

Adventures in Growing Azaleas

Ben Blankenship — Stafford, Virginia

My adventures in growing azaleas have been very enjoyable and rewarding, but not very rewarding. You see, after learning back in the 1980s how easy it was to stick cuttings, cover them with fruit jars outdoors beside the chimney, and then transplant them to my garden the following spring-well, the idea of earning retirement income dawned. Even if there were little money in azaleas, I confided to a friend, at least I'd wind up someday with a yard full of lovely plants.

Today, I'm happy to report that everything has worked out nicely. Not that I've developed a retirement income jackpot, but at least it's been enough to help keep a Roth IRA going. Besides, the stock market during the past five years since I've retired has proven quite adequate as a pension supplement. Meanwhile, not only has my own yard of nearly an acre blossomed with lovely azaleas I never could have previously imagined, but neighbors in my community are also growing some of the plants I have come to love the most.

Over the years I've probably given away or donated to worthy fundraisers about as many azaleas as I've sold. That kind of satisfaction has been far greater than commercial success of the admittedly quite modest variety. In the process, I've learned several things: (1) Producing top-notch plants isn't easy. (2) Selling from the garden gets old fast, especially when boating weather beckons. (3) Work piles up, too.

In fact, while I used to stick a dozen or more big trays of cuttings each summer, the pace lately has slowed considerably. I still enjoy doing it, but my back doesn't anymore. So I thought now might be a good time, while I'm still in the mood, to list for you aficionados some of the azaleas that have done the best for me and my customers and friends here.

Azaleas of Aquia, my occasional nursery of truly modest dimensions in my back yard, is located in Stafford County between Washington, DC, and Fredericksburg. Don't take this as an ad, though. For if you perchance call, I probably won't be home, since the retirement pace hereabouts is hectic. More to the point, I've stopped selling plants altogether. Even so, I want to tell you about my favorite azaleas, the kind my wife wishes I would have kept rather than sold. They include the following:

- R. 'Hardy Gardenia'. I couldn't grow enough of these lovely plants for visitors who saw them in bloom. But the plants haven't been the easiest to get started and past the first year or so in the garden. I've grown them in beds, not pots.

- R. 'Mrs. Nancy Dippel'. Women especially like this one. I thank the Landon Azalea Festival I visited years ago in Maryland for my starts from a single plant that cost entirely too much, but has yielded great pleasure over many seasons.

- R. 'Geisha'. When its buds escape late frosts, the flowers are glorious in our area. Cuttings root easily, and the plants grow vigorously, tolerating drought conditions that were severe here a couple summers ago.

- R. 'PJM' and R. 'Olga Mezitt'. These early-blooming and very hardy azalea-rhododendron plants are equally easy to grow from cuttings. They make a lovely show massed in garden beds, but then are spent all too soon, just as the others are beginning to blossom.

I would love to go on about other favorites, like R. 'Damask Rose', a lovely old specimen that my wife won as a door prize at a Northern Virginia Chapter meeting some years ago. Then there's R. 'Treasure', whose cuttings I originally swiped from the

White House grounds during a Rose Garden speech by, yes, Ronald Reagan. And I can't forget R. 'I'll Be Damned', which fellow Virginian Don Hager developed and then provided me shortly before he retired from the business.

You can tell it's been a fun experience for my wife and me. For a hobby, azaleas are endlessly fascinating. From a business standpoint, though, they're for far more determined and skilled fellows—with sturdy, younger backs.

Ben Blankenship got interested in azaleas late in his career from a fellow bureaucrat where he worked for 20 years in Washington, DC, as head of economic information for the US Department of Agriculture. He's been growing them since 1987, when he first decided to establish a business at home, chose the name for his nursery, and joined the ASA. He wrote a tongue-in-cheek [his words] article for the March 1990 issue of THE AZALEAN and another article following the Richmond convention. He is a graduate of Texas A&M, in animal husbandry.

