

Chapter Ideas for Success

Azalea Society of America

Ideas for Success

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Overview

The Azalea Society of America consists of azalea enthusiasts throughout the United States and in several foreign countries. These members are affiliated with chapters or are At Large (i.e., no chapter affiliation). Chapters are chartered by the national society in accordance with the society by-laws. Each chapter has its own set of by-laws, officers, budgets and programs.

Affiliation with chapters can and should enhance the experience of society members. The degree to which this experience is enhanced depends in large part on the “value added” by the chapter.

- **Purpose**

Each chapter should have a purpose. This purpose is normally stated in broad terms in the objectives, found in the chapter by-laws and can include such things as promoting an interest in azaleas and bringing together individuals to share their knowledge and appreciation of azaleas. The chapter program should support the objectives stated in the by-laws.

- **Value for their membership**

We must all recognize what it takes to keep loyal members in our chapters. Of course, people join because of some interest in azaleas. But what keeps them as members? The key is that members (1) need to like and enjoy being a member and (2) they deserve value for the money they pay to be a member. If chapter leadership fails to recognize either of these and does not provide an environment where both exist, membership will dwindle.

The challenge is that not all members are the same. First, members will fill the spectrum from novice to expert. This diversity creates problems and opportunities. The chapter must provide a variety of programs and opportunities that offers some interest to each side of the spectrum. Opportunity comes in that your experts and experienced plants people can be utilized to educate and help those with less experience.

Second, many chapters may have both local and distant members. To keep distant members interested and provide them with value, the chapter needs vehicles beyond meetings and local activities. Here newsletters, websites, and other imaginative programs come into play.

- **Leadership**

The success of a chapter depends on its continued leadership. A chapter will not automatically sustain itself in the long run without its leadership actively managing and working to improve the quality of its programs and activities. A president cannot do everything alone. Delegation is essential. Distributing responsibilities for programs and events also develops future leadership. The president’s job is to lead, monitor, encourage, and remind those responsible for various tasks. Future leaders of the chapter should be identified and encouraged to participate in planning activities and committees and in

participating as a volunteer in other chapter activities. Encourage them to volunteer for committee chairmanship positions and include those positions as members (voting or non-voting as appropriate) in the chapter's Executive Committee.

- **Membership**

We all know plant society membership in general is in decline and the average age of many chapters is higher than we would like it to be. Chapters must actively work to enhance their membership. This means not only adding new members but keeping the ones you already have.

- **New members**

To attract new members, it helps to have programs and opportunities in place that would be of interest to prospective members. As time goes on, more and better programs can be brought on line. Many venues exist to find a new member and are listed in this document. Some are: invite friends to meetings, issue calling cards to your members with "Ask me about joining ASA," offer discounts at plants sales for members, have a speakers bureau, have a website, have an active Instagram account, have an active Facebook page.

- **Existing members**

Chapters should not ignore the members they already have. As already stated, members need to like being a member and feel they get value for their dues. This means not only interesting and informative programs and activities but a friendly environment.

The purpose of this document is to provide ideas for running a successful chapter. It contains ideas from society members who have had success in running chapters. Many of these ideas may be familiar to you, but some may be new. It is hoped that the suggestions contained within are useful in promoting successful chapters. Your chapter may have additional ideas for success. Let us know what works well for you, and we can add your ideas to future editions of this handbook.

Activities

Having interesting activities is the key to giving members the most "bang for their buck." Most (if not all) chapter by-laws specify meeting at least four times a year with the last meeting of the year designated as the "Annual Meeting." Chapter by-laws specify minimum activities to be conducted at this meeting. This meeting is frequently an end of year or holiday social.

The schedule of activities for the following year should be available to the general membership at this meeting. This schedule should reflect the events planned for the following year. It should be compliant with by-laws requirements (i.e., meet minimum meeting requirements) and can include additional tentative events or planned events for which the actual time and date are tentative (e.g., garden tours

whose scheduling is dependent upon the weather). The program should also be supported by the budget. Both of these are normally developed by the Executive Committee or a subset thereof (including the treasurer), prior to the annual meeting.

