

# Chain Saws and Pruning

Jim Thornton—Conyers, Georgia

During the years, I've seen numerous questions about pruning azaleas posted on the ASA azaleas email forum. Some of the questions were never answered, and I just shook my head at some of those that were answered. It looks like everyone has an opinion on the subject, and you know what that means. The ASA even has instructions posted on how to prune azaleas, but those too seem inadequate to our readers.

Don't get me wrong. I am no expert—far from it in fact! I will probably get a lot of flack from some people about this article and accompanying photos. But I can vouch for what's in this article, since it is from actual experience and not from books. By the way, this is not for the faint of heart.

Our situation, causing the need for drastic procedures, started when Patsy and I start planting azaleas on our little three-acre lot 30 odd years ago. Oh, we had a plan. Plant, plant, and plant—masses of plants, including collector's items and separations of varieties and colors. And oh yes, trails—trails that we could drive our little riding tractor through.

Today, in some areas we have to get down on our knees and crawl to get to some places in our garden. It's an "azalea jungle" no less. Visitors could no longer see the beauty of the individual plants. It's a mess to say the least, and to top it off, unhealthy for the plants. Obnoxious vines and trees were taking over, which is a haven for disease and insects.

But no surprise here, right? Oh, we, rather I, created this mess because I wanted to see just what the plant would grow into. I even went to the point of hiding the pruners from Patsy. Things were out of control. Something had to be done.

Over the years, I've cut those unsightly "suckers" that protruded toward the "wild blue yonder," and I've taken thousands of cuttings, which I suppose is a way of pruning [1]. I just never crossed the bounds of serious, planned, pruning of our azaleas and now it's too late for a mere method some gardeners propose. One in particular comes to mind—the three-year method, meaning you cut back a third of the plant each year for three years. This method, in our case, would have me pruning plants the rest of my life and looking at ugly plants for years. Besides, after three years, what would the first year pruned part look like?

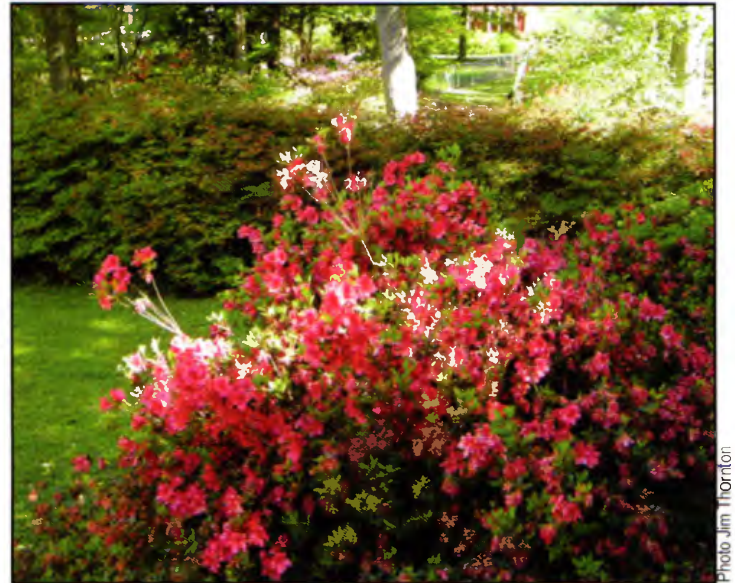
I elected to call it chain saw time. That's right, some of the trunks on these plants were way past any size for your typical loppers or small pruning saws. We started a couple of years ago, after the blooms started fading [2]. Taking three beds at random, I bit my tongue and waded in on the massacre of a hundred or so azaleas, sawing plants down to within 6 to 8 inches of the ground. Then we left Dodge.

When we returned, lo and behold we found new life coming to our decimated beds. Then a year later we were pleased with our work and marveled at the resiliency of the azalea—even to the point of having some blooms! This gave



▲ Thornton described his garden as an overgrown "azalea jungle."

▼ The only type of pruning Thornton performed for many years was cutting "suckers."



us the wherewithal to drag out our trusty chain saw and plan another attack, selecting three more areas for reclamation. This time we stayed home and watched these wonderful plants begin to restore themselves. They seem to know what to do without our help. No extra water, no fertilizer, no TLC—nothing at all. Just Mother Nature doing "her thing."

