

All of my future introductions will be under the umbrella of the brand and will include some very nice selected cultivars of species and hybrids between some Exbury, Ilam, Knap Hill, and the species. This collection should contain azaleas that will be welcome in the landscape.

As a matter of reference, all color names and numbers are from the RHS color fans (1), and hopefully adhere to the standards of color name nomenclature (2). Also, some terms used were found in Fred C. Galle's book on azaleas (3). Keep in mind that the low winter temperatures listed are the lows tested on my Cumberland Mountain property, which is in Zones 6b to 6a where winter temperatures have gone down to -30°F. These hybrids may be even more cold-hardy, depending upon location.

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he is better known as an azalea nut and chases the natives' bloom each year with many fellow enthusiasts. He is a frequent contributor to The Azalean.

References

1. The Royal Horticultural Society. 2001. *The R.H.S. Colour Chart*. London.
2. Huse, Robert D. and Kenneth L. Kelly. 1984. *A Contribution Toward Standardization of Color Names in Horticulture*. Edited by Donald H. Voss. The American Rhododendron Society. p. 20, 34, 37-43.
3. Galle, Fred C. 1987. *Azaleas*. Revised and Enlarged Edition. Timber Press.

[Editor's Note on Color Names in the Azalea Descriptions Joe Schild provided the RHS color chart numbers for each element in the flower and foliage descriptions that follow. These RHS chart numbers are shown in parentheses. Editorial board reviewer Don Voss provided the Inter-Society Color Council-National Bureau of Standards color names for these RHS color references. These ISCC names precede the parenthetical RHS numbers.]

Azalea Mastery Series

Part 5. Raised Bed Method

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If you recall a previous article on planting azaleas where the soil is heavy clay and the problems I encountered, this article will discuss an alternative method, growing azaleas in raised beds. Several important things to remember about this method are: use what ever organic material you have readily available in your area, make sure it drains well, has a low pH (4.5-6.0), and add some nutrients.

Now, we will look at the methods of building raised beds in a fashion that will give your shrubs a good environment and will have some aesthetic qualities. In my case, I had to first determine what materials I would use and came to the conclusion that I had an abundance of wood chips available from the local tree service companies. They were always looking for some

place to dump or dispose of this valuable material free, and I had the room to store large loads over a long time while it composted.

Another source for organic materials is the local or city composting yards where they dump all the collected leaves in the city, chipped up tree limbs, and other stuff. For those of us living in the county, there is small fee per truckload, but for city residents it is free.

To wall or contain the beds, I also had access to mountains of stone, timbers and in a few cases, logs, though the latter will decay over time and must be replaced. In a pinch, I once used about two ricks of firewood, but do not recommend it, for I ran out of firewood to heat our house and had to buy more.

The other key ingredients for the soil mix in the beds are: pine bark,

both small nuggets and fines; compost; and good soil. All of this combined with the bulky composted wood chips will provide the basic soil for the beds. Through years of experimenting, the use of some soil in the mix will encourage the azaleas to send out adventurous roots for faster establishment. The more compost you have the less soil is needed.

What I did was to determine where I wanted a new bed and marked off the boundaries. Since nature seems to avoid straight lines, most of my beds were marked off using a garden hose or with lime. Keep in mind that my native soil is about 4" to 12" of sticky yellow clay over limestone rock, so drainage is very important.

I killed out the existing vegetation within the bed area with a non-selective herbicide. To get rid of vegetation,

several methods will work, such as using herbicide, smothering, or sun-scalding. Placing a sheet of black plastic over the designated area will kill off the existing vegetation as long as the sun and heat are intense enough. The same goes for the sun-scalding method.

After two treatments of the herbicide, enough of the vegetation was killed to do a shallow tilling to about 2". Into this layer, I tilled about 4" of pine bark fines and compost, both the elixirs of azalea gardening. Next came layers of mixed composted wood chips, compost, pine bark and good top soil until the bed was about twice the ultimate height I desired.

I sprinkled on bone meal, cottonseed meal and ammonium sulfate to the bed, and watered the material in. On top of all this, I spread about 4" of shredded pine bark as the ultimate mulch for my shrubs.