Suggestions:

- Published/scheduled for the following year in advance to allow folks to plan.
- Disseminate to all chapter members and have available at any time via media such as a chapter website.
- Reminders/detailed information sent out in a timely manner (e.g., two weeks prior to the event). A chapter newsletter can be used for this purpose (details later). Consider a calling committee to call and remind members of upcoming events. A regular phone call maintains friendly, encouraging contact with members, reminding them that the chapter is still there and appreciates them even if they have not been to any events recently.
- The chapter budget should be developed in conjunction with and supportive of the activities.

Suggestions for activity elements are below. Details follow on subsequent pages.

- Legacy Hybrid Sponsorship
- Speakers
- Plant exchanges
- Garden visits
- Propagation workshops
- Plant sales/auctions (both internal and external)
- Nature walks
- Nursery trips

Specific guidelines for developing schedules and budgets follow the suggested program elements.

Conducting Chapter Meetings

No one likes to waste time. Chapter meetings should be well planned with an interesting program and other activities. Your meetings should encourage attendance by your members and encourage guests to join the society. Suggestions to make your meetings more enjoyable and well attended include:

- Fixed, “good” meeting areas which are convenient to the membership are preferred. Revolving meeting areas (i.e., change for each meeting) are less desirable and if used, should be advertised well in advance.
- Plan for any logistical needs such as projectors, computers, screens, tables, chairs etc. Don’t forget things such as extension cords and power strips etc. Ensure you have sources for each requirement and have planned for pickup, delivery, and setup.
- Have an agenda indicating what events will occur at what time and who is responsible for conducting the event. The agenda should be followed as closely as possible. Keep control of the meeting and do not let it run on and on.
- Provide nametags for all chapter members to wear during the meeting. Collect afterwards for future meetings.
- If you are aware of guests in advance, print out tags for the guests. For others, provide a provision for creating a nametag onsite (pen, tag, tag holder).
- Provide a sign in sheet to track attendance at the program. Collect email addresses (optionally) from guests. Send an email to guests afterwards, thanking them for attending.
- Identify individuals(s) in the chapter to greet and engage guests. **Do not** allow guests to be left alone and ignored.
- Include guests in **ALL** activities less business meetings (e.g., voting). This includes events such as plant raffles, plant exchanges (even if they haven’t brought a plant(s) to share) etc. Providing guests with a plant to take home is often successful in gaining members.
- Have a Refreshments Committee to coordinate providing of refreshments. This could include refreshments brought by members as well as those provided by the chapter (need to budget). Committee should make provisions for set up and tear down/clean up of the refreshment area.

Legacy Hybrid Sponsorship

The Legacy Project is a society initiative to preserve the legacy of various hybrid groups. A chapter could adopt one or more hybrid groups to sponsor (one individual would have to be identified as a Legacy Lead for the hybrid group). One good suggestion would be to adopt hybrids/hybridizers who are affiliated with the chapter or who are/were located in the geographic proximity of the chapter.

Activities associated with the project which could be conducted by chapter members include:

- Propagating cuttings of the hybrids and raising them to gallon size or larger
- Promoting the hybrids in chapter plant sales

- Sponsoring a Legacy Garden at a local public garden
- Researching the hybridizer and hybrids and publish an article (e.g., in *The Azalean*)
- Give presentations on the hybridizer/hybrids

More information is located on the society Legacy Project webpage: <https://www.azaleas.org/legacy-project/>

Speakers

Speakers are often included as a good element of a chapter program. It is sometimes considered difficult to find speakers on azaleas. To assist in this regard, the society will be implementing a roster of speakers which can be used by your chapters or other horticulture groups.

Topics for chapter meetings need not be related solely to azaleas. Sources such as other horticultural organizations, speakers bureaus and Master Gardener groups often have speakers available. Other topics related to the care and raising of azaleas which might be of interest include:

- Soil conditioning
- Pruning
- Companion Plants
- Garden design (including integration of azaleas in a design)
- Presentations on specific gardens
- Pest control
- Propagation of woody plants
- Plant rescue

Your chapter speakers can also be used externally to spread the word about azaleas, spurring interest in the azaleas and the chapter/society. One way to expose the chapter is to participate in the Speakers Bureau and publicize it to local horticulture societies (and other groups). Consider providing a few door prizes or raffling off an azalea(s). Also consider bringing a quantity of azaleas for sale. As part of the presentation, have the following artifacts available:

