Massing Azaleas by Color

Sandra Austin — Burke, Virginia

One of the most effective ways to show off azaleas is by planting them in masses, or groupings of plants, instead of scattering them singly around your garden, yard, or estate. The colorful display presented by azaleas in bloom is one of the most spectacular shows put on by flowering plants. Here are some ideas for color groupings to inspire you for the coming year's planting:

- The most familiar (and probably to this audience, most overused) are the groupings of the common azalea colors—reds, oranges, purples, and pinks—with whites scattered around for accent. It's the introduction-to-azaleas planting style, and every spring, it's a flower show to grab everyone's attention. The reason is that there are big, bold blocks of strong, vivid colors with lots of contrast. **Try it without the whites.** Although the whites are added for accent, they sometimes make the combination have too many contrasts, and the plantings look brassy. Particularly if you're a person who doesn't like oranges or purples with reds, you may find that removing the whites makes you happier. What you'll be left with is a planting of colors that are darker than average. When you plant this color grouping in a shaded wooded area, even though the hues are very bright, they will not stand out as you might expect, but appear richer and more subtle, because their lightness (or darkness) is similar to that of the foliage of azaleas. But if you want these colors to really stand out, plant them against a lighter background—a fence or the facade of a house.

- Try changing the relative amounts of certain hues. Color combinations are more successful when they do not use equal amounts of different colors. Think about the colors of your house: there's a base color with accent or trim colors in smaller amounts. It works in large part because you don't try to use the same amounts of all colors. Choose a favorite hue to be the predominant color, and add smaller amounts of the other hues. For example, use lots of purples, with lesser amounts of reds and maybe only one or two oranges. Or, if you like orange, choose predominantly oranges, with a much smaller number of reds and a few purples. You'll be surprised at how the feeling of a planting changes as the relative amounts of color change.

- Another variation is to **plant cultivars that have slightly different appearances, some detail that can only be seen close up.** So, from a distance, the purple flowers will look the same in a mass, but on close examination, they can be seen to have special characteristics. This is a good way for the collector to incorporate a number of different cultivars in a planting that still has a lot of visual impact.

- If you are planting over a large area, an interesting variation is to have **smaller masses of the same colors, but have each smaller planting vary the predominant color.** Again, it's quite surprising how simply changing the different amounts of colors can change the feeling of a planting.

- Another way to tie together multi-hued combinations of flowers is to **select plants for a border of the bed that will tie together the plantings in the bed.** The most traditional method is planting a low growing green planting such as boxwood or Liriope, or some shade-loving perennial, but it would also be striking to have a band of low-growing or ground-cover azaleas that repeat one of the colors in the main bed.

- **You can also plant flowers of all hues that are not so brilliant.** There are azaleas that are more muted in their color, such as soft pinks, peaches and lavenders, and reds and purples that are deeper and less saturated than their pure hues. Although muted colors don’t get much attention, these are the colors that are particularly useful when used around houses and other architectural features (statuary, fountains, gazebos), because they don't compete visually with the feature. Often, muted colors can be used very successfully in gardens that have a lot of other contrasts, including foundation plantings, giving a richness and variety to plantings, without looking too busy or garish.

- **If you like all hues, but find such plantings too busy for your taste, you can have yet a different effect if you control the other aspects of the colors. Try a mix of all light hues, such as pinks, lavenders, peach, and white.** Such a planting will really show up in a shady, wooded garden—light colors make a strong contrast with the other, darker colors of foliage, bark, and soil. If you want to introduce a dynamic note, try adding one or two plants that have flowers that are much darker versions of the hues in your planting. It does the same thing that adding white to the traditional planting does, introducing a strong note of contrast to the planting.

- **If you find multiple hues too distracting for you in any of the above scenarios, think about limiting the**
hues in each grouping to one or two that are similar in appearance. You can choose strong hues such as red or orange, or the more subtle pinks, peaches, and lavenders. Such groupings are relatively simple compared to their multi-hued companions, and so are more versatile in their use. If you choose cultivars that have early, middle, and late bloom, you can stretch the color display over a much longer period. There may not be a single spectacular display, but if it's your own garden, sometimes it's preferable to stretch the bloom times for your own enjoyment.

- Don't forget the whites; a grouping of white azaleas can be really spectacular. It is sometimes thought to be the most formal of all the colors, and shows up in a shady garden or at dusk more than any of the other azalea colors. One of the advantages of using single-color plantings is that you can more readily use plants, not only of different bloom times, but of differing heights and textures—large and small flowers, and single, split, and double flowers—all combine well when the color choices are limited.

You may feel that all this discussion of grouping and massing plants is only interesting to those gardeners with a lot of space. It is true that the most spectacular results occur over large areas, but anyone can group a number of azaleas in the corners or down the sides of a residential yard, or in pots in the tiniest of townhouse lots, if you limit yourself to smaller and low growing plants, or resign yourself to serious and knowledgeable pruning. The effect can be really charming. As the garden grows and changes, you'll want to acquire new plants to add to or replace parts of these groupings. Each time you introduce a new plant, you'll have the opportunity to change your color scheme and create a new design.

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50th Anniversary Celebration of
Morrison Garden Dedication
Bob McWhorter — Gambrills, Maryland

On October 1, 2004, Ben Morrison Chapter members attended a 50th anniversary celebration of the dedication of the Morrison Garden at the US National Arboretum. The ceremony began with welcoming remarks by Scott Aker, Acting Gardens Unit Leader at the Arboretum. This was followed by opening remarks by Dr. Phyllis Johnson, Director, Beltsville Area Agricultural Research Service.

William C. Miller III gave an outstanding presentation on the history of the Morrison Garden and the hybridization of the Glenn Dale azaleas, with many slides to add interest to this excellent presentation. Bill distributed printed materials that included selected dates and Morrison highlights; a short history of the Morrison Garden; the May 3, 1954 dedication of the Morrison Garden; and selected readings from books and articles. Also included was a photograph and short article on the Hamilton Elementary School in Washington, DC, and its connection to the Morrison Garden.

Barbara L. Bullock, Curator, Azalea and Rhododendron Collections at the Arboretum, then spoke about recent developments in the azalea collections. During her tenure as curator Barbara has restored the collections, done much to identify those with missing or mistaken name tags, and improved the overall condition of the gardens. She is to be congratulated on the outstanding job she has done and on the sizeable "To Do" list for future enhancements.

Scott Aker discussed the future of the azalea collections and the Morrison Garden. A new visitor's center is to be constructed in close proximity to the Morrison Garden, which in the words of Dr. Johnson, is the "crown jewel of the Arboretum due to the spectacular spring show" it offers. Mr. Aker also described a new Walk of Flowering Trees that will connect the major Arboretum collections and improve wheelchair access to them.

Special Remembrance
Buddy Lee, ASA president, was not able to attend the official 50th anniversary ceremonies, but he reported this special observance:

Friday Oct 1, 2004, at 12:05 pm at Evergreen Cemetery in Gulfport, Mississippi, I placed numerous azalea blooms at the gravesite of Benjamin Yoe Morrison. I also read out loud the invitation that was sent to me concerning the anniversary. This was my tribute to an absolutely wonderful person and also to the Ben Morrison Azalea Garden.