

The methods used in transplanting native azaleas from rescue sites to home gardens depend on several factors.

- a) Time of Year. Azaleas can be moved any time of the year but is best to move them in the fall; secondarily during periods of dormancy. Azaleas can be moved without cutback most any time, but unless one devotes significant care, it is best to cut back the plants to 6-8 inches above the root line.
- b) Size of Plant. Certainly it is easier to move small plants but larger plants can be moved. Regardless of plant size, the rule "...as much of the plant's root structure as possible" is an important guideline.
- c) Distance Moved. How far one has to transport a dug plant is certainly a factor in transplanting azaleas. It is virtually impossible to transplant a large azalea in the summer, if the plant has to be moved a significant distance. Under these conditions, it is necessary to moisten the plant and keep it covered and away from the sun and wind. It is best to cut the plant back if these type of conditions exist.

Digging Techniques

The drip line, the projection of the plant's outer most limbs to the earth, is a guide in determining how large of root ball to dig. Various other guidelines have been proposed regarding how far from the plant's trunk one should dig. A good rule is dig as far from the trunk as possible such that the resulting root ball can be easily extracted and handled. Azaleas, like dogwoods and some other native shrubs, are shallow rooted, so it is usually not necessary to dig more than 6-10 inches deep. After determining how large of root ball, insert a sharp pointed shovel into the ground at the determined cut line, cutting the roots cleanly. Make these cuts completely circling the plant. After completing the circle, start inserting the shovel again in the cut and pry up the earth, again completely circling the plant, until the root ball is free from the surrounding soil.

Large bags, such as empty Nature's Helper or pine bark nugget bags can be used to hold the plant and root ball. Sometimes, depending on the size of the plant, it is helpful to cut down the side of the bag to handle the root ball. Many times it is easier to work with one of these bags that has been shortened by cutting off the top half of the bag. Some move extracted plants onto tarps or plastic. Others do not use any container at all. This is usually necessary for large plants.

Transporting Guidelines

If possible, move the dug azalea in a closed vehicle. Lacking enclosure, cover the plant from the sun. Mist the leaves and if possible pour water around the root ball. Avoid leaving the branches in the hot sun and don't let the branches get wind blown when moving on the road especially in the summer. Some cut back the plants and remove all earth around the roots and place the plant in a plastic bag after moistening.

Planting Techniques

It is important to distinguish between transplanting and planting an azalea plant. Planting normally refers to potted plants and the methods for such plants don't necessarily apply to transplants. As with most natives, the relocation site should replicate to some extent the site of the extracted plant. However many native azaleas growing in the wild have little or no blooms because of shady conditions. They must get some sunlight in order to bloom. This varies by species with Piedmont Azalea, *Rhododendron canescens* in particular requiring sunlight to bloom.

Azaleas require a loose, moist, well drained, slightly acidic soil. If the soil in the relocation site is heavy, use soil amendments such as ground pine bark or compost mixed 50-50 with the site's soil. Dig a hole larger than the root ball of the transplant and deep enough for the top of the root ball to be level with or slightly above the surrounding soil. Be sure that the hole contains loosened dirt on the bottom and around the edges. Fill in the area between the root ball and the hole's edge with soil from the hole, amended if necessary. One can take excess dirt and form a mounded ring around the plant to help retain water.

Mulching is very important. Use 2 to 4 inches of pine straw, leaves, pine bark, wood chips or other material around the plant, leaving the material about 2 inches from the plant's trunk. Water carefully and thoroughly. Water again the next day and every week for several months, up to a year if moving a large plant.

It is not necessary to fertilize a transplanted azalea, however some do. Watering in is essential if a non liquid fertilizer is used. The recommended time to fertilize azaleas is shortly after their bloom period.

