

'Saotome' and Blind Azaleas

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Many years ago I acquired an azalea by the name of 'Saotome' from a friend at the U.S. National Arboretum. I had never heard of 'Saotome', but its chief feature, I was told, was that it did not bloom. I had seen azaleas with flowers that were all petals (e.g., doubles like 'Balsaminiflorum'). I had seen azaleas with flowers that were almost all stamen (e.g., 'Shiraito no Tsuki'). But, an azalea with no flowers...What would be the point...either in nature or in the commercial market? An azalea without flowers is like a hamburger without mustard.

My new one-gallon specimen of 'Saotome' gave every indication that



Figure 1: 'Saotome' flower, frontal view.

it would be low growing. It was not blooming when I obtained it, so I was able to appreciate that it had really interesting foliage, small dark green and glossy sort of like 'Kinsai'. The only listing in the Lee Book (1) was for a Kurume hybrid (syn. 'Peach Blossom') which did not seem like a very good fit. Galle's book (2) did not exist at that time, so I did not have very much to go on. Curiously, the description that I got from the National Arboretum stated that it had red flowers, so it must have bloomed at least once. Presumably it could be induced to bloom again...or so I reasoned.



Figure 2: 'Saotome' flower, side view showing small foliaceous calyx.

After several years of fertilizing and generally modulating its environment, I was not able to make it bloom. For that matter, it did not even seem to set buds. I then began to have doubts. It occurred to me that perhaps this had been some kind of joke that I had not been sharp enough to see through. Hey, it could be some kind of obscure azalea-like holly or boxwood, and I would never know the difference. Interest in pursuing the problem waned, and the mystery of 'Saotome' was relegated to the "some other time" file.

In 1995, I decided to build a small pond (8 x 18 feet) in my back yard. Given 'Saotome's attractive foliage and low plant habit, I decided to use my non-blooming azalea as a transition feature between the pond's edge and some larger shrubs. My



Fig. 3: 'Saotome' foliage is larger on branches containing flowers

'Saotome' must have really liked its new location because it has prospered there and developed into a nice wide and low growing green thing. I didn't think any more about it until March of this year (1999) when the topic of non-blooming azaleas appeared as a "thread" (a line of discussion) on the ASA's new azalea listserve (e-mail discussion forum www.azaleas.org). One of the participants had posted a message that he had several specimens of 'Tradition' that refused to bloom. The story sounded familiar and the proposed solutions all made sense...including the ultimate suggestion that if they don't bloom...get rid of them. Fortunately, someone had the good judg-



Fig. 4: Normal 'Saotome' foliage on branches without flowers.

ment to mention the phenomenon to Dr. Sandra McDonald, who volunteered the concept of "blind azaleas," a trade term referring to azaleas that should bloom but don't. She recounted her experience at Le-Mac Nursery in Virginia with a group of 'Hinodegiri'. She theorized that they must have undergone some kind of mutation that altered their requirements such that they did not get enough of something essential to blooming. In any case, they were of absolutely no commercial value to the nursery and had to be rogued out (3).

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On the morning of July 4th, while pausing to briefly savor the joys of small pond ownership (i.e., the "aquarium effect"- graceful fish, really different plant material, soothing sounds of cascading water, and acrobatic odonates), I detected a glimpse of color near the pond's edge where none should be. A quick examination revealed two flowers that were indeed attached to my heretofore barren 'Saotome'. Judging from the condition of the flowers (see Figures 1 and 2), they had not just opened recently.

Galle's book, published in 1985, has two references to 'Saotome', one the aforementioned Kurume and the other an Hirado hybrid. The Hirado hybrids that I saw in Japan had foliage like 'George L. Taber', not remotely similar to my 'Saotome'. The picture of 'Saotome' in *The Kurume Book* (4), published in 1989, is more pink and the leaves are closer to 'Coral Bells' than my plant. Meanwhile, I sent an e-mail message to Dr. John Creech who, based on his examination of the photos that I provided, confirmed that what I had was a Satsuki.

I then turned to the ASA's e-mail discussion forum to see what information that assembled multitude might be able to share. Here are selected responses:

- Phil Normandy, at Brookside Gardens in Wheaton, Maryland, responded that 'Saotome', BG0842, was among the first or second batches of Satsuki that Brookside collected in Japan, all of which were imported as cuttings. Brookside's record suggested that it failed to root.
- Nancy Swell, from Richmond, Virginia, said that she got her 'Saotome' from George Harding and that it was part of the ones that Barry Yinger

sent back to Brookside Gardens in 1978. "One of mine had one bloom this year.....otherwise it has never bloomed."

- Bob Stelloh, in Hendersonville, North Carolina, responded that he had two 'Saotome', one acquired as a Kurume in 1986 and the other acquired as an Hirado in 1990. Bob wrote: "The plants are both low growing, spreading and dense, about 12" high by 30" wide after 9 or 13 years, respectively. The leaves are mostly 3/8" to 1/2" long, elliptic, flat or convex, shiny dark green above, and a duller lighter green below. With a hand lens, you can see hairs along the margin, midrib, and scattered elsewhere on the surface, much more so along the top than below. One plant has one branch that usually has a few 1-1/2" purplish pink single flowers in mid-May, and has mostly 1/2- to 1-" leaves. A branch sport to be cut out? No way! Otherwise, they are "never-bloomers." Bob went on to say that his two plants were pretty much identical.

I had not counted leaf hairs on my 'Saotome', but Bob's description fit my specimen pretty well, especially the foliage. Based on my two flowers, my description is: 2 - 2 1/2" single flower, RHS86 63B Red-Purple group, with five stamens, dark anthers and filaments the color of the petals, and inconspicuous spotting in the blotch region of the standard and two upper wings. A small foliaceous calyx is present (Figure 2). Bob also volunteered the observation that the leaves in the vicinity of the flowers were larger than elsewhere on the plant, and I found that to be true with my plant as well (Figures 3 and 4).

In closing, one observation of two flowers is not much upon which to base a conclusion. However, my 'Saotome' is clearly a Satsuki. I am not too concerned about a slight dif-

ference in color or mid-May versus July blooming because Bob Stelloh is in Hendersonville, North Carolina and I am in Bethesda, Maryland, which translates to differences in latitude, longitude, and altitude. Bob has been known to "sprinkle" things on his azaleas and, as a rule, I don't. There are more than enough cultural and environmental differences here to account for plant variation. Finally, with two flowers produced this year, I guess it could be said of my 'Saotome' that it is not blind, only very "nearsighted."

1. Lee, Frederic P. 1965. *The Azalea Book*. Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company. 2nd reprint, 1980. Little Compton, Rhode Island: Theophrastus Publishers.
2. Galle, Fred C. 1985. *Azaleas*. Portland, Oregon: Timber Press.
3. For more information about the roguing process, see "To Rogue or Not to Rogue," a Colloquium. **THE AZALEAN**. 17(4): 87-91.
4. Tamura, Teruo. 1989. "Azaleas in Kurume - Monograph of Kurume Azalea and its Relatives," *Published Proceedings of the 1st International Azalea Festival*. Ashishobo, Fukuoka, Japan.

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