

Observations from the West Coast

Don White — Watsonville, California

I have been asked why don't I write some type of a report, statement, or whatever, as a West Coast member of the Azalea Society of America. I will gladly make a few comments. But, please understand they are not of the scientific, professional or authoritative nature. Some may say, not even appropriate for this journal. It is only my personal observation of what I have learned as a recent member of the ASA.

Since becoming a member of the ASA, some two years ago, it seems that I am now finally able to keep our azaleas and Satsuki in somewhat of a living and healthy state. I am not a complete novice at this thing called gardening. For many years my wife and I have maintained fairly extensive plant collections in our many back yards. We dabble with irises—even re-bloomers, even though sometimes they do not re-bloom—fuchsias and begonias, just to name a few. We also have a large bonsai collection that has been the center of our botanical life for over 30 years. Both endeavors have been pretty successful, in that we have not lost too many plants.

West Coast Growing Conditions

As it is fairly easy to grow almost anything here on the central California coast, failure with the azaleas was a bit baffling to our minds. Watsonville is located about half way between the towns of Monterey and Santa Cruz in what is called the Monterey Bay area. We are some two miles, as the crow flies, from the Monterey Bay. The outdoor tempera-

tures here do not vary much throughout the year as far as extreme changes are concerned. The average summer temperature is about 76 degrees with the coastal low clouds providing a natural air conditioning system. The warmest times of the year normally are in the spring and fall with temperatures into the mid-80s. The fog, or what we locals refer to as low clouds, will roll in under the early morning sun, then by lunch-time drift back to the sea leaving us with shirt-sleeve, sparkling, after-

Watsonville itself averaging about 10 to 14 inches annually and normally coming all during one season.

If Father/Mother Nature decides upon a period of drought then we may have three or four days of heavy frost, but nothing really debilitating, as a rule, with temperatures then in the mid-40s to high 30s. Last year we had four days below 40° F. Just do not forget to cover up susceptible plants when warned by the weather services, then you will be OK! We are in, what I believe is called a sub-Mediterranean climate. So, you have to fall deeply into the compost pit to not be able to grow almost any plant Father/Mother Earth provides here in the Monterey Bay area. And that includes azaleas!

First Azalea Trials and Advice

Now, we come to our azalea trials and tribulations. Rhododendrons were no problem! But every time we obtained azaleas, and normally it is not just one or two plants, but multiple purchases at one time, within a year or so something goes awry.

We do not buy small plants either, usually two- to three-gallon sizes anyway. I figure that we are at the age when we do not want to wait too long to enjoy the fruits of our labor. Yes, it is more costly, but hopefully more pleasure, sooner! However, it was getting so that the lifespan of some azaleas would be from one to two years, maybe even three, if we were lucky. Then the poor plants would become sickly looking, or so ugly that they were not worth keeping, and eventually dying. That compost pile was getting pretty deep!



'Iveryana', a Southern Indian azalea that was doing poorly in the ground in June 1996. Now recovered well, after being dug, potted up, given no fertilizer, just mist. This floral display was mid-April 2002. One of Kathy White's favorites. (Photo by Don White)

noons and very comfortable evenings. You can practically set your watch by it.

The seasonal rains, which some years are not so seasonal, arrive between late October and early February, providing a couple of weeks of heavy downpour, some minor flooding, but much needed fresh water replacement. Temperatures during this time hover in the mid-50s to low 60s. The annual rainfall in our area can vary from mile to mile, with

“What in the world is going on?” we asked ourselves. I would talk to local nursery folks from whom we made the purchases and discuss the situation with other knowledgeable gardening friends, particularly those in our local bonsai club who have azaleas. I got all sorts of advice: “The city water is bad.”—OK! Then how come your azaleas are doing so well? “Your location is not providing enough sun.” —OK! So I move them to more sun! (How do you like scorched leaves?) “Maybe you live too close to the salt air of the ocean?” —Again, OK! But, why do yours do so well? Apparently just planting the things and letting them go on their own was the secret? They didn’t know? Should have been a hint there, I think? If you’re not an overzealous gardener, plants seem to do much better? Well, I can’t move the ocean, and we were not leaving paradise, and I am not giving up my zealotry for this thing called azaleas! So, this meant that I had to seek out some serious instruction.

You might pose the question, “Why does this guy continue on with this azalea struggle?” Here’s why. I grew up in the state of Washington in the Seattle/Tacoma area. As a kid, many years ago, I would marvel at the many rhododendrons and azaleas that grew wild there. Then my military service provided opportunities to visit Korea and Japan where I really fell in love with azaleas. Azaleas became my favorite blooming plant. And, I thought, when I got married and settled down, azaleas had to be part of my family. Well, I got married 33 years ago to the best flower possible, my wife, Kathy, and it took us a few years to actually settle down long enough in one place to begin a family, and to rekindle the azalea craving on a serious basis.

And speaking of serious, boy was I seriously instructed by some serious persons on the care of azaleas. “You’re not feeding them enough.” Wow, that was right up my alley. Do I

love to feed plants; I’d get to talk to them more that way! So, up went the amount of food applications.

