

# Azalea City News

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## Nacogdoches Says It's Good to Be an Azalea City

Barbara Stump and Pam Fitch - Nacogdoches, Texas

Since Nacogdoches was the first city to receive the designation as an Azalea City by the Azalea Society of America (ASA) in 2004, and was the first to re-certify in 2011, it seems only right that we share why we think this is such a good program. Joe Schild had a great idea back then, and it's still a great idea now.

Nacogdoches City Manager Jim Jeffers gives the award his vote of confidence: "The Azalea City designation for the City of Nacogdoches has given our city and its annual Nacogdoches Azalea Trail national attention. Being an Azalea City helps our Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) promote the trail and our gardens to a large audience of garden enthusiasts and tourists. More cities with annual events focusing on azaleas should apply for certification by this program of the ASA. The application process is easy."

We believe there are several benefits of being an ASA Azalea City:

**Increased tourism potential.** Being an ASA Azalea City allows our Convention and Visitors Bureau to use this designation on our annual Azalea Trail brochures and in publicity to attract tourists to our town. The designation also serves as a motivator for groups in town to continue to think of new programs and ways to use azaleas. Since our first application in 2004 there have been two big gardens added in our community, one on the campus of Stephen F. Austin State University and one on the site of a Victorian park, which is now a Master Gardeners Demonstration Garden. New events have been added to the Azalea Trail celebration as well. We now have an annual Little Princess Tea Party, the Art of Flora Design using azaleas, and an azalea photography competition.

**Increased convention potential.** The fact that we applied to become an Azalea City in 2004 possibly helped convince the ASA board to approve our city as the site for the 2007 national convention. Then, when they saw the scope of the azalea gardens we have built,

and continue to build in both the city and the university, they agreed to have us host the national convention here in 2015 as well.

**Expanded marketing potential.** Our Nacogdoches Convention and Visitors Bureau saw early the value of the Azalea City program as a vehicle for increasing tourist interest in our annual month-long Azalea Trail. The directors of our CVB created the initial application package in 2004 and the re-certification package in 2011. We proudly display the fact of our being the first Azalea City in the nation on our tourism brochure each year. Says current executive director Melissa Sanford, "Being designated as the first ASA Azalea City establishes a unique selling point for us to use in our marketing to tourists, and it has enabled us to expand our marketing efforts to include different target audiences such as gardeners and photographers. We have approximately 5,000 individuals and 25 group tours that visit Nacogdoches during the Azalea Trail, and the designation as an ASA Azalea City has been a contributing factor to annual attendance."

The certification is also used by the Chamber of Commerce to market our city as a certified retirement community.

**Increased ASA membership potential.** Another benefit is that the Azalea City program helped motivate us to work harder to develop memberships locally. The basic requirement for certification is just three members, but with the interest generated by the publicity about our Azalea Trail and the ASA, we grew to 40 members in the East Texas area. Because of the relatively long distances between our main cities in the Texas Chapter, Azalea City program chairman and past chapter president Bart Brechter and current president Jo Ann Smith, developed membership in the Houston and Tyler areas, respectively. Both cities have had "Azalea Trails" for more than 20 years, but until the ASA Azalea City program there was little recognition

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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.