- Society brochures
- How to care for azaleas flyers
- Complimentary copies of *The Azalean* (contact the back issues coordinator)
- Membership applications
- Business cards with chapter/society information
- Sign in sheet with space for an email for folks who would like to be on your mailing list

Plant Exchanges/Raffles

Most gardeners (especially those with mature gardens) have plenty of excess plants to share. Plant exchanges are a relatively easy event to include in your programs. Some suggestions for conducting include:

- Publicize the exchange as being part of the program
- Leave it open to all types of plants...not just azaleas
- Ask donor to include their name and information on the plant (in case someone has questions)
- Do not overwater (you don't want a mess in your meeting area)
- Consider opening the exchange/raffle to all attendees whether they provided plants or not. This is especially true for guests.

Garden Visits

Many members have beautiful private gardens. Coordinate with them and schedule a day or two during peak garden bloom seasons to open their gardens to visitors from the chapters. Garden visits can be open ended (i.e., come individually anytime during the period, with or without notification based on the garden owner's preferences) or could be more structured (chapter visits a garden or more and car pools between the gardens). The latter approach lends itself to some sort of social event at one of the gardens (could be as simple as light refreshments).

There are also many public gardens within an easy drive of most organizations. Some offer free admission for people with memberships at selected public gardens in the American Horticultural Society Reciprocal Admissions Program <http://ahsgardening.org/gardening-programs/rap/find/statebystate>. It might also be possible to get group discounts at the garden. Chapters can consider organized trips to a specific garden. You can also check out other amenities the gardens offer to groups, such as docent guided tours, speakers, meeting rooms etc.

Propagation Workshops

Schedule propagation workshops at the appropriate time of the year for taking and propagating cuttings (late spring for deciduous/mid-summer for evergreen). Members take cuttings (2 inch) and package them in plastic sandwich bags, labeled with name of the donor, name of the plant and hybrid group and characteristics of the plant (detail to be determined...but certainly bloom description if desirable).

Members can link up with each other directly for providing of specific cutting types or can donate cuttings to a general pool. These are then laid out on tables and each member gets the opportunity to select packages to take home and propagate. Chapters can set their own methods for determining sequence of selection and number of packets allowed per cycle.

Make provisions to conduct a propagation presentation/demonstration and ideally to conduct a workshop. A workshop would consist of the necessary supplies being provided to the participants and following along with the workshop presenter to put a sample set of the cuttings obtained during the cutting exchange.

Plant Sales/Auction

Plant sales and auctions can be beneficial in a number of different ways. They can

- Generate revenue
- Bring attention to the society and chapter and perhaps encourage new membership
- Introduce new and unusual azaleas to the general public (including Legacy Hybrids)
- Provide an enjoyable social interaction for chapter members

These activities can be held in isolation (i.e., the chapter sets them up by themselves at a given location), collaborative (i.e., the chapter coordinates with other plant societies to hold a joint sale/auction at a given location) or as a participant in a larger externally sponsored event (e.g., a plant sale sponsored by a public garden).

They can encourage/sustain membership in the following ways:

- Free plants can be provided to each new member
- Members can be offered a discount (e.g., 10-20%) on plant purchases
- Email addresses can be solicited from customers (voluntarily) to be included on mailing lists for chapter activities, including upcoming sales

An aggressive membership drive combined with a successful one-day plant sale offering discounts to members can bring in a dozen new members.

Sales are also a good opportunity to educate the public on planting and care instructions. Provide flyers on plant care to the public.

Plant stock can be obtained either from wholesale nurseries (sold at a markup) or ideally through internal chapter programs to propagate and raise the plants to sale size.

Field Trips

Field trips can vary greatly from day trips to multi-day trips. They can involve mostly road trips, like a drive along the Blue Ridge Parkway, or a long hike to Gregory Bald. The options are numerous. These trips allow members and invited guests to see more than plants in someone's garden.

Nursery Trips

Day or overnight trips can be arranged to visit multiple nurseries. As a group, it might be possible to visit wholesale nurseries not normally open to the general public. It is also possible that a nursery might offer a members discount for the purchase of plants.

