

Propagating Azaleas from Cuttings for Newbies

By Sherrie Randall—Nacogdoches, Texas

I love to grow things! I've been growing flowers and vegetables from seeds for a very long time. It wasn't until I became a weekly volunteer at the Stephen F. Austin State University Arboretum in 2001 that I was introduced to propagating plants from cuttings. Under the guidance of head gardener Dawn Stover, I became hooked. To this day, my main weekly contribution to the gardens is preparing cuttings for future plants that are sold at the two plant sales a year. Now the Arboretum has a climate controlled, glass greenhouse with heated, timed mist beds. The only procedural variable over the past years has been the rooting compound used....Dip'N Grow® (liquid), Clonex® (gel), Hormodin® (powder), are the three that come to mind. Early on, my quest began to successfully propagate plants from cuttings at my home.

For my first attempt, I purchased Dip'N Grow®, Clonex®, and Root Tone®, also a powder. I prepared 18 cuttings, and stuck six each with the different rooting compounds. My potting medium was a mix of perlite, peat and bark. To simulate the greenhouse humidity, I used water bottles with the bottoms cut off and stuck over the cuttings. Heat came naturally from Texas in late spring/early summer. I placed them in a semi-shady spot and waited. My wait stretched for months as what I didn't mention was the cuttings were vaciniums, aka blueberries. Not the quickest or easiest thing to root, even in the Arboretum environment. But success came. Six for six using Root-tone, four with Dip'N Grow, and three with Clonex. I was ecstatic.

My cuttings are very typical of those shown in past articles. New growth ~3-4" long; fresh cut made below a node; lower leaves stripped. I use a powder hormone so I pre-poke holes in the medium so as not to rub off the hormone when pushing the stem in. Cuttings for the more diminutive or Sat-

suki cultivars are generally much shorter. Cuttings are generally taken from the garden in spring after bloom.

My success eventually led to a large trash can full of cut-off water bottles, case of 4" pots stacked neatly on new shelves by my potting bench, and trays of cuttings on new shelves built on the side of our barn. And naturally, I branched out to taking cuttings of ornamentals, as well as our blueberries.

In preparation for the 2015 ASA convention plant sale, our Texas Chapter members participated in two cutting parties. For many, this was their first exposure to propagating via cuttings. We established some ground rules, gave a brief demonstration and the cutting/sticking began. The "newbies" thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Our success rate for rooting was really great as we were able to use the Arboretum mist beds until the cuttings actually grew roots. The "after kill," as **Dr. David Creech** calls it, became the challenge. Even with the best intentions, growing up rooted cuttings became a bit of a challenge for some of our members.

I am currently growing up the left over 4" azalea plants from the convention plant sale and some Gartrell Hybrids given to our chapter by Ronnie and Donna Palmer of Azalea Hill Gardens & Nursery in Arkansas. Our chapter has already had one successful plant sale at the local Farmer's Market and we plan on making this a yearly event. To that end, our members are already talking about the next cutting party. It's fun to see their enthusiasm.

A few years into my cutting propagation, my husband announced he was buying a new, bigger drill press and planer. He quickly squelched my objection by saying I could have a greenhouse. Oh, ok....I was thrilled! Today the water bottles are gone, replaced with a mist system; 4" pots are replaced by propagation trays; and the barn shelves hold pots

▼ Good cutting length for sticking.



▼ Mini greenhouse made from a water bottle.



▼ The Texas Chapter hosted a plant sale at a local Farmer's Market to sell plants propagated by members.



and supplies. But honestly, with the relentless heat of our summers in Texas, I have at times reverted back to domed propagation trays, as my greenhouse is not climate controlled. During one of our potting-up-parties, Dr. Creech checked out my greenhouse and noted it was too shady. After a phone call to Eric, our tree removal expert, one water oak was felled and hauled to the burn pile. When husband went to town to run errands, I grabbed the reciprocating Milwaukee saw, got on top of the tractor port and lobbed off as many branches as I could reach and had them hauled to the burn pile before he returned. (‘Mum’s the word’ fellow chapter members, he thinks we’re too old to be climbing on structures....not me.) Over time Mother Nature happens, and we must be flexible.

My enthusiasm for propagating and growing up plants has in no way diminished from my first success. It pleases me to be able to share “new” plants with friends and fellow gardeners. I hope “newbies” to the azalea world will give it a try!

Sherrie Randall grew up in Zone 22, Southern California, then moved to and lived in Zone 5, Colorado, for 20 years until retiring from Lockheed Martin. She and her husband moved to Zone 8b, Nacogdoches, Texas, where they are the owners of *The Blueberry Place*, a pick-your-own blueberry farm. She is secretary of the Texas Chapter.

Editor’s note: We have asked **John Migas** to write an article for **The Azalean** on “aftercare” for newly rooted cuttings and very young azaleas. Watch for this in a future issue.

Warning! Mulch with Care

By Donald Voss—Vienna, Virginia

Mulching offers many advantages for the health of your trees and shrubs, but there can be serious problems. Driving around our area, one may see mulch piled as high as five or six inches around the trunks of trees and shrubs. That endangers the health and potential longevity of the plants, including azaleas. The following recommendations are extracts from the Web-sites of three well-known horticultural organizations:

- The Morton Arboretum—Pull mulch away from the bases of tree and shrub trunks, creating a donut-hole. Mulch piled against the trunk creates ideal conditions for insect pests, diseases, and decay.
- North Carolina State University—Pull the mulch 1 to 2 inches from the base of the plant to prevent bark decay.
- Rutgers University—Don’t build a mountain of mulch, piled high against a tree trunk; this does not kill a tree immediately—it results in a slow death.

Don Voss is a retired economist, a life member of the Northern Virginia Chapter of the ASA, and regularly volunteers at the US National Arboretum Herbarium.

New Members

Northern Virginia Chapter

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The Azalea Society offers membership to any one with an interest in azaleas, from home gardeners, collectors and students to plant professionals. Local chapters have social activities, garden tours, meetings and plant sales of unusual varieties. National conventions offer garden tours, talks by well-known azalea authorities, plant sales, and the opportunities to make and renew friendships. *The Azalean*, our quarterly journal, has timely informative articles about azalea culture, hybridizing, propagation, garden design, new introductions and chapter activities.

**To join the society
or for more information,
visit our Web site at
www.azaleas.org**