Now I have to stop here for a moment and explain what I thought was meant by *azaleas are acid-loving plants*. (If ya don’t know what’s coming now, you never will!) I thought it meant feed, feed, feed, and that they were constantly hungry! Our azaleas, which are ours if they live, but mine if they die, were really



This unknown azalea was planted in October 1994 and pruned to shape each year. As with this survivor of the over-feeding regime, Don thinks the plants in the ground were less affected than potted azaleas. (Photo by Don White)

fed well! Lots of high potency nitrogen at more than regular intervals and particularly when they began to show poor health. Gosh sakes, don’t ya give a sick person medicine, food, and drink? You talk about walking backwards! So now you know how many azaleas became mine!

Then it was suggested, “You have to water these plants profusely.” (Profusely: a word meaning death to azaleas.) Dunk them in water, spray

from over head, keep em’ good and wet, they like it. Again, wow! Just like the bonsai, I can water them all the time. A funny thing happened though. — I believe the reason some of our azaleas survived my manic feeding habit is simply because I did water too much. But, there again, there were consequences to pay as well. I guess it can be said that I either poisoned the plants to death or drowned them; take your pick.

You see, and those of you familiar with the art of bonsai will know this, bonsai are watered almost every day. But, the bonsai soil we create is porous, allowing the water to drain straight through the pot, and still allow the potting medium to retain moisture. We have to be careful to avoid over-watering. However, you can never allow most bonsai plants to dry out. So by watering the azaleas on the same schedule as the bonsai I was merely flushing out the poison from the over-fed azaleas. This must explain why some of the older azaleas survived my predatory behavior. Was I a genius and didn’t know it? It’s ironic; if I had just treated the azaleas as I treated the bonsai I probably wouldn’t be writing this exposé.

International Azalea Advice

At the time of our dilemma we had over 30 potted azaleas and a dozen or so in the ground. One evening, after viewing the discouraging sight of some sickly looking azaleas, I got to thinking. (According to some circles in our family, that can be dangerous.) “There has to be a higher authority of azaleaphiles from which I can find out what in the world am I doing wrong.” Then my wife said, “Can’t you find someone one who knows about azaleas on that blasted computer of yours?” Hey, I am a fumblehead when it comes to the computer, but I decided to try. Well, lo and behold, I found the Azalea Society of America.

Now this presented another dilemma, or at least a figment of my imagination. With my experience in the garden and bonsai endeavors, what if someone thinks my questions were dumb, or too dumb to answer? I could claim innocence—that I was just a beginner, but I am not! What if I did not get a favorable answer back? Would this be an embarrassment! Maybe I might receive some sort of a smart retort as a result?

I stuffed my Irish pride into the compost pile and presented a couple of questions to the ASA mail list. Bingo, I not only got back one answer but many, and I could not believe the many places this precious information was coming from. More astoundingly, I could not believe that among all the professionals, among all the experts from the Carolinas to Holland, from Maryland to the British Isles, Australia, Brooklyn, Tennessee, from so many places on this planet it is mind-boggling, that so much information was given out so freely, and to me, a novice. (You see, I admit it, I am a novice when it comes to azaleas.) And, to boot, I was even invited to join the ASA. I was surprised and happy, that I, a neophyte, who had nothing to contribute but everything to gain, could become a member of such an esteemed and knowledgeable group of people. (To paraphrase a famous comedian, "It can only happen in America!")

It has been almost three years since I received my first few tips from members of the ASA, and it boiled down to two strong points of procedure, *stop feeding and watering so much!* Since applying this newfound common sense, this past spring we have had some of the most beautiful flowering azaleas in years. Some of the flushed out survivors, along with newly obtained potential victims, not only flowered well, but

also, the foliage regained a nice healthy appearance rather than the sickly pallor of the past. My wife is so encouraged she has asked, "Aren't there more azaleas to acquire?" You know what that means!

As I write this little ditty, it is the middle of December. I can gaze out into our yard and see seven spring-blooming azaleas now in full bloom. Two Satsuki as well are showing some flowers. Why? When I confronted a grower in Sacramento about this, his retort was simply, "They're confused." Well, maybe some azaleas are confused, and I am still not an expert, but when visitors now come



This 9-inch tall Satsuki, name unknown, was dug from a private yard—with permission—in 1996. Shown here in May 2000 ready for the Watsonville Bonsai Show in full bloom, the plant is said to be over 5 years old.

(Photo by Don White)

to our garden they can again marvel at what is on display. Most people are familiar with our bonsai work and simply accept it as something old hat; they have seen it many times before. But now, by giving the azaleas a chance to perform their best without too much interference from me, we have regained a welcome feature in our garden. And if I am asked, "How did you do this? Where did you get your information on how to improve your azaleas?" I can simply reply, "Oh, I have friends from all over the world! Don't you?" Impressive, hmm?

