

Azalea Gardens

The Oakcrest Garden Story

Carlton LeMond — Montevallo, Alabama

My love of flowers must have come from my great-grandfather whom I never had the privilege of meeting, since he passed away before I was born in 1939. I have learned from family and friends that he had a great love of flowers, and I suppose that love gene was passed down to me, since I have an exceptional love of flowers and especially azaleas. I spent 22 years in the US Air Force, and moving from assignment to assignment during my Air Force career did not afford me the time to have an established garden. While I always managed to scratch out a small place to plant roses or annuals, I always had the desire to have a great garden of beautiful azaleas. Each spring we would tour the azalea trails, oohing and ahing over the gorgeous plants and dreaming of someday having our own azalea garden.

After my Air Force career and then getting another career off the ground, my wonderful wife of 44 years and I began to build our dream home. We purchased 123 acres of forest land, cleared a road 1 mile off the main highway, 3 miles south of Montevallo, Alabama, where we selected our home site among towering giant white oaks and pine trees with dogwoods everywhere the eye could see. It was a perfect site, away from traffic and noise except for an occasional soft rumble of a distant train. Birds serenading us with their joyous songs and woodpeckers tapping could be heard throughout the day. On the week-

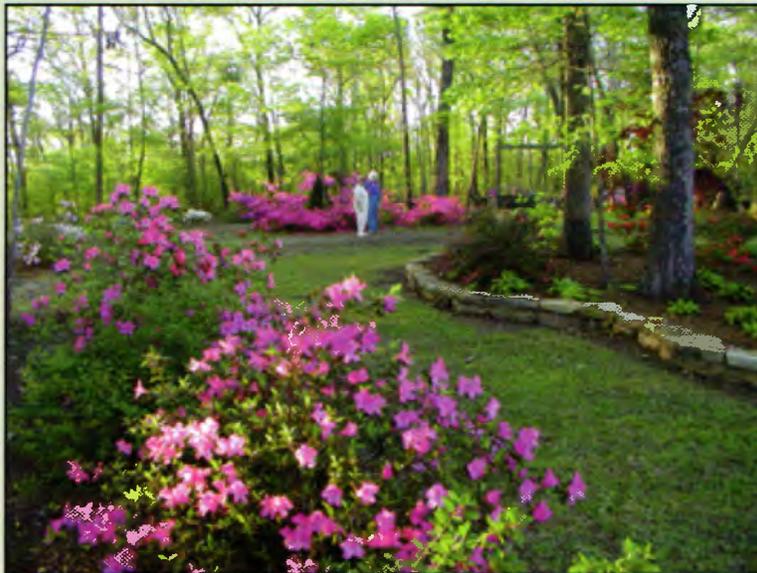
ends before we started building we would spend the day relaxing and dreaming out loud under the canopy of a large dogwood that would soon be in our front yard.

After building our home, we began to prepare the site by clearing out the knee-high poison oak (that suddenly appeared out of nowhere) and removing selected trees to allow filtered sunlight to flow over the

water for weeks. Our dream site seemed to be turning out to be a lemon, but a beautiful lemon. When life gives you lemons, make lemonade! We were determined to have an azalea garden, so the pH had to be changed from alkaline to acid. Good drainage was absolutely necessary. I had to either build raised beds or install drains. I did not want just a few bushes scattered around the house, I wanted a garden of five or six acres with the remaining land in a woodland garden. If my age wasn't what it is and cost not a factor, I'd shoot for a garden like Callaway; six acres just isn't enough. At the present time we have over 300 azaleas, not counting a few rhododendrons.

My Garden Soil is Mainly Compost and Bark

The best planting beds would be the slightly sloping areas, after the soil was prepared. In some areas, the beds needed to be raised and in other areas the beds on a slight slope needed to be prepared so they would drain. I found truckloads of rotting pine bark from a closed sawmill nearby, and also I began to make compost to supplement the soil. I hauled sawdust from a local mill, which I got free, and mixed it with grass clippings from along our driveway to make compost. With a mixture of 60% carbon (sawdust), 40% nitrogen (grass clippings), and a little 13-13-13 fertilizer, compost can be made in about 25 to 30 days if it is wet down well and turned often. Since I was making large quantities, I was blessed with having a backhoe to do



View of raised beds, with my wife and 87-year-old mother-in-law enjoying the garden. (Photo by Carlton LeMond)

planned garden area. The selection of which trees to remove was very difficult. The underbrush was fairly thick; and, hidden among the brush were wild irises, oak leaf hydrangeas, and a few native azaleas. The poison oak had to be reckoned with, and the felling of the trees had to be just right in order not to crush or damage native plants that would be a part of our garden. On the surface, it was a picture-perfect site for an azalea garden among the giant oaks and pines. However, under the topsoil was clay, white to yellow clay that would hold

all the heavy frequent turning and mixing of the compost material. This also helps to greatly speed up the process of composting, but it isn't necessary. I can make a dump-truck load of compost about every 30 to 40 days.



