

Azaleas In Mexico

Esther Salinas — Xicotepec, Mexico City, Mexico and Lake Conroe, Texas

I have been a plant lover all my life. I inherited this love from my parents, and for many years I have been a garden club member which increased my knowledge and appetite for all kinds of species, among which of course were azaleas. I am a fairly new member of the Azalea Society of America. I have had the opportunity to garden in three different climates in Mexico — in Mexico City, in Xicotepec, in the state of Puebla, and in Acapulco — as well as in Lake Conroe in Texas.

We live in Mexico City, at 7,000 feet above sea level in the lava flow area, and I grow many beautiful azaleas there. But we also have a property northeast of Mexico City, about three hours by car, on the Tuxpan, Veracruz Road near a little town called Xicotepec (pronounced "He cot a peck"). This is ideal azalea and camellia country, and this is where I propagate them and grow them on about 30 acres.

The area is mountainous and wooded with oaks and sweet gums; bromeliads and orchids grow wild on them. There are lots of tree ferns, a few pine trees, and we grow coffee. The altitude there is about 5,000 feet above sea level, with a tremendous drop just after one leaves the town towards the Gulf of Mexico. Since Xicotepec is above the coastal plain, it has plenty of humidity and rain. It is hot during spring, mild the rest of the year and during the cooler winter months we get occasional frosts at night. In all central Mexico we have the wet season from June to the end of October and the dry season the rest of the year. In Xicotepec, however, as the humid air from the Gulf of Mexico hits the mountains, it rains often, or at least there is frequent fog.

I thought that azaleas as well as camellias probably had been introduced to Mexico by the British who came to work the Pachuca silver mines, but recently I found out that they had been introduced to Mexico via the Nao de China, or "Chinese Galleons," that came regularly once a year, for 250 years, from the 16th to the 18th centuries from the Philippines. The fleet of galleons, some of which were 3,000 tons, would leave Acapulco due South and about 12° North of the Equator would turn westward. Laden with silver coin minted in Mexico and making a stop in Guam, the crossing to Manila would take 90 days. The return trip took six months; they brought all sorts of silk, spices, porcelain, and other exotic oriental goods. This trip started northbound toward Japan and then eastward across the Pacific making their landfall in the North American continent near Cape Mendocino, California. From there they followed the currents and wind down the Californian and Mexican coastlines until they arrived in Acapulco where in December, January, and February there was a great fair at which the Manila fleet was joined by other fleets bearing merchandise from Peru. Historians have said that this fair was second in importance in the world only to the annual fair at Leipzig, Germany. The merchandise that did not stay in Mexico would be transported on muleback to the port of Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico and be shipped to Spain.

History aside, to increase the number of varieties of azaleas available in Mexico, about 1978, I imported several azalea plants of different varieties from Nuccio in Altadena, California. I have been propagating and growing them in Xicotepec since

then. I have about 70 different varieties. We propagate azaleas by cuttings in open beds.

Now we have a lovely house there and the 30-acre gardens have been mainly planted with thousands of azaleas and camellias. The camellias (which I graft myself), I originally obtained from Howard Asper, the well-known camellia hybridizer, also from California.

I grow Kurume, Gold Cup, Pericat, Southern Indian, Rutherford, Belgian Indian, Satsuki, and other hybrid azaleas, which provide us with a long flowering period. Only the Satsuki seem to bloom less. I do not grow species, but would like to do so, and I would like to have more spreading, cascading and groundcover types of azaleas to use in the landscape. I also grow them in hanging baskets.

Our soil is on the acid side, and we grow them in leaf mold. We don't use peat moss because it is not easily available, and we fertilize only about twice a year with cotton-seed meal and/or an azalea-camellia fertilizer. It took me a long time to train my people to correctly prune for shape, since azaleas in Mexico were generally leggy, but they finally learned. Our main problem is grooming. Moss grows on their trunks because of the humidity, and, if not removed, can sometimes cause trunks or branches to die. Also, if the oak leaves that fall on them are not removed, they will form a mat, and the branches will root. Yes, form roots. Occasionally, some leaves will get azalea leaf gall, but we have no other pests.