The next most important item is patience, for this bed was left to settle about a year. During that time, I saw a number of mushrooms flourish, indicating the material was breaking down properly with plenty of air within the material. A friend with knowledge of the mushrooms, counted eight different species. Mushrooms will not grow in poorly drained or non-aerated soils.

Around the beds, I have used stone, landscape timbers and other material as mentioned before. Since most of my beds are under very large trees where most grasses will not grow, I chose to use wood chips in the paths. Again it was free and a lot cheaper than brick, pave stones or concrete, though it needed replacement almost yearly. Through the years, the paths of wood chips have rotted and slowly built up until they are now almost the same height as the beds.

When it was time to plant my azaleas, rhododendrons and other shrubs in the bed, I felt a little excitement, for I knew nature had been working very hard to make it perfect. I sank a spade into the loose mixture and rolled the load out to look at it. The first thing I noticed was the dark color and earthworms the size of number two pencils

wiggling out. I brought to my face a handful of the mix and smelled it. The fragrance was that of the deep woods, with humus very rich and slightly acidic.

A pH test told me it was 4.8, a number that would insure good azalea growth and thrift. Into each hole I dug I added pine bark fines and watered each azalea in, to eliminate the air pockets. I also made sure the bottom of the hole was firmed down to prevent sinking of the shrub. The mulch around each plant was replaced, but not to the shrub trunk or trunks.

The first season of growing in a new bed is very important, for with the loose mixture, water loss is higher. At the same time as I planted the shrubs, I also installed irrigation, an extension of my main system that is automatic. I also realized the large trees would eventually send feeder roots into this mixture and compete for both moisture and nutrients.

In over 15 years of raised bed growing of azaleas, I came to realize that just setting out the shrubs in the beds was not enough. Mulch had to be added on an annual basis, even with the tons of leaves that fall into them every fall. I also managed to kill several 6' Flame Azaleas by not being careful with herbicide in the walkways, for as the trees extend roots, so do the large azaleas.

I look back now and wish I had not planted the shrubs so close together, for they will grow large quickly. Through the years, I have had to move some of them, and that chore is not easy or desired, if possible. Most of my plants have name markers or are located on a plan map for reference, though like most folks I have managed a few unknowns.

With 30+ beds, I do not cut much grass in my landscape, and turf is a companion plant in my garden. Even with a rich soil in the beds, I do add cottonseed meal yearly; and from time-to-time, I may give the shrubs a dose of minors to keep them in good shape. I will usually give the entire garden area a dose of Epsom salts, for the magnesium unlocks nutrients bound to soil particles and gives the

leaves a good green color.

If you have heavy seeding trees such as oak, hackberry, black cherry or maple, a lot of time will be spent pulling small saplings from the beds, for they sprout faster than crabgrass in the rich soil mix. I keep a pair of channel-lock pliers handy to pull them when small. Any dogwood seedlings are taken out and replanted into pots for use in the garden or to give to friends.

Another lesson learned came indirectly from my eldest son when he came by our house one day as I was building another bed. He asked me, "Why didn't you do this when I had to cut the grass?"

I looked at him, burst out laughing, and then replied, "You answered your own question, son." If I had known cutting grass was one way to get an adult child out of the house, I would have delayed putting in raised beds when my youngest adult son was still living with us.

Okay, so let us re-cap:

- Mark off bed area and kill out competing vegetation
- Use organic materials available locally
- Use pine bark (as fines and small nuggets)
- Use compost in copious amounts
- Use some good top soil
- Mulch with shredded pine bark or pine needles
- Provide adequate moisture
- Provide a strong retaining system of stone or other materials available locally
- Provide added nutrients when needed

That finishes this section so a new direction will follow in the next issue: *Pests, Two-legged and the Other Kind*. Have fun and enjoy your garden.

Joe Schild has written six articles on azalea care and culture in this Mastering Azaleas Series for The Azalean, beginning in 2003. He is also an azalea breeder; see his article on his newly registered Cumberland Azaleas on p. 29 in this issue.