

Kurume Azaleas - Personal Reflections

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Editor's Note: It has been suggested by several members that we should reprint articles from past issues of The Azalean. As we have room, we will reprint items from the archive. This piece originally appeared in the September, 1997 issue of The Azalean. Thank You to Audrey Stelloh for suggesting this article.

In exploring the Kurume azaleas, I found that there is a wealth of scholarly information currently available, particularly in Fred Galle's *Azaleas*, in articles by John Creech in the *American Horticulturist* magazine and more recently, a fine article by William Miller in **The Azalean**. Rather than do an extensive history and geographical review, I prefer to accept the plants no matter how dubious their origins or how variable the spelling of their names. Many of these plants look quite similar; their minute differences may be appreciated by Japanese plantsmen, but they are lost on my less discerning eye. Even when I have three of the same plant, each with a different exotic name, I don't worry about the botanical details, I just enjoy their beauty! Where did my attraction to Kurumes come from? Spring in Atlanta means dogwoods blooming with masses of azaleas filling the landscape with color: white, pink, or two shades of red.

I grew up believing that to get a building permit for a red brick house, 'Hinodegiri' or 'Hino-crimson' had to be somewhere in the plans. It seemed to be mandatory to place against the house a veritable hedge of a hue purposely selected for contrast—and I'm not talking subtle here, I mean the loudest clash possible! Okay, it's only for a week once a year, and it could be worse—'Sherwood Red' could have been selected. In older, more established foundation plantings, after ten or 15 years, most Kurume hedges begin to take on a rather moth-eaten appearance. This occurs when plant substitutions are made as older plants succumb to soil compaction, poor drainage, drought, and physical damage. There is nothing like plugging in the wrong shade of azalea and discovering the mistake in the spring. The most astounding foundation hedge I have seen is one of 'Hino-crimson' alternating with 'Snow' against a red brick house. You lose all confidence in the concept of using white to separate clashing colors when you view this "candy cane" effect! In the Atlanta area, there are only four Kurumes: 'Coral Bells' (glowing pink), 'Snow' (white), 'Hino-crimson' (bluish red) and 'Hinodegiri' (scarlet). Imagine my surprise on going to Callaway Gardens, to find a Kurume bowl filled with multiple shades of color: pastels, borders, and subtle tones. Taking this palette of color into the landscape

can really expand any design. I think it's a major mistake to limit the colors to be used; the fact that Kurumes completely cover themselves with color is the reason for their use in the first place. A great mass planting of a single color is rather boring, and if the planting is of 'Snow', you had better cover it with a sheet for two weeks after peak bloom, if you don't want to go from an outstanding white blossom to several weeks of brown, spent blossoms that won't let go. I would prefer to mix a lot of colors and let them bloom and fade when they will. With more shades, you have less chance of having two shocking shades planted next to one another. Besides, who said you can't move them whenever and wherever you want!

One of the more attractive aspects of many Kurume azaleas is plant form. Although Kurumes are often purchased as dwarf plants, only the Beltsville Dwarfs remain truly small. Given time, many Kurumes can get quite rangy, growing to heights of eight to 12 feet. When you choose a place to plant them, consider the light conditions. In good sun, plants can remain quite compact, often with the branches arranged in tiers looking as if they have been sprayed with color. In these conditions, plants often look like natural bonsais [sic]. In deeper shade, plants tend to be looser, with fewer blossoms and an open plant habit. Since Kurumes adapt easily to pruning, the Japanese use them in formal gardens less for their flower color than for their shape when trimmed into small oval rock-like forms, much like green Mexican beach pebbles. This creates the symbolism of rock or boulders where none is available in the garden. Pruning also permits Kurumes to be used as trimmed hedges or as topiary shapes as accents in more formal gardens. If I had the room, I would simply plant them where they would have plenty of room to assume their natural form.

Of course, the most spectacular aspect of Kurumes is their flowers. These plants probably cover themselves with color better than almost any other azalea group. When they are in full bloom, it is almost impossible to see green foliage on many Kurumes. If you tried to cover a plant with spray paint, you couldn't do a better job! Although many have small size flowers, there is plenty of diversity, from the tiny flower form of 'Twilight' to

the larger flower forms such as 'Ho-oden'; from the split petal flowers of 'Koromo-shikibu' to the double and hose-in-hose flower forms. Their ability to flower from the cutting stage on gives Kurumes the advantage of giving a full display each spring.

Since we are looking at foliage 51 weeks of the year, we should also consider the appeal of various leaf forms. Foliage can range from the soft and fuzzy (sticky) leaf of 'Koromo-shikibu' to the small shiny ovate leaves (unfortunately most attractive to white fly) of 'Coral Bells'. The vast majority fall somewhere between, with a moderate sized, glossy or flat leaf fully clothing the plant. It is this distinctive foliage that makes Kurumes so easy to shear when needed or to trim into formal shapes.

Kurumes offer us another bonus—ease of propagation. Because they are among the first to bloom, Kurumes get a head start on seasonal growth; this also makes good cutting wood available early in the propagation season. Usually rooting hormone is not necessary if the technique is sanitary and the cuttings are taken when the new growth material will snap cleanly. Hardening off the cuttings is easy, considering how early they can be taken. As long as they are protected from wide temperature swings, Kurumes will have no problem in development. Normal spraying will discourage insect pests, lace bug in sunny areas being the primary problem. The only real threat to their survival is having the bark split during the coldest temperatures. Like other azaleas, there are a few such as 'Ward's Ruby' or 'Ruby Glow' that seem to be more tender than others. Just take a few extra cuttings to protect yourself!

In summary, Kurumes are our "Harbingers of Spring." They provide among azaleas our first big show of color, often making it difficult for us to appreciate later blooming azaleas. Indeed, in Atlanta most people consider azaleas finished when the Kurumes fade, forgetting that there are six more weeks to enjoy the Glenn Dales, Linwoods, Back Acres, Robin Hills, Satsukis, etc. Kurumes are only the beginning, but what a way to start!

Dr. Joe Coleman is by profession a dentist, in practice for twenty-seven years in the Stone Mountain area. By passion, he is an azalea collector (for the past twenty years) as well as a member of the Azalea Society of America almost since its inception.

From the Editors

A full year has passed since we took over the editorship of *The Azalean*. We have learned so much about the ASA, our fellow members, and how important this publication is to so many people.

When we first stepped into this position, *The Azalean* was a full issue behind schedule. Many challenges stood in the path of getting production back on time, some professional and some personal. We appreciate your patience and support as these obstacles have been met and overcome.

We are happy to announce that the Spring issue will be only a month off schedule and the Summer issue will be published on time. Many thanks go to the ASA officers, our editorial board, and our printer, Complete Printing, for helping to achieve this goal.

We strongly believe that *The Azalean* is a "for the members, by the members" journal. As such, we rely heavily on what you, the readers, submit. One of our biggest challenges has been obtaining articles and up-to-date society news for publication.

Looking back through past *Azaleans*, there are as many articles about local gardens and devoted gardeners as there were about advanced subjects such as hybridization. Chances are, if you would like to read about a certain azalea related topic, others would, too!

Email your articles and photographs to theazalean@gmail.com or mail them to *The Azalean*, 6900 Skillman Street #304, Dallas, TX 75231 by the appropriate deadline.

The Azalean Publication Schedule

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Summer 2013	May 1, 2013	June 2013
Fall 2013	Aug. 1, 2013	Sept. 2013
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