It is interesting to point out that azaleas in Mexico City do not have either problem, because it is drier due to the altitude. Another benefit is that in Mexico City we have some azalea

Society News

Continuing Society Concerns

At the September 23rd Board of Directors teleconference meeting, three issues were raised that may have a big impact on the Society:

- 1) photographic reproduction quality in **THE AZALEAN**;
- 2) disposition of back issues of **THE AZALEAN**; and
- 3) need to increase support of Azalea Projects at the National Arboretum.

As the Society's journal, **THE AZALEAN** is the most visible and vivid image the Society presents to the public. It is also a key means to recruit new members. As such, it

needs to be of the highest quality, while using the most cost-effective processes. A committee has been formed of Don Hyatt, Art Vance, and Barbara Stump to examine potential methods that could improve the photographic quality. The group will report to the board before the annual meeting in Charleston in 2000. A key issue in this group's work is to find the best sources for slides of azaleas within the membership. Members may provide feedback on this topic to Barbara Stump (contact information page 67).

Since requests for back issues seem to be low, the backlog in personal storage being handled by member Col. E.M. Sheffield is getting out of

hand. Also, future electronic storage of the text is available. The board suggested the Society develop a list of worthy institutions which could benefit from gifts of complete sets. The Chapters and At-large members should suggest institutions they consider worthy. Make these requests to Jim Thornton.

The most effective indication of the Society's sincere support of the U.S. National Arboretum's Azalea Projects would be for members to write a large number of personal letters to their State Representatives. Gen. Bryghte Godbold will be contacting chapter presidents; At-large members can write directly.

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plants, but there are lots of others that are not available. It is a problem to import plants to Mexico, so it is not easy to get new ones. Besides the troublesome permits we need the cooperation and personalized service of the sender, so we can retrieve them from customs at the airport as soon as possible. But as I said at the beginning I am a plant lover and will do anything to get more!

Three years ago in New Zealand I saw Vireyas for the first time, and I

became very excited about them. I would like to grow some, and I am going to order some. I also have a home in Texas, near Lake Conroe, and that would be an easier place to have them sent to. I extend an invitation to visit my place to anyone that is interested, just let me know.

Esther Salinas lives in Mexico City and is a new member of the Azalea Society of America and the American Rhododendron Society, but she has been growing and

propagating azaleas for many years. Her greatest hobbies are growing plants and flower arranging. She has been a garden club member since 1968 and belongs to clubs in Mexico and belonged to clubs in Houston when she lived there. She has been President of every club she's belonged to, as well as the Mexican Federation of Garden Clubs. At present, she is President of the Judges Council of Mexico City, and she is a member of the Board of Directors of the National Council of State Garden Clubs.

Azaleas Online II

Bob Stelloh — Hendersonville, North Carolina

In the June issue, we showed several complete threads, or topics, that online members have been discussing. Here we summarize a few of the other threads on the <azaleas@azaleas.org> maillist, and how to find them in the online archives. [Editor's note: any text within angle brackets < > is something the computer user would type in.]

Cuttings Clearinghouse: Trade Mart

Tom Hughes mentioned a wish for some Satsuki cuttings in a private message to Bill McDavit, but sent it to the list by mistake. John Kaylor saw it, thought it would be a good idea to have a clearinghouse for such requests, and coined the term Trade Mart. With some help from Nancy Swell's experience with an ephemeral seed exchange for the North American Rock Garden Society, John Brown

developed the Trade Mart guidelines and is chairing the clearinghouse. It works like this:

- you post a <[TM] Want Cuttings> e-mail to the list describing the plants you want and your mailing address
- someone with those plants sends a private message to you, and you two work out the details via private e-mail