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## Cultural Note—Azaleas and Fertilizer

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It's that time of year again...it's time to feed your azaleas! But wait, are you confused about fertilizing your plants? The old "why, what and when to" questions? Well, I'm gonna make your life easier. First let's answer a few questions, starting with why fertilize? Without going into a course on fertilizer and the interaction with plants, (which suggests a topic for somebody to address some day) the azalea needs a pH of 4.5 to 5.5 (soil acidity). This should prompt you to get a soil test, so let's assume you're OK.

Anyway, you want a slightly acid soil to make certain nutrients available to your plants to make them good and healthy, like iron, which gives the leaves a good green color. Otherwise you end up with chlorosis. This is when the leaves start turning yellow and have green veins running through them. You don't want this, so now you have one reason to fertilize.

Now, what to use? This can be very confusing, depending on what you read or whom you talk to. Some say all-purpose fertilizer like 8-8-8 or 10-10-10. Some say a 2-1-1 ratio, like 12-6-6 or 14-7-7. Some say fast release, others swear by slow release. Without being scientific, I can only tell you what I use, which at least will get you started and I'll guarantee you good results. You can debate with any die-hards later.

I like a 2-1-1 ratio, but I look for a lot more than the basic nitrogen (N), phosphate ( $P_2O_5$ ), and potash ( $K_2O$ ). I want some other stuff like boron (B), copper (Cu), iron (Fe), magnesium (M), molybdenum (Mo); and zinc (Zn). This

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### Chapter News

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**Brookside Gardens Chapter, Dianne Gregg, President**

At the February 1, 1999 meeting, the speaker was Lynne Meyer, who has been a landscape designer and contractor for 25 years. The next meeting will be April 5.

**Northen Virginia Chapter, Dan Krabill, President**

At the November 8, 1998 meeting Charles and Wanda Hanners, owners and operators of Azalea Trace Nursery were the speakers. The Hanners, who own and operate a nursery called Azalea Trace in Calvert County, Maryland told about hybridizing their own azaleas and about their experiences in running their azalea nursery. The Hanners started growing azaleas as a hobby, obtaining plants and other equipment from an old nursery that had gone out of business. It soon got beyond the hobby stage, and they started selling azaleas from their seven-acre lot. Over the years they have continued to expand to the large nursery that they have today. They have many interesting tales to tell about their experiences in dealing with many buyers and the growers about identification of the plant varieties. Charles Hanners is a retired electrical engineer, and a former Air Force officer. He comes from a family of gardeners, and has a passion for growing azaleas. He is a long-time and leading member of the Ben Morrison Chapter. The officers were elected at this meeting: Dan Krabill, President; David Nanney, Vice President; Lee McElvain, Secretary and Leslie Nanney, Treasurer. There were door prizes, a plant exchange, and refreshments.

**Tri-State Chapter, Greg Wedding, President**

A few years ago, the Tri-State Chapter was saddened to lose one of its dedicated members, Mr. Lawrence P. Schlensker. In keeping with his promise to Lawrence's wife Charlotte, Stephen Schroeder (Society Director) proposed that a granite stone be erected in Lawrence's honor. In May 1998, the engraved stone was installed in the azalea garden located in Mesker Zoo and Botanic Gardens, Evansville, Indiana.

gives my azaleas all they need and believe me, I've got some healthy plants. As far as fast versus slow release fertilizer, I've used both and have been satisfied with the results. I think both have their place in the garden, but I'll let you be the judge on which you want to use.

Now, on when to apply fertilizer. This can also get confusing because some say never, to two or three times a year, to only when they look like they need a dose. Well, let's make it simple to get you started. Again, without being scientific, how about, once a year right after they bloom.

Before I go on, there's still one question you might want answered and that's how much fertilizer do you apply to the azalea? This is a crucial question when it comes to azaleas, because to some people, if a little fertilizer is good then a lot is better. Not so with the azalea or for any plant for that matter. The azalea needs very little fertilizer and to over fertilize can be very harmful and even fatal! In general, apply no more than one teaspoon per plant less than a foot tall and one to two tablespoons per foot for taller plants. One other caution: in the case of newly purchased container plants, it's best to wait a year before applying any fertilizer. These plants have been pumped up enough to get them to the market and it's best to leave well enough alone.

Now, how to make your life easier. As you know the ASA has an agreement with Pursell Industries, Inc., of Sylacauga, Alabama, to evaluate and endorse their Azalea, Camellia, and Rhododendron plant foods. They own and market Vigoro, Sta-Green, Bandini and other products. Their new products contain Polyon which answers the timed release nitrogen question and, they've added all the other goodies I like in fertilizer for my azaleas. I highly recommend you try their products and you'll find out your life will become easier when it comes to fertilizing your plants. Besides, you can help promote our new azalea friend and help the Society evaluate their products. Send your comments, observations, etc., to me. We need the feedback!

"Try it you'll like it."

**Jim Thornton**

PS: Do you know what pH means?  
See page 18 for the answer. □