

Kurume Azalea (*Rhododendron obtusum amoenum*)

*Brought to you by ArtisanWorks, Kagawong, ON
(Most of the included information is obtained from several online sources.)*

General Information: The azalea is a member of the genus *Rhododendron*. It is an evergreen which in the wild grows as a small shrub (up to six feet). There are hundreds of azalea varieties. The azalea used to be considered a separate genus from the rhododendron, but has recently been reclassified. The Kurume azalea is a hybrid of *R. obtusum* and *R. kiusianum*, both native to the island of Kyushu, the southernmost island of Japan. They are often referred to as dwarf, although they may reach 4 to 6 feet in height and spread. Kurume Hybrids are hardier than the Southern Indian Hybrids. Most of the Japanese Azaleas are very successful as bonsai. Even ancient plants produce spectacular flowers with all the freshness of a nursery plant. The Kurume azaleas have wonderful flowers, just as the Satsuki azaleas, but are usually smaller and with more solid colors, leading to a more refined appearance. The flowers of Kurume azaleas are small about 1cm (1/2in) across. Most flowers are single.

CARE

General Care: **Temperature:** Protect the tree (preferably under glass) in the winter, but do not bring indoors. **Lighting:** Filtered, partial sun. Avoid prolonged direct exposure to spring and summer sun. Do not place the azalea bonsai in direct sunlight as this will affect the color and kill the flowers, instead keep the plant in the shade, especially during the summer.

Air:

Watering: Keep the soil damp, as the roots can dry out easily and this is fatal to the tree. Water with rain water if possible. If using tap water that is high in lime, repot the tree every year to keep the soil acidity high. This bonsai usually needs rainwater for optimal growth. However, if this is not possible for long periods of time, one can add a tablespoon of white vinegar to a gallon of water and just once a month use that mixture for watering.

Fertilizing: Feed every 20-30 days with a slow-acting organic fertilizer, from early spring to late autumn, and apply chelated iron a couple times a year. Micro nutrients should be applied routinely. You should never feed this bonsai when blooming. Be patient and wait until the flowering has ended, then only feed the bonsai once a month. You must not use rapid growth fertilizers. If you prefer to use chemical fertilizers, feed every two weeks using a half-strength solution of a fertilizer for acid-loving plants, such as Miracid. If the tree is repotted in spring, do not feed until autumn. Do not feed during the hottest month of the summer.

Pruning / Training: Prune branches and new shoots in late summer, using a sealing compound to seal wounds. Azalea can and will grow shoots from old wood. New shoots at the ends of branches grow in groups of five. These shoots should be reduced to two and the remaining shoots shortened to two sets of leaves. Wiring may be done from spring through summer. Use care when bending branches, as older branches are brittle. Skipping watering the day before wiring will make the branches more flexible. You may need to protect the bark by wrapping the wire with raffia.

Insects / Pests: Aphids, lace bugs, white fly, leaf miners, spider mites, scale, stem borers. Diseases include petal blight, leaf gall, mushroom root rot. When applying any kind of pest control, avoid spraying the flowers as this will kill the plant. Only spray around the root level of the soil.

Propagation: Usually by cuttings to maintain hybrid characteristics. Take 3-to-4-inch cuttings after spring growth has hardened.

Repotting: Repot in the spring after the flowers have gone by, every year for young trees, every 2-3 years for older trees. Azaleas like well drained, organic soils with a pH of 4.5 to 5.5. Some growers use pure peat moss, though this is probably too extreme. Using a soil mixture specifically intended for azaleas is advisable. Azaleas grow extremely dense, hairy root masses. Experienced growers of azalea bonsai recommend using a soil mix that contains no small particles at all, because of the dense growth of azalea roots. If soil with fine particles is used, the roots can form mats that shed water, making successful feeding and watering difficult. When repotting, trim the root ball and cut out pie-shaped wedges around the outside of the root ball so that the roots can grow into the gaps.

Design and Styling:

Special Care During Blooming Season

May: Flower buds will be swelling nicely now, in fact some will be showing color or even be open depending on weather conditions and how the plant has been over wintered. Strong growing shoots from the base of the buds should be trimmed back to allow the flowers space to open. Because of the prolific number of flowers a tree can produce, reducing stress is a good practice by reducing the number of flowers by 30 – 50%. On a show tree this can be achieved by removing most of the flowers from the back. On young plants it would be advisable to remove all the flowers to encourage maximum growth. Stop feeding now. This will encourage a longer flowering period. Providing some kind of temporary shelter to protect the buds and flowers from rain will stop them from discoloring. For the same reason, be extra careful when watering. This temporary shelter will also serve as a sunshade to help stop flowers fading prematurely. This is a busy time in the growth pattern of Satsuki and demand for water will increase accordingly.

June: Remove all flower heads. Although this can be a tedious, time consuming job it is important to prevent the production of seed, which puts undue stress on a tree at a time when it needs to recover from the rigors of flowering. New growth slows for a short period after flowering and this is an ideal time for repotting, wiring and pruning/trimming to shape. Feeding can re-commence once flowering has finished but wait a few weeks if trees have been repotted. Likewise, care should be taken not to over water newly repotted trees. As mentioned previously, Satsuki, like all other azaleas and rhododendrons, produce a profusion of new shoots from the base of old flower buds. With Satsuki, it is best to remove all unwanted shoots leaving just two, one either side of the bud. These are then trimmed back to two pairs of leaves.

July: Some late flowering varieties will still be in flower this month. Allowing trees to flower this late in the year can have a long-term detrimental effect on the plants health. Hard as it seems, all flower buds/ flowers should be removed, especially if the tree is about to be repotted. Leaving flowers on this late will weaken the tree at a time when it should be producing next year's flower buds. A short time after flowering is over a second spurt of growth occurs.