Conclusion

With all the asides aside, I think I will now turn my attention more to the western azaleas (*Rhododendron occidentale*), that is, if I can locate some more plants. Many gardeners focus on the evergreen and deciduous azaleas most easily grown in the eastern and southeastern United States. While these are very interesting, they are difficult for me to obtain locally. And, without seeing the plant, it is quite difficult to decide what to work with, even if it is desirable to have. I have found that pictures, although very nice to view and informative to study, do not really help to properly appraise the plants for purchasing. At least now I feel confident that I can be successful with azaleas and can begin to focus on one area or another. Or maybe I will just collect and plant?

I guess what I am trying to say with all this rambling is that, after all my years working with bonsai material, chopping the roots up to fit into a tiny pot, cutting the plant back to shape as desired, and being able to grow almost anything from flowers to trees to weeds, I became quite humbled by our failures in the azalea world. (You notice now I said "our failures.")

And now I want to thank all those folks who have contributed to my resurrection in the azalea world. Also, I encourage anyone who has a penchant for the green thumb but who keeps stumbling into the compost pile, to ask questions, any question that may be required for a successful project. There is no stupid question! The stupidity comes from not asking the question. The height of stupidity is a rank answer to a question asked in earnest. Thank you for the help and *happiness in azaleas to everyone!*

continued on page 18

Chapter News

Ben Morrison Chapter

Robert W. Hobbs, Newsletter Co-editor
rwhobbs@mindspring.com

The chapter met on March 9, 2003, at Severna Park Library. The chapter holds its meetings at diverse locations in Calvert and Anne Arundel counties to accommodate existing members and to possibly attract new members. Plans for future meetings include tours of members' gardens.

The speaker at the March 9 meeting was Dr. Mike Raupp, an expert on integrated pest management (IPM) from the University of Maryland Entomology Department. The subject of his talk was "Old Pests, New Problems: Problems with Managing Lace Bugs on Landscape Shrubs." The objective of IPM is to control predators by improved culture and by encouraging the presence of insect predators, without the use of pesticides.

2004 Convention Planning. Under the leadership of Carol Segree, the convention steering committee continues planning for the May 2004 Convention. The convention headquarters will be the Comfort Inn and Conference Center in Bowie, Maryland. Bowie is 15 miles east of Washington, DC, and 12 miles west of Annapolis, Maryland. The Comfort Inn has easy access from interstate routes and other controlled access highways, and is 15 miles from the Baltimore-Washington International (BWI) Airport. More plans will be presented at the 2003 Convention in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Brookside Gardens Chapter

Dr. Charles Evans, President
ch3@georgetown.com

At the December 1, 2002, annual meeting of the chapter, the existing slate of officers was re-elected.

Louisiana Chapter

W. L. Brown, Secretary
wlbrown@i-55.com

At the December 8, 2002, meeting, the following officers were elected:

President – James Campbell

Vice-President – Thomas Milner

Treasurer – Margie Jenkins

*Recording Secretary –
Keith Pendergraft*

*Corresponding Secretary –
Larry Brown*

Also at this meeting, the chapter membership voted to send a \$1000 contribution to the national organization to help with the funding deficit. Then the meeting brainstormed many new ideas about attracting new members and changing the meeting routine.

Northern Virginia Chapter

Barry Sperling, President
barrysperling@ix.netcom.com

Sunday, March 2, the Northern Virginia Chapter started off its 2003 season with a presentation by Don Voss, covering a topic that he knows intimately: the Robin Hill azaleas. Don, who registered the last 42 of Robert Gartrell's 69 Robin Hill cultivars, presented slides of virtually every one! The hybrid group is known for being cold hardy and floriferous. While filling in the gap between the mid-season flowers and the Satsuki, the group actually has a wide range of bloom times. Additionally, the range of colors and plant habits make the group a great addition to every garden. Don has spoken often at the national ASA conventions and written for a variety of publications, as well as being a frequent contributor to *The Azalean*.

Oconee Chapter

Frank Bryan, Newsletter Editor
Rudie2rudie@aol.com

As of the February 2003 meeting, the new chapter officers are:

President – Allison Fuqua

Vice-President – Ed Mellon

Secretary – Ruth Bryan

Newsletter Editor – Frank Bryan

Membership – Jim Thornton

Observations – continued

Don White has been a member of the ASA for the past three years. He retired in December 2002 from 22 years as a Financial Services Registered Representative of the Prudential Financial Services Company. For 20 years previously he was in the professional golf ranks during which he played with the likes of Ben Hogan and Arnold Palmer. He has been married to his wife Kathy for 33 years, ironically meeting when he was attempting to play in the old Bing Crosby tournament at Pebble Beach. He worked at golf clubs in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, North Hollywood, and Washington State, trying to save enough funds to play the golf tour. Wherever he has traveled, from coast to coast from Maine to Florida, he has been captivated by all the colors of the plants. Kathy and he had always enjoyed gardens, plants, and flowers, but only when he had settled down to the insurance business were they able to begin our own collections. He says he has been a "bonsai freak" for over 30 years, and also belongs to the Watsonville Bonsai Club.