The mulch and pine bark are recycled to improve the soil.

(Photo by Carlton LeMond)

To prepare the azalea beds I used a mixture of 30% fine rotting bark, 40% compost, and 30% natural soil. This was thoroughly mixed to provide good drainage as well as a good rich soil to promote growth, keeping in mind that some areas would require more or less bark. The percentages are an approximation, but as close as I could get the mixture without measuring all the components. I mainly added more or less compost along with bark until the soil was rich and dark looking, taking samples and performing a pH test occasionally. The excess soil that was removed was used in general landscaping.

In the fall of the year the fallen oak leaves are blown and carefully raked from around the azaleas and ground into mulch. This un-composted mulch is then placed around the azaleas to a depth of 2 to 3 inches to add nourishment to the plants during the winter months, being careful to stay 2 to 3 inches away from the base of the plants. Leaves around the base of an azalea could allow diseases and insects to attack the plants during the winter months and at the beginning of spring. I also place pine straw around some of the plants, mainly those in the front yard. The rest is turned into the soil in other areas that will be used for next year's planting. Excess leaves are placed on

the compost pile with 13-13-13 fertilizer added to speed up composting during the winter months.

Pests: They Didn't Tell Me About That!

For everything that lives there is something out there that wants to eat it, including azaleas. My biggest surprise—and it holds true for a number of first-time azalea gardeners—were those little sap-sucking nits that grow into white flies. They discolor the foliage as well as rob the plant of its beauty and its nutrients. Everything, well almost everything, needs a chance to live, but not on my plants.

I'm sure there are several ways they could be disposed of, but I'm sure I would miss two of them, the mating call would be sounded, and they would repopulate with vengeance and then next year set out to ruin my hard work. Now you could try to drown them, but I can tell you that won't work; neither will a mild soap solution, that would only make them feel better from a nice bath, and they would only eat more. That little pest did not show up in my garden until I had a couple hundred plants. They waited until they were sure I could not possibly smash them all.

I am not sorry to say and I make no apology, I killed the suckers, and what I didn't kill flew to your garden. I assure you that I did not limit their numbers, for they came to visit each time new plants were brought into the garden. They also have the uncanny ability to know when my plants are looking good and healthy.



Sap-sucking pests—likely azalea lace bugs—cause light spots on top of leaves, and leave dark residue on their undersides.

(Photo by Carlton LeMond)

Each spring, after the blooms begin to fade and the new growth begins, the word goes out and here come the sapsuckers. One product I used did a good job until the EPA banned its use and manufacture. I now use a broad-spectrum insecticide like Malathion 50 Plus, which is successful. However, it may also be banned, and then I will have to go back to giving the suckers baths.

Of course, indiscriminate use of pesticides without safeguards is not good for the environment, nor is it safe for you or those who love and visit your garden. **I use pesticides as a last resort and only according to label directions. I also use protection.** Humans have accidents, some more than others. Accidental spraying of a chemical in the eyes or any other place not intended for the spray could be disastrous. So use proper clothing, eye protection, and a well-fitting respirator mask when spraying chemicals. Do not allow visitors in the garden until it is safe to enter. Chemicals made to kill bugs could also harm you.

As our garden grows I plan to add new azaleas each year, hoping to get some of the newer varieties until we run out of space. If anyone has plants you want to have tested and admired, contact me right away, I know just where they should be planted!

Carlton LeMond was born in McCalla, Alabama, in 1939. At the ripe old age of 17, he enlisted in the US Air Force and spent the next 22 years in electronics, teaching US airmen as well as foreign Allied students radar and electronics. He attended several colleges throughout the US during his military career. After leaving the Air Force, he spent five years as a business administrator prior to starting a construction company building sewage treatment plants and installing large-diameter pipe along with building highways and airports. He has retired full time to the farm, hoping to cultivate azaleas and rhododendrons. He joined the ASA in 2002.