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# Easy Propagation of Azaleas at Home

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It has seemed to me that the Azalea Society of America should promote the periodic publication of certain "basic articles" on azaleas, such as their culture, the various hybrid groups, propagation, and the like. I said as much to society officers, and they replied with not only agreement, but with the request to write something—not quite the response I expected. I was reminded, however, when noting my own propagation training in an article for the last issue of *THE AZALEAN*, that few things about azaleas have been as gratifying as being able to successfully grow my own plants. Additionally, I have found that once one is confident with propagating, other aspects of azaleas become more interesting: the identification of hybrids, the judgment of quality, etc. So, I am glad to share what I know about a fundamental skill for anyone interested in azaleas. It is based on the experience of an amateur suburban azalea enthusiast who successfully raises small numbers of plants.

The propagation method I present here is for the rooting of cuttings from evergreen azaleas. It is not much different from the well-described procedure for rooting cuttings from all kinds of plants. How this is done for azaleas has been described numerous times and with some variation in procedure. I will explain the best way I have found for rooting and growing, but also with some comments on variations and alternatives. The basic idea is to take good cuttings, to place them in a moist environment until new roots grow to take up water naturally, and to provide protection during further growth until the plants are mature enough to be planted outside. With the method I use, a miniature greenhouse is created by putting containers of cuttings in sealed plastic bags. Unlike many articles that don't tell you what to do after the cuttings are rooted, this article also discusses further growing using a light table and cold frames. The supplies you will need should be readily available from any larger nursery or garden store [1]. I should say also that the following is based on a six-page typewritten information sheet that I have given over the past few years to friends who wanted to know about propagation. It has worked well for them.

The first thing to do well in advance of taking cuttings is to decide what plants you want to propagate, how many cuttings you want, whether the plant can provide that number, and where on the plant to take your cuttings. The latter is important if the azalea has sport flowers or any variation from the "official" description of the flowers. In such cases you should mark the places for cuttings with tags or ribbon when the plant is in bloom. The number of cuttings may be limited by the type of container you use for rooting; for example, the way I use my container (which is a tray or flat) results in four or five cuttings in a row, so that's how many I typically take for each cultivar. You should consider also when determining the number of cuttings to take how many rooted plants can be accommodated in further stages of growth; as I describe later, the arrangement I have permits a maximum of 216 plants.

## Rooting Materials and Preparation

☞ **Mix:** 1/2 perlite, 1/2 peat moss, well mixed and damp, but not soaking wet. One way to tell if the dampness is about right is to take a handful of mix and squeeze it. It should hold together, but no water should drip out.

☞ **Container:** Flat measuring 12 x 6 x 2 inches deep. I now use a plastic flat, but previously I have used 5-inch square plastic market packs divided into cells, and also plastic pots. Just about any kind of container could be used as long as it is at least two inches deep, can be handled easily, and can be covered or enclosed with a plastic bag.

☞ **Materials:** Plastic label stakes and waterproof pen, rooting hormone (Rootone or Hormex #1), spray bottle with fungicide mix (i.e., Captan), and plastic bags to fit container [2]. I save and use the plastic bags that cover clothes from the laundry. Zip-top or plastic storage bags can also be used if they will fit snugly around the container used.

☞ **Preparation for Cuttings:** Fill the container with the damp rooting mix to near the top, and tamp down somewhat, but don't compress the mix too tightly.

## Cuttings

Take cuttings of new growth beginning at the end of June or so after growth has matured somewhat (professionals say about six to eight weeks from flowering). Immature growth is light green and very flexible; cutting material should have some resilience, but should snap or break if bent too much. Use small, sharp scissors to make clean cuts. Cuttings should be about 1-1/2 inches long, but may be as short as 3/4 or even 1/2 inch. The thickness of the stem of the cutting doesn't seem to matter, but I prefer neither the very thin nor the thick main stem pieces. If plants are growing together, be sure to take cuttings from the proper azalea; also make sure cuttings are insect free. (Some say cuttings can be rooted anytime the plant is in active growth, including well into the fall before dormancy; others say rooting can be