A Few Common Problems of the Azalea

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Figure 1 Leaf damages due to azalea lace bug

Figure 2 Leaf yellowing due to poor soil conditions

Figure 3 Lichens on azalea stems

Figure 4 Azalea petal blight

Figure 5 Azalea leaf gall

For some time I have wanted to attend a program on various problems confronting the azalea: a down-to-earth type of program with photographs, where you could walk away with a basic idea of what the problem was—weather, diseases or insects—and what to do about it. I didn't want the scientific details from an entomologist, biologist, botanist or some other card-carrying Latin-speaking presenter. Not needed was someone who would give me a headache and leave me walking away still not understanding what it was that plagued my beloved plants or how to help them. So, finally, I decided to do it myself!

I promised our new chapter President, Dave Butler, that I would present, in our next program, a few common ailments of the azalea.....photographs and all! This was going to be a snap. First, I would call our Azalea Society of America Slide Librarian, to procure some slides. All that would be left would be to pick a few of the slides, jot down some notes and just do it. Simple? Nope!! It didn't happen that way; not at all. In fact, it caused me a lot of stress, loss of sleep, and several bucks. But down to the eleventh hour, I came up with a few photographs, made the presentation, and now I want to share it with all of you.

Remember, you won't obtain credits for your horticultural degree, but hopefully you'll learn to recognize the problem and what to do about it. Fair enough? By the way, you'll have the benefit of learning some tips from some of our members who participated in the discussion during our meeting.

First, let's start with yellowing of the leaves. To some folks, lace bug (*Stephanitis pyrioides* Scott—O.K., so a little Latin won't hurt!) draws attention to discolored leaves. Not exactly yellow, except on older leaves (see later discussion). But lace bugs are very common to the azalea and can be very damaging. This damage starts out with a silvery-gray, mottled coloration on older leaves (Figure 1). Why? The bugs feed from the underside of the leaf, causing it to lose vitality and thus the discoloration on top. The bottom side becomes rust-colored and covered with a tar-like substance. The lace bug over-winters as eggs inserted into the leaves. Come spring, they hatch, feed, lay eggs, and the cycle is repeated. The solution? Spray!

The most available insecticides for control of lace bugs are Diazinon, Malathion, Orthene and Cygon. Be careful with Cygon. It's more toxic, and I've had a bad experience with it. Start your spray program in early spring when the little buggers begin to hatch. I usually spray again in mid-summer, plus I use a dormant oil spray during the cold months to help kill off additional over-wintering insects. By the way, you can mix your insecticides with the dormant oil.

Another leaf-yellowing problem can be caused by poor soil conditions, either a poor pH factor or lack of iron. Usually the soil here in Georgia has enough iron, so by checking your pH, you can get to the bottom of this problem. Stay in the range of 4.5 to 6.0 and you should be all right. If you do have a problem with iron deficiency, a lot of fertilizers now contain iron (at least 0.1%) and other micro-nutrients that will also be beneficial. You'll find most of your problem areas near the foundations of buildings because of mortar contained in the soil. I recently had a problem with some plants near my greenhouse, which during the summer I keep painted with a "shading-type" paint...lime-based, no less! Anyway, you can easily tell this yellowing problem by noting the leaf begins to yellow but the veins will remain green (Figure 2). For all practical purposes, a yearly dose of a fertilizer for

acid-loving plants should keep your azalea a healthy green and a happy plant.

Now, the real leaf-yellowing problem. This one's not really a problem, but one that gets most folks upset. It's called leaf senescence. This is a normal, God-intended thing the azalea will do in the fall and late summer during drought periods. The bright yellow leaves get one's attention, but this winter look around and observe. Look at your red- and purple-flowering azaleas. Notice the autumn colors on some of their leaves—not quite as predominant as the bright yellow on your whites and pinks, but again, the same thing—leaf senescence. It's the ageing process of the leaf. Normal—not to worry!

Now, here's another alarming sight, (Figure 3) not necessarily a problem, but symptomatic of problems worth pursuing. The papery growth is "Lichens" and according to Webster, it is a "fungus in symbiotic union with an alga". It uses the bark as a growth site, not a feeding site. Therefore, it's not harming the plant, but is nonetheless an ugly sight. Lichens can be controlled by chemicals, but again, it's indicative of an unhealthy plant. Therefore, you should do something.

Let's see...how about some ugly stuff? Nasty—really nasty, slimy, yucky stuff. Like petal blight, A.K.A. *Ovulinia azaleae*. This is one of the most serious and devastating diseases of azaleas. It was first reported in the 1930's in South Carolina and has spread throughout the USA and to other parts of the world.

Starting with small spots (Figure 4) actually occurring before the bud opens, it spreads rapidly, becoming a slimy mess as the fungus progresses. **It is an ugly sight!** This disease, this fungus, does not go away. Adhering to the plants, living in the soil surface, the leaf mulch, *Ovulinia azaleae* waits for the next blooming cycle to start again, spreading further into your garden, infecting more and more plants. You have to stop it, get it under control, and it won't be easy. From a personal note, the picture in Figure 4 came from my garden. This was the second year this plant was infected (still confined to one area, thank goodness) simply because I forgot to do anything about it. What should I have done?

A few sanitation measures would have helped a little, but the main defensive measure? Spray, spray, spray! Starting with a spray program of a fungicide, you begin at weekly intervals, just as the bud begins to open, and continuing until it opens. It may not help, but I think it would be wise to spray the beds of the infected plants during the off season. During our meeting, several products were suggested from folks who have had to fight this battle, and who have won. I guess from the discussion, Bayleton (Triadimefon) was touted as the most used. Zyban (Thio-phanate Methyltmaneb), Daconil 2787 (Chlorothanlonis), Dithane (Mancozeb), Benlate (Benomyl) and Fung-away were others. Since I haven't used any of these, I have to defer to the experts, so if you have any experience, please let me know. I understand some of these products, such as Bayleton are not easy to find. In any case, if you've got this problem, don't do like I have done. Don't delay your spraying!

One more ugly looking problem and I'll stop: *Exobasidium vaccinii*, a fancy name for leaf gall (Figure 5). Depending on weather conditions, this can be a problem overlooked, or it could be very bad and damaging to plants. A little preventive measure, such as spraying with a fungicide can keep this problem to a minimum. Start when the bud breaks and continue two to three weeks later. Any of the above fungicides, including products containing Captan, should do the trick.

NOTE: To folks who don't spray, folks who did and missed some plants, those with just a few plants, or those with lots of plants who like to get out among their shrubs: Simply pick off the galls and destroy them!

There was one other problem I wanted to present, but I didn't have a slide—the dreaded *Caloptilia azaleella* Brants [azalea leaf miner, ed.]. I'll just wait until I can get a picture to show.

Speaking of photographs or slides, if you have any, or want to make some, please forward to me. I'll write up something and send to our Azalea Society of America Slide Librarian. Like I said, "With a few slides, what could have been easier?".

WARNING!
BEFORE USING ANY CHEMICAL, READ THE LABEL

REFERENCES

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(5) *"Azaleas"*, Fred C. Galle; Timber Press; 1985, Portland, Oregon.

(6) *"The Azalea Book"*, Frederick P. Lee; 1980, Theophrastus Publishers, Little Compton, Rhode Island. ❑