

My Nursery and Gardens Help Grow Memberships

By Robert Thau—Jasper, Texas

I have worked with plants since I was a kid and always had a love for azaleas. So, after retiring in 2014, I decided to plant an azalea garden with azaleas and Japanese maples. I located azaleas throughout the US that I wanted. I was looking for rare plants that most people have never seen before. I now have over 100 varieties of Japanese maples and 400 varieties of azaleas. Just a few hybrid groups in my garden include Holly Springs, Bob Stewart, Nuccio, James Harris, and Sandra McDonald plus a large collection of Satsuki. I am also working with Buck Claggett's Bowie Mills Hybrids as part of the Legacy Project of the NVA Chapter, since their president Rick Bauer appointed me as an associate member on the project.

I do my own cutting propagation, with an 80% success rate, and want to pass on my experience so people don't make the same mistakes I made learning how to propagate.

The garden development includes a tract of a little over one-half acre, with trails and large beds roped off with wooden posts and rope. All the plants are marked with plastic stakes and the names written in permanent ink, using a Markal® K® Paintstik® marking pen from a local building supply outlet.

In 2015 I joined the Texas Chapter of the ASA. At the meetings I attended there was always talk about attracting new members. Here in Texas most people think the only azaleas that exist are in the Formosum group, because these are planted in most yards. I had an idea to offer tours of my garden to let people see what other azaleas are available.

I did not know where to start, but knew that Jasper, Texas, had a Master Gardening program and that they are always looking for places to visit. I knew a retired nursery owner who was an instructor for the Master Gardeners, so I hopped in my truck to visit him. I talked to him and his wife. When they heard my offer, they were so happy, especially since I wanted to introduce the public to azaleas that many people did not know existed. He directed me to the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service office to see a lady named Sharron who does the bookings for the class. She was so excited with my offer she called her boss, and we talked for a good while and set up a date for them for a tour of my nursery and garden. I was told that 16 members would attend, but 31 members came. As soon as the people started walking into the garden, the cameras were going off. I received many thanks from them and even received a thank you note from one member. It was a big success. I believe that two Master Gardeners have joined the ASA so far, and there should be more to come.

There was more I had to do, so I offered to do a free workshop on propagating azaleas for the same group. The date is set, and I've been told up to 80 members could attend.

Another source of potential members is the Boy Scouts. My neighbor's boss is a Scout leader. She talked with him about the idea, and he was interested. They are getting me

some information about whether the Scouts might have a merit badge dealing with growing and care of plants. Sharron from Texas AgriLife Extension also asked if I would be interested in doing a talk at our local school. I accepted, but this will most likely not take place until next year.

I had another lead to check with—the Jasper Chamber of Commerce—to let them know what I have and see what they could do to attract people to tour my garden. Since the Jasper-Lake Sam Rayburn Chamber of Commerce is sponsoring the 29th Annual Jasper Azalea Festival March 18, 2017, I persuaded the Texas Chapter of the ASA to have a booth to sell azaleas and pass out membership information.

My whole idea is to introduce the public to the many types and varieties of azaleas with hopes of attracting new members so our society will flourish. Each month at the Master Gardeners' meeting Sharron sets out ASA applications. She told me that the members are picking them up. In the future I am also planning to invite another group of Master Gardeners for a tour. I have a friend who is a member from a town about an hour away. I compiled a picture album of close-ups of all my azaleas so I can show pictures when the azaleas are not blooming.

I have dedicated myself to doing what I have to do to attract new members to keep this great society moving forward.

Robert Thau first became interested in plants as a teenager, and he still loves to watch plants grow. In the early 1980s when he lived in Moss Bluff, LA, he was co-owner of a retail nursery specializing in azaleas and camellias and owned a wholesale nursery that grew tropical bougainvilleas until they were lost during Hurricane Rita. He learned how to propagate at an early age, attended seminars held through the Texas Nursery and Landscape Association and the Louisiana Nursery and Landscape Association, learned from several propagators, and purchased many books. He is also an associate camellia judge for the American Camellia Society. His hobby nursery is called Nature's Way Gardens and Greenhouse. He can be reached at 409-489-8318 or at rwubbathau@yahoo.com. Watch for garden photos in bloom time next spring.



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