Personal experiences

2

Georgia is blessed by having more different species of native azaleas than any other state. The eleven more common species found in Georgia was increased to twelve with the discovery of *R. vaseyi* by Clarence Towe in Rabun County a few years ago. Dr. Towe, who lives in South Carolina, has predicted that the fairly recently discovered South Carolina species, *R. eastmanii* will be found in Georgia as well. However in the metro Atlanta area where most GNPS rescues are conducted, the number of azalea species is considerably less. I personally have dug five of the species and have heard that an additional species was found in Cherokee County some years ago when the large Town Lake Subdivision was rescued.

The most common azalea found in our area is the Piedmont azalea. It is characterized by its beautiful fragrant blooms, usually pink in color, although some white forms have been found. The next most common species is the Oconee azalea, *R. flammeum*. The Oconee azalea is usually orange in color, but red forms are not uncommon. There are some pink and yellow forms as well. However the Oconee azalea is not fragrant. The growth habits of these two species are different. The Piedmont azalea usually grows to a larger size. In my experience the Piedmont azaleas are found near water sources, primarily along drainage routes and along creeks. The Oconee azalea is frequently found in open wooded areas and will do well away from wet areas. Also it will bloom better in shaded areas than the Piedmont azalea.

Another azalea species found in this area is the Flame azalea, *R. calendulaceum*. The ones that I dug were found in northern Fulton County, not far from the Chattahoochee River. Both orange and yellow forms grew at this site. The species also blooms red, but orange is the predominant color for this non fragrant species. The smooth or sweet azalea, *R. arborescens* has also been found in this area. Most of the plants that I have seen are in the more northern counties - Cherokee and Pickens. However on one occasion I talked with a lady in the Vinings area of Cobb County who had a large *R. arborescens* growing in her back yard, adjacent to a creek. This species is characterized by its lovely white fragrant blooms with distinctive red stamens that occur in the summer. On one occasion while working with some master gardeners in Gordon County, some specimens of *R. periclymenoides* (formerly *R. nudiflorum*) were found on a hillside slated to be developed. Jeane Reeves, a pioneer GNPS plant rescue person, reported that *R. viscosum* was found in Cherokee County when she and others rescued in what she described as the best of all plant rescue sites in her experience.

Frequently hybrid azalea species are found. In my experience, most of these have been Piedmont - Oconee crosses. Piedmont azalea blooms first, followed shortly by Oconee, so it is not difficult for the two species to cross when both species are common to an area. In a large area in Cherokee County where rescues were conducted for several years, many such crosses were found. Most were generally pink in color with one yellow petal. The plants inherited the Piedmont's sweet fragrance. However, other forms including solid light yellow, white with a single yellow petal and other forms were found. In most all cases the blooms were fragrant.

Identification keys

It is difficult to determine an azalea's species if not in bloom. Generally the Flame azalea has larger leaves than most other azaleas, but it is virtually impossible to ID an azalea found in this area solely by its leaves. *R. vaseyi*, primarily a North Carolina azalea, is an exception and can generally be identified by its leaves. Growth habit is another key in plant identification. Piedmont azaleas can grow to a height of 15-20 feet. Many authorities insist that the Piedmont azalea is not stoloniferous but I have encountered groups of azaleas that were obviously connected by stolons, that appeared to be Piedmont azaleas. However, I suppose the plants could have been hybrids.

The fact that the Oconee azalea will grow in open woods is another identification key. However, one key that clearly distinguishes Oconee azaleas from Piedmont azaleas is the setting of bloom buds. Oconee plants will set buds on plants barely a foot tall and in shaded areas, while generally Piedmont azaleas will not. Flower bud shape is another key. Oconee buds tend to be narrower and more pointed than the fleshier Piedmont buds. *Arborescens* azalea is called smooth azalea with good reason. Its terminal stems exhibit a smoothness not found in other azaleas.

Bloom time is also a key as well as bloom color. In this area, the pink Piedmont blooms occur in late March through April. Oconee blooms appear 1 or 2 weeks later than the Piedmont azaleas. *R. calendulaceum* can bloom in late April but usually blooms the first two weeks of May. The highly variable, usually white, fragrant *R. viscosum* blooms from mid May to mid June, while *R. arborescens* blooms from mid June through mid August.