. In times of high heat and moisture, unless due care is taken, leaf rot will occur and whole sections of the tree can die. This could threaten the plant, especially if the vigor of the tree is allowed to slip.

Insects that attack azaleas include lace bugs, mealy bugs, aphids, and spider mites. By the time they are noticed, a substantial amount of vigor is robbed from the plant. The best course is to use a good systemic insecticide.

As with everything else where azaleas are concerned, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

When trimming azaleas, your tools must be clean. Clean tools with alcohol before using them on azaleas. This will prevent pathogens from being introduced into the plant's system.

All cuts must be sealed. This accomplishes two things: it keeps the cambium from drying out around the cut and retards shrinking back, thereby giving more time for healing.

Also, all but the smallest of cuts must be finished off with a very sharp knife or razor blade. Since the bark is so thin on azaleas, it does not row well over ragged cuts, neither will it fill in a concave cut. Use a root cutter instead of a concave cutter. Root cutters leave a flush cut and this is what you need. Finish the cut off very fine with a graving knife or razor blade.

Azaleas like to be slightly pot bound so repot every 2-3 years. With the roots thus confined, azaleas will thicken their trunks faster. If they are let to get too pot bound, the growth and vigor will be slowed down.

With trimming and repotting, there is a fine line between growth, vigor, and control. Exercise just enough control not to sacrifice growth and vigor.

Do not trim after the end of August thru September. Azaleas are setting buds then and flowers will be sacrificed. You can trim the odd strong shoot that may crop up.

Let the plant bloom for a couple of weeks, then, when the first flush of flowers begins to fade, remove all of the flowers and any remaining buds. Do not let the plant bloom itself out completely. This will weaken the plant too much. When removing the flowers, be sure to remove the ovaries, otherwise, seed development will take strength from the plant. At that time, a good pruning can be done if the plant is healthy and vigorous. This is the most control that should be exercised during the year. Do not completely defoliate the plant.

These are the basics of growing azaleas successfully. I know it sounds like an awful lot of trouble, but azaleas are the queen of the classical bonsai, and they are worth it. To bring a well developed azalea into full bloom is a sight to behold.