
Personal Experiences in Hybridizing Azaleas

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About 50 years ago I started hybridizing day lilies and iris and I thought, with the plants I had to work with, I had some beautiful day lilies and iris—nothing to compare with what we have today but still beautiful.

My next hybridizing experience was with rhododendrons and out of 15,000 seedlings and seven and one-half years nothing was worth keeping. So I started on azaleas in 1975. I decided to use the prettiest azaleas one could find for stock plants. I ordered Robin Hills, Linwood Hardies and anything else that he had (Frank White, in the Washington, DC area). I started with these plants along with the James Harris hybrids. My slide presentation will show you some of the results of these crosses. Each year since 1975 I have used different azaleas for crosses and in 1978 I found an azalea in Florida, named 'Duchess of Cypress'. I used this azalea to cross with 'Parfait' and other Harris hybrids. As a result I have a whole new series of azaleas that I call Apple Blossom Azaleas. They are characterized by a profusion of small blooms in bi-colors and plain colors on low-growing plants (2' to 3' in ten years). They are very good landscape plants.

A few thoughts about growing azaleas from seed: If you have ever grown anything from seed, you can grow azaleas from seed. Take a seed pod from any azalea in September or October. Dry the seed pod. After the seed pod is thoroughly dried, get a large piece of white paper and a colander, one with a screen. Put your seed pod in colander and mash with a large spoon over the sheet of white paper. I just put the seed in a small envelope and mark the outside with the cross I made or write "open pollinated."

I like to use a sterile growing medium and put about 1/4" of screened sphagnum moss on top and just sprinkle the seed on the sphagnum moss. As to the container, I like to use clay pots. If pots have been used, soak in a Clorox solution for several days and rinse thoroughly. For a growing medium I use fine composted pine bark. Soak medium thoroughly for several days before planting.

Stash seed container in a clear plastic bag and tie so no moisture can escape. Place a seed container under regular fluorescent lights, at least 16 hours a day. When seedlings are 1/4" high open the top of the plastic bag each day, for about a week. Then just roll plastic bags down around the top of the pot. Leave as dry as possible to prevent damp off. If water is needed, pour water into the plastic tube, never water the plants directly.

When plants are one inch tall, transplant into four-inch pots, using the same growing medium as in the seed flat. After plants are a month old fertilize

with a liquid fertilizer (one teaspoon to a gallon of water). After the first year, plant into gallon pots.

If You Would Like To Try Your Hand At Hybridizing

First you have to decide what color flowers, low or tall shrub, size of the bloom and whether double or single flowers. Whatever you are looking for in an azalea, try to find two plants that are most like what you want. Then, cross-pollinate these plants. I like to take them into the greenhouse and do the pollinating there. This keeps the pollen bees from stealing the pollen and gives you a better chance to pollinate. No wind, water or other things that may cause the pollen not to take. Use small white tags to tag the blooms you pollinated. On the tag write the name of the one being pollinated x the one you use the pollen from. I like to take one small top branch with three or four blooms; this way you're sure to get one or two seed pods. After pollination pull the pollen sacs from the bloom you just pollinated. Some people like to tie small brown paper bags over the blooms to keep the bees off. I have never gone to this much trouble. I am not a good record keeper and had a lot of trouble with the plastic tags. The birds will pull out the plastic tags or the water will fade the writing off. A few years ago I started using aluminum tags and have had good luck with them.

Just a note here: when transplanting seedlings, only one seedling to a pot! I have 20-year-old plants with two or three plants to a pot, because the seedlings are so small it's very easy to put more than one to a four-inch pot when transplanting. □