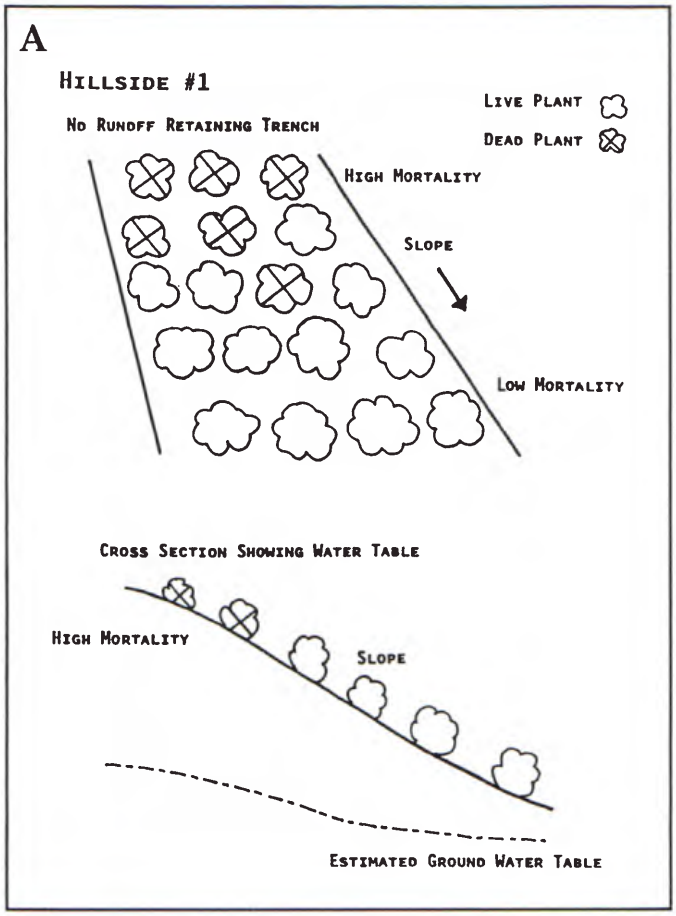

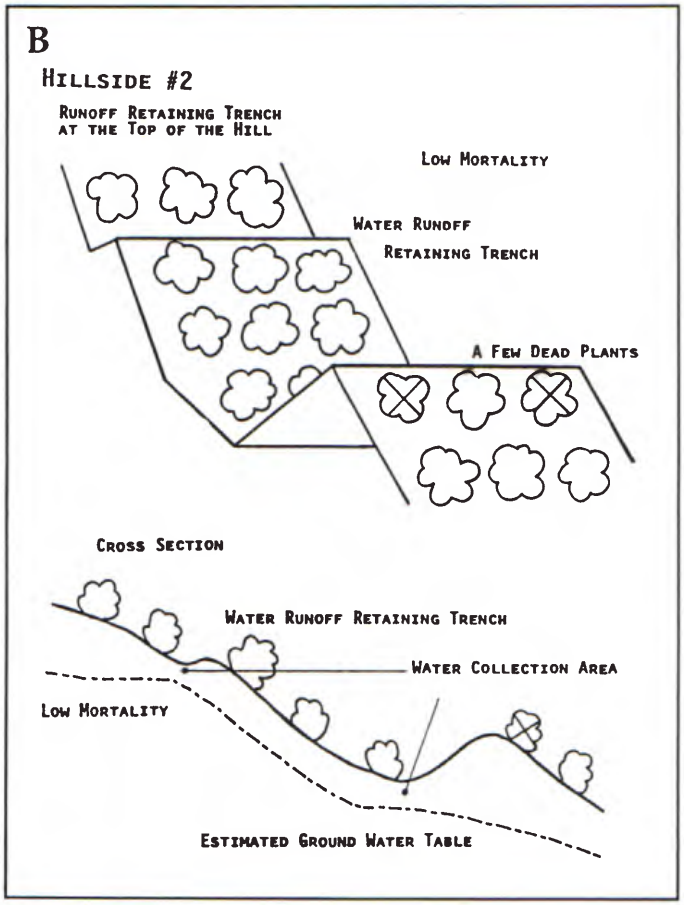

Observations On Azalea Culture

Courtland Lee

Glenn Dale, Maryland

Last summer (1993) was one of the hottest and driest on record for Maryland, east of Washington, D.C. The temperature remained in the high 90's—even 100's—for weeks in July and August. Although humidity was high, there was little precipitation. Perhaps all our rain fell in the Mississippi Valley. It did afford some interesting observations of how mass azalea plantings survived these drought conditions.

Of particular concern for these observations were several local embankment plantings of many varieties and numerous individual plants. A pattern of mortality was noticed and a theory is proposed to explain these observations. It appears to this author that failure of plants was more a question of ground water hydrology than one of hardiness of a particular cultivar. No tests were directed to drought hardiness of particular cultivars. Where moderate watering was done in the morning or evening on beds containing several hundred cultivars, including many of the Glenn Dales, no problem seems to be cultivar-specific.

Over the past few years we at Boxlee have transplanted, largely from Frank White's collection, many of his named varieties and have had success in establishment of well over 95%. Of those plants that did not make it, most were planted too deep or the mice got to them the first winter. It should be noted that Frank White did not use the light pine bark medium that seems to be catching on today. For the many other cultivars which were not from Frank White that were transplanted in a pine bark medium, care and extra watering had to take place to ensure a "wick" effect didn't dry out the plant before it became established. Our success ratio with these plants was not as high. Mulching helps, as well as mixing some native soil at planting time. Our soil is a mixture of sand and clay. It should be noted that none of these plants are in the direct sun.

From the above background I made the following observation of some large commercial embankment plantings of azaleas in the area. It seemed that the greatest mortality of newly transplanted plants occurred at the top third of the slope. Not all plants died but the pattern was obvious. Also, in one case where there was a level gouge in the embankment where water could collect, little mortality occurred even though in an identical level planting nearby mortality was up to 50%. It is the opinion of this author that the explanation of this lies in the behavior of the ground water relative to the surface of the bank, and that after a period of hot searing weather the hardened ground is not receptive to rainfall and most subsequent rain immediately runs off. The Diagrams A and B illustrate these observations.

The conclusion is that some sort of trenching along a slope in an area unlikely to be watered will improve transplant success. In addition first year transplants need watering in dry spells since they can become points of selective drying due to the light planting medium.

***Courtland Lee** is an azalea grower and a Certified Professional Geologist. Boxlee is a 10-acre historic site a mile from the Plant Introduction Station in Glenn Dale, MD. Mr. Lee has been a long-time member of the Ben Morrison Chapter of the Azalea Society of America.* ❑