

Thoughts On Pruning Azaleas

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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 June, 1991 issue of **The Azalean**. Thank you to Audrey Stelloh for suggesting this article.*

How much pruning an azalea undergoes can depend on the space available for the plant to grow, the vigor of the plant, and the inclination of the gardener. In public parks and large estates where plenty of space is available, plants can age gracefully and need only an occasional trimming of dead wood to be kept healthy and attractive. In smaller and more formal areas where azaleas have been planted closely, more intense pruning is needed to prevent the more vigorous plants from smothering others. Many azaleas are naturally bushy, compact shrubs and need very little pruning, especially when compared with other shrubs such as *Forsythia*. Probably the most frequent mistake made in planting azaleas is in spacing plants too close together. Nursery grown plants in 2-or 3-gallon containers look great just as they are, so we often plant them for immediate effect. Within a few years they are fighting each other for space, and we then remove every other plant and replant it someplace else. But 10 to 20 years later we realize they're still too close together and they're now too big to move easily. THEN we have to prune.

Implements of pruning range from fingernails to power saws. Fingernails work well on fresh crisp growth in late summer and the gardener always has them on hand! A power saw may be required for the drastic pruning of an old plant. Hand pruners with either straight or curved edges are readily available and suitable for most requirements. Lopping shears will handle a thicker branch than hand shears and will also extend the gardener's reach to very high or very low branches. Unfortunately lopping shears do not readily fit in a pocket. Power hedge trimmers are enjoyed by men who like playing with power tools and they are quite useful in achieving a geometrical artificial look.

The routinely recommended time for pruning azaleas is immediately after blooming so that new growth will have plenty of time to form next year's buds. Early pruning is especially important for old, badly overgrown plants where drastic measures are required.

Plants that are grown in tight artificial forms such as gumdrops and topiaries are often sheared frequently and closely, so that they develop dense surface foliage with few leaves inside the plant. If a Mr. Scissorhands is too enthusiastic or too late in cutting off the vigorous new growth that develops in late summer, much of next spring's bloom will be lost.

Pruning at blooming time may be desirable for a plant that sports freely. The branches bearing the sports can then be identified, and the desired balance of sports (high, low, or zero) can be maintained. Pruning at blooming time also provides branches for flower shows and interior decoration. Most azalea growers are, however, apt to prune whenever the mood strikes them and to limit their cutting to plants that are growing over something else.

Winter pruning is seldom recommended, but it has many advantages. It does, of course, remove a lot of spring flowers, but established plants are generally so loaded with buds that quite a few branches can be removed without being noticed. Evergreen azaleas are not totally evergreen in the same sense as the evergreen hollies or rhododendrons. Instead they have two types of leaves. The spring leaves, which form about blooming time, are large and usually drop in early winter. The summer leaves — located closer to the terminal bud — are smaller, more closely spaced on the stem, and remain all winter. After the new year, with the leaves thinned out, the branch structure of the plant becomes more apparent so that the gardener can more easily see where pruning is needed. On a mild winter day (when available) we often look for a chance to be outdoors. Furthermore, in the winter the gardener is much less likely to step on a snake or a nest of yellow-jackets.

The amount of pruning an individual plant needs varies considerably. A young plant may need nothing whatsoever for several years. An old plant with a lot of dead wood can be cut nearly to the ground and in time, recover nicely. When heavy pruning is needed, removal

of all excess wood in one year may leave an unsightly space. It may be desirable to reach inside the bush and cut back to the desired level about a third of the branches each year for three years.

Young plants of *Rhododendron kaempferi*, R. 'Vittatum', and their hybrids which make loose but vigorous upright growth can be pruned frequently to encourage branching close to the ground. On the other hand, young plants of Satsuki hybrids often make dense, spreading growth close to the ground leading many gardeners to hope that they will always remain dwarf. The gardener should be aware however that vigorous upright growth can readily develop on older plants and must be kept pruned if it is desired to keep the plant low.

A bush looks better after pruning when the stems are cut low enough that the stumps are hidden by foliage. Most of the new growth on a plant forms as a cluster of three to seven stems, of which one or two are often very much longer than the others. Cutting the longest stems back to their bases is an easy way to keep a plant compact. It is also often wise to cut branches growing horizontally when they are likely to smother lower growth. Stems that have grown a foot or more in a season should also be cut back since future growth from these stems will also be vigorous and overshadow other plants. Be alert to remove so-called "water sprouts," vertical shoots from the base of the plant that may grow two feet or more in height during the summer!

A massive planting of azaleas appears more natural when individual plants or groups of plants of one variety are trimmed so that they can be displayed separately rather than blending with other varieties into a hedge-like grouping. For best results it may be wise to prune lightly at first—then step back a ways and look the planting over critically before doing more.

A few last words of advice. Fertilizer can be a dangerous chemical around azaleas. Just as using fertilizer on grass results in the lawn having to be cut more often, so fertilizing azaleas more than may be needed to maintain them in healthy condition only means that they have to be pruned more often. Some use of chemicals in pruning may be desirable: plant diseases can be spread by your tools. Cleaning shears or saws frequently with rubbing alcohol or a 10% solution of Clorox in water is a wise precaution. And don't forget — before closing the shears always make sure where your fingers are!

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ASA Azalea City program there was little recognition on a national scale. Both cities were initially certified in 2007 and are in the process of re-certifying this year.

Increased interchange of nursery plants. We give tours of our eight-acre Ruby M. Mize Azalea Garden on the campus of Stephen F. Austin State University during the annual Azalea Trail to bus groups from southeast Texas and western Louisiana. People always ask where we got our many kinds of azaleas (more than 520 cultivars from 52 hybrid groups, including 20 deciduous azalea species or cultivars). We very proudly tell them about our many nursery-owner friends from the ASA, without whom we couldn't have such a wonderful collection. We encourage them to ask their local nurseries to branch out into the newest kinds of azaleas and some of the not-so-typical ones. We tell them they, too, can create gardens by working with other groups in their local community to develop service project gardens for beautification. We also tell them about the ASA and how joining would help them learn from azaleaphiles ready and willing to share knowledge and enthusiasm. With luck this will help not only expand the ASA's membership but also keep our local nurseries growing.

Increased community pride. Receiving national recognition as an ASA Azalea City promotes civic pride. Being an ASA Azalea City gives the gardening souls in your city credibility for their efforts, while inspiring their neighbors to join together to beautify their public and private lands through hands-on projects. Citizens begin taking an increased interest and awareness in the local gardening community and are inspired to get involved. Levels of involvement may range from plantings in residential yards to visiting one of the public gardens.

If your city is just beginning to organize in this way, keep track of your efforts and contact the Azalea City program for ideas. If your city has a history of gardening projects and efforts, review them; you may be surprised to discover that you already qualify, especially if you can recruit some ASA members.