Believe me, she knows best and in some cases, she declared some of these old timers were just too far gone to make a comeback. But there again, I have to admit it was my fault. They were planted too close together to start with, which I guess is a natural thing for novice gardeners to do in

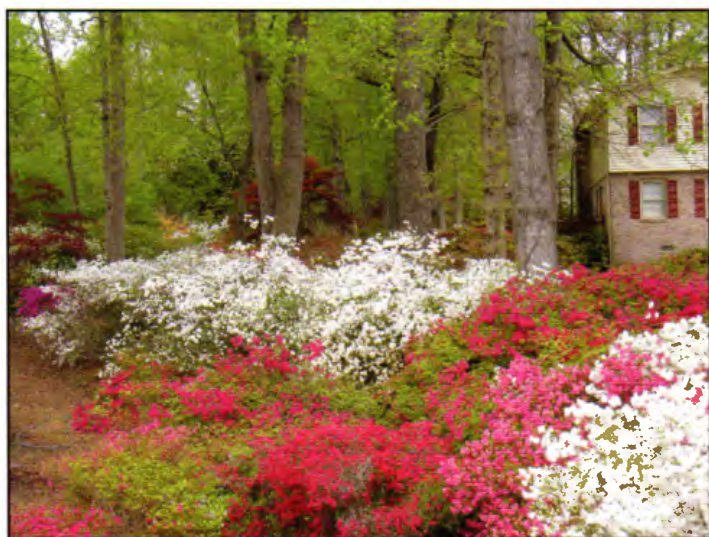


Photo Jim Thornton

▲ ▼ Scenes from Thornton's garden before pruning.



Photo Jim Thornton

▲ ▼ Thornton's garden after "chainsaw" pruning.

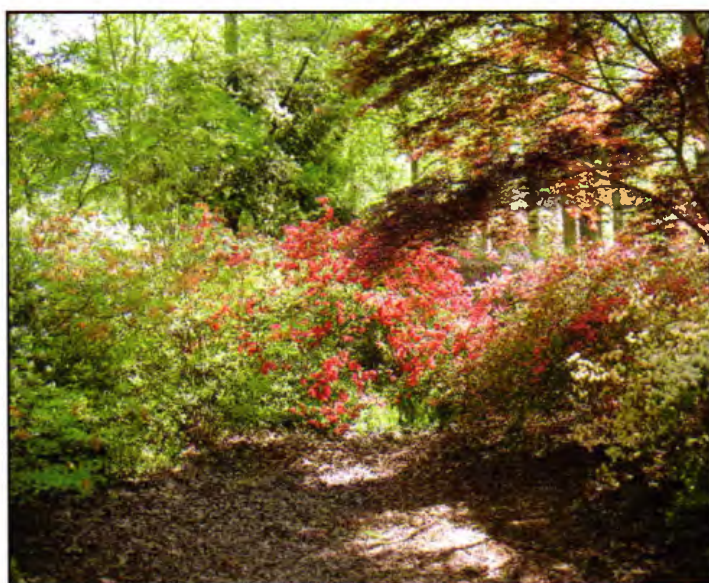


Photo Jim Thornton

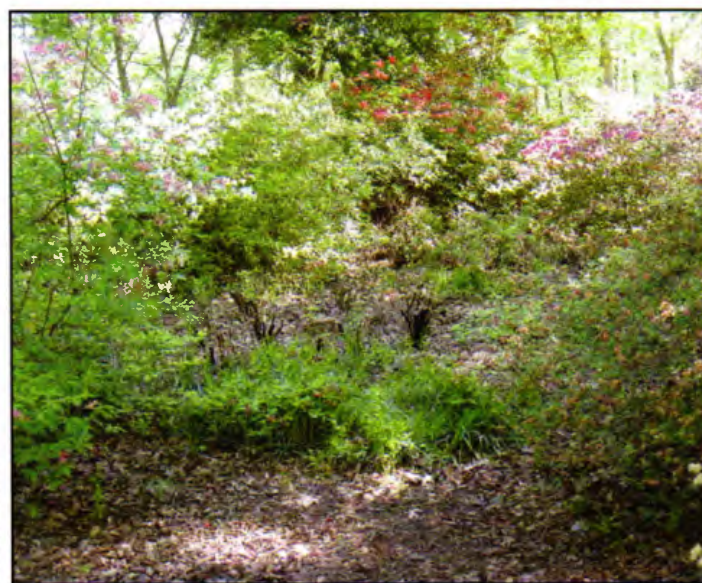


Photo Jim Thornton

a desire for instant coverage and beauty.

We still have a long way to go to tame our "azalea jungle" but we'll still use the chain saw approach. If you go this route, just remember the chain saw is a dangerous piece of equipment and should be handled by someone with experience. It's always safer to have someone with you to watch for hazards and help clear the debris out of your path.

#### Notes

- [1] When pruning suckers, make your cut a few inches below the normal shape of the plant.
- [2] Timing is very important, so do your pruning as soon as the blooms begin to fade.

**Jim Thornton** is a cofounder and the first president of the *Oconee Chapter*. He has served as a director, vice president, and president of the *Azalea Society of America*.



Photo Jim Thornton

▲ Close-up photo of the 6- to 8-inch stubs left after pruning.