If an overnight event, it can also foster social interaction, for example if everyone went out to dinner together, or gathered in one place for drink/snacks and socializing.

Benefits of membership

Additional perks should be advertised and offered as benefits of membership. Suggestions include:

- **Trips**
The field trips and nursery visits mentioned above are great chapter membership benefits. Trips are often sponsored by other chapters or groups of chapters with invitations provided to other members of the society.
- **Co-op buying program**
Consider using the buying power of the chapter to benefit your members. With a co-op buying program you could purchase in bulk or wholesale many items (e.g., peat moss, perlite, pots etc.) and save your members money.
- **Plants-for-members**
Another value program suggestion is plants-for-members. Often one hears a member is looking for a hard-to-find cultivar or species. Another member may have such a plant. You also probably have expert propagators. With a plants-for-members program a limited number of the desired plant could be propagated and given or sold to the member.
- **Seed exchange**
Swap seeds among members. Establish a chapter seed exchange. Share with the ASA and ARS seed exchanges. This gives additional opportunities for field trips to collect seed.
- **Native azalea study group**
Consider a native azalea study group where the members do more than look admiringly at pretty plants and pictures. This is a particularly complex group of plants with many questions still unanswered about identification, distribution, characteristics. Create specific narrow scope projects and pursue them.

- **Social events**

Members will enjoy their membership better when they know and are comfortable around other chapter members. Socializing events such as picnics, BBQs, Christmas parties, and lunches before meetings can bring members into the heart of the chapter.

Schedules/Budgets

Schedules for the following year should be developed and provided to the chapter membership no later than the annual meeting. A specific person/group (e.g., the individual responsible for activities) should develop a draft.

A template can be used as the starting point for a schedule. For example, a chapter may normally have meetings with speakers in Mar/Apr or Oct/Nov, the national convention in Mar/Apr, a cutting exchange in Jul, sales in May and Sep and an “Annual Meeting/Holiday Social” in Dec. These events can form the basis for the next year’s schedule. The content of the events can vary (e.g., speakers on different subjects). Other events can be scheduled on a tentative basis (e.g., garden tours whose date may depend on whether it is an early or late spring, visit to a public garden etc.).

The budget for the year should be established at the same time. A cost should be developed for each event (e.g., room rentals, speakers’ fees, refreshment costs, incidentals such as cleaning products, supplies needed to conduct workshops, plant acquisition expenses etc.) This should be balanced against projected chapter revenue. Sources include rebates from national (currently \$5 per membership) and fund raising events such as plant sales. The budget ideally should be balanced. Any deviations will result in an addition or subtraction to/from the chapter monetary assets (e.g., bank account). The goal is not to let the assets go into the red (negative). The program and/or the budget may need to be tweaked to ensure they are synchronized (i.e., the program is supported by the budget).

It is always a good idea to maintain a cushion in the bank to deal with any unexpected expenses.

Chapter Outreach

Your chapter can have exposure to the general public through a variety of means. Reference has already been made to public sales, talks given to other groups and guest invitations to chapter activities.

Other means are through available electronic and social media methods. These include:

- Emails to members and potential members apprising them of chapter events
- Chapter websites containing up to date information on chapter activities. Content management should be controlled by one or a few specified individuals with specified responsibilities.

- Chapter Facebook pages with posts of azaleas, azalea gardens and chapter activities. There should be a single coordinator for content management within the chapter. [I'm going to need some verbiage on how members can link to the page, how other organizations can do it etc.)
- An Instagram account is another valuable communication and public relations tool. With a chapter account you can regularly post pictures of plants, field trips, gardens, and upcoming events. Appoint a chapter Instagram communicator to post your pictures and publicize events.
- A "Business Card" can be created with pertinent chapter information (e.g., website, points of contact, Facebook page etc.). These could be liberally disseminated at each and every chapter activity (e.g., meetings, sales, presentations to other groups etc.). On them should be displayed, "Ask me about joining ASA."

Conclusion

Membership in the Azalea Society of America is enhanced by belonging to an active, engaged chapter. Key is energetic and creative leadership. While this document presents suggestions for a successful chapter, you are not limited to the ideas contained within. You are encouraged to contribute your own ideas for chapter success. Contact the society